

Film 5, *The True Cost*

As the film *The True Cost* makes clear, people in wealthy countries consume an extraordinary amount of stuff. And it's not just clothing, but all sorts of stuff. From small stuff like smartphones to big stuff like cars. Incidentally, our country, the United States, arguably leads the world when it comes to consuming stuff.

Environmentally, this is a double edge sword, with each side harming both people and the Earth.

First, all this stuff is made of natural resources. A smartphone, for example, is made of dozens and dozens of different materials. Some of them, like the cobalt used for the battery, cause significant social and environmental problems through their mining, which directly harms workers ([including children working in some mines](#)), as well as the environment by contaminating air, land, water, etc.

Second, making stuff requires an enormous amount of energy, which in turn emits greenhouse gasses. The manufacturer of an automobile releases more than a dozen tons of carbon dioxide or equivalent gases into the atmosphere. Some luxury SUVs are responsible for three times as much (35 metric tons).

So, just who is responsible for all this? Is it as consumers? Or is it the companies that manufacture all this stuff?

A variety of corporations and their advocates have long argued that we consumers are the problem. After all, they just make what we want. If we didn't want it, they wouldn't make it, and there wouldn't be a problem. Consequently, since we are the problem, it is up to us to address the issue. If we really want to do something about it, then we should simply stop buying, or at least become minimalists.

So, it sounds simple enough. As we consumers are to blame, it is up to us to solve the problem that we've created.

But are we?

Something to think about is that corporations have long been in the business of making consumers out of ordinary people. Ideally, insatiable, rampant consumers. It sounds a little like *The Matrix*, but corporations are in the business of making us into the beings that serve them best: consumers. Unfortunately, neither we nor the earth are much served by this enterprise. To the contrary, it can be incredibly detrimental to our species and our planet (as well as all the other species with which we share the Earth).

In order to help explain all this, please allow me to repeat a story that I included in my book on writing a new environmental era [and] moving forward to nature.

"Quite a few years ago, while visiting friends, I noticed that their young daughter, who was six or seven at the time, was watching TV. Glancing over from time to time, it was obvious that the show was geared toward young girls. What caught my attention were the ads. Most were selling what you would expect: toys, sugared breakfast cereals, a local theme park."

"One ad, however, was another sort of beast altogether. It was for a major cosmetic corporation, showing models having fun on a Caribbean beach. It repeatedly cut to scenes of them applying makeup, which they were having a frolicsome good time doing. Realizing that this ad was running on a show pitched at young girls, I waited to see how it would end. Were they really trying to sell lipstick to six-year-olds?"

"As it turns out, they weren't. The ad was not designed to sell a particular product, but rather to sell a brand that makes a broad range of products. It was really just sixty seconds of young women made happy by cosmetics (well, made happy by a particular brand of cosmetics). So, were they trying to get six-year-olds to switch to their brand of eyeliner? If they really were trying to sell cosmetics to young girls, you would expect that at least some of the models would have been children. Why were there instead just young women on screen?"

"After thinking about it, the frightening answer hit me like a ton of bricks. This cosmetic company decided that they needed to make more than just cosmetics. Astonishingly, they had also taken up the business of making consumers."

"First, they present girls with images of happy and appealing young women. Next, they cut to the source of the happiness: applying and wearing makeup. There is no suggestion that young girls themselves should be wearing the makeup; instead, it is held up as an essential part of what it is to be a woman."

"It may take a decade or more, but by repeatedly and subtly suggesting to girls that the road to womanhood is paved with cosmetics, a generation of consumers is created whose very sense of self (in this case their gendered self) depends on the products on offer. With so much at stake – indeed, the fragile, emerging self-identity of a human being – the

desire to have, and fear of being without, the product becomes extraordinarily important, as it is presented as an essential part of a happy and successful adulthood."

"Although we may think that industries exist to serve us by providing all sorts of appealing consumer goods like cosmetics, it is arguably the other way around: human beings exist to serve these industries. Human consumption is what empowers them. An enormous amount of care and attention is thus given to fashioning human beings willing to work long hours making disposable income - and willing to make sacrifices in the bargain, such as by not having time for family and friends - so that these industries can thrive."

It really does sound a little like *The Matrix*, doesn't it?

As I noted back in our discussion of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, today, the project has been profoundly ramped up, as young people are themselves recruited to help create this new generation of consumers. They do so by first cultivating a following on social media. Once a trendsetting young person has a sufficient number of viewers on YouTube, they can monetize this achievement by, for example, selling cosmetics on their channel. In this sense, the project comes full circle, as the trendsetter themselves was arguably fashioned by the cosmetic industry for this role. Ironically, they may view having been conscripted by the cosmetic industry as a great personal achievement. Maybe it was, as young people are certainly encouraged to look up to individuals of this sort.

Of course, all sorts of industries are in this business and it certainly doesn't just involve girls and young women. It happens with boys and young men as well, although with different products. For example, certain cars are marketed to men with great success. More than four out of five purchasers of the Chevrolet Corvette are men. In both cases, marketers hope that they can exploit our insecurities, so they provide a way for us to believe that we can become more attractive (via cosmetics) or seem more powerful (by purchasing a so-called muscle car). And, of course, there are plenty of products that are not gendered in their marketing.

The film *The True Cost* shows us the ugly underside of this consumption machine, which is a disaster for both us and the planet, as well as for the people making our clothes. In terms of clothing, the average American purchases over sixty new items of clothing every year, not including incidentals like socks and underwear. Thus, although we consumers are seemingly the ones that benefit by this, it is the corporations selling all this stuff that really profit. Our job is to buy, briefly wear, and then dispose. And repeat. And repeat.

While *The True Cost* focuses on the fashion industry, this ramped up consumerism impacts all sorts of products.

Incidentally, 150 years ago Henry David Thoreau desperately tried to convince us of the truth about all this when he argued that the goal of the clothing industry was “not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but, unquestionably, that corporations may be enriched.”

So, at the risk of repeating myself, “just who is responsible for all this? Is it us consumers? Or is it the companies that manufacture all this stuff?” Thoreau certainly thought that industry was principally to blame.

I am curious what people make of all this. Do you agree with Thoreau? Having been given a glimpse inside of the fast fashion industry by *The True Cost*, what is your response? While this film is about the fashion industry, are other industries now following suit? In other words, in addition to fast fashion, do we now also have things like fast consumer electronics?

The episode of *Patriot Act* on “The Ugly Truth Of Fast Fashion” provides an interesting supplement to *The True Cost*. Perhaps the most amusing part of a generally funny documentary is when we discover that a garment that has a tag suggesting that it is “100% recycled,” refers not to the garment itself, but rather just to the paper tag!

Although it doesn't shockingly take us inside of the fashion industry, as *The True Cost* did with the scenes from the Rana Plaza disaster, this *Patriot Act* episode nonetheless makes, it seems to me, an effective critique of fast fashion. However, what I find particularly interesting here is the format. At one third the length of *The True Cost*, quite a bit has to be crammed into this episode, yet it does not feel rushed. And, of course, it manages to make us laugh out loud in spite of the horrific subject matter.

To me, this episode of *Patriot Act* raises an important question: how should we go about informing the public of issues like this? A full-length documentary is a traditional - and I would argue nonetheless great - approach, but it is not without its shortcomings, as it may not attract a huge audience. So, should we be experimenting with other ways of getting the message out, like the biting comedy of *Patriot Act*? Any other ideas for spreading the message?

Class discussion of *The True Cost*

Note that the following observations, which are in italics, have not been paraphrased or altered, though I do correct the occasional typo and, because of space concerns, often just part of the comment is reproduced here along with my reply. In working through these, I will first quote a student's observation, followed by my thoughts.

Every single employee deserves a livable wage, trade union rights, pension, safe working conditions, and healthcare. However, the numerous disasters, including the collapse of Rana Plaza and factory fires, show how little greedy companies care. The less money these companies spend on infrastructure and employee benefits, the more profit is made for a small group of people at the top. My mother, who immigrated to the US. two decades ago, has experience working in garment factories in both China and San Diego; she talked about the poor living conditions, not making enough to eat, the long hours, and the strict management...

The treatment of garment workers makes me awfully angry; the poorest people in the world who face innumerable struggles and can't afford the necessities in life (shelter, food, childcare, healthcare, etc) support the selfish lifestyles for the rest of the world. And what makes it even worse is that most people don't know where their clothes come from. The problem with American culture is that people have insatiable desires for more and the need to meet unrealistically high standards. Instead of buying quality fair trade clothing for a higher cost and that will last longer, Americans go towards purchasing cheap clothing that is made to be worn a few times and disposed of. The cheap clothes come from mothers who can't afford to care for their children and cotton farmers who face the health consequences from pesticides.

Wow, such a powerful statement. And it's all true; squarely on the mark: "Every single employee [on the planet does] deserves a livable wage, trade union rights, pension, safe working conditions, and healthcare."

The International Trade Union Confederation's (ITUC) "[Global Rights Index](#) ranks 139 countries against 97 internationally recognised indicators to assess where workers' rights are best protected, in law and in practice." Basically, the ITUC has created [five tiers](#) in order to clarify where workers rights are most protected.

Scoring a one, the top score, are countries like Norway and Denmark, where rights violations are not a regular occurrence. Next down are countries like Japan and Switzerland, where "[r]epeated violations of rights" occur. The third tier down includes China and Ghana, which have "[r]egular violations of rights. At the very bottom, in the fifth tier, are countries like Bangladesh and Nigeria, where there is "[n]o guarantee of rights."

You may have noticed that I skipped a tier, the second from the bottom, number four, right above Bangladesh and Nigeria. In these countries, there are “[s]ystematic violations of rights.” There are 77 countries that rank above these tier-four countries.

Tier four includes Kenya and the United States.

It may seem like garment workers in San Diego, like this person’s mother, would have their rights protected more than in Paraguay, Namibia, or Ghana, but this is simply not the case. Moreover, this person’s mother would, statistically, have experienced fewer human rights violations back in China than she did when she arrived in San Diego.

Hence, while we might hope that a “Made in USA” label ensures that the workers who made the product did not have their rights violated, this is hardly a guarantee.

After watching *The True Cost*, we might think that these rights violations happen far from home. However, they are widespread in the US as well. One can imagine a sequel film, titled something like *The True Cost: The US Story*, which would take us inside of garment factories in the United States, which, in many ways, would be as poignant as the original film.

While watching “The True Cost” it made me more suddenly wary of the impact just one person can really have on climate change. I think we all to an extent think that we are just one person and we can’t be contributing so largely to such a widespread issue. Though the reality is that we are individually damaging the climate. Watching this film, I knew about the impact I make on the environment with the everyday choices I make, but seeing it was a whole different story. My family is from India and I have visited there often so I have seen these horrific labor circumstances first hand making them far more impactful to me. India has a large population of over exerted laborers though most of what they make is for export purposes.

There are a number of great, interconnected points here.

First, in terms of workers’ rights, India is also at the very bottom with Bangladesh, in the fifth tier, where there is “[n]o guarantee of rights.”

As this person aptly notes, “most of what they make is for export purposes,” which is the case with many countries, such as Bangladesh and China.

Consequently, even though it may seem that *The True Cost* is about horrible working conditions in far-off places like Bangladesh and Cambodia, it is also about the US and our insatiable consumerism. Indeed, that could have made for an illuminating supplement to the film’s title, as it could well have been called *The True Cost of Our Insatiable Consumerism on the Rest of the World*.

In this sense, the film holds a mirror up to us. While we can (and absolutely should) be outraged at the corporations that directly exploit people in Bangladesh and Cambodia,

some of that anger should be turned in on ourselves, as these companies are doing it for us.

Of course, none of us are authorizing these corporations to violate the rights of people across the planet. However, when we buy things like shirts that cost \$5 or \$10, yet are sewn by hand, we need to realize that we are enabling a system that does just that. To again repeat the previous comment, “[e]very single employee deserves a livable wage, trade union rights, pension, safe working conditions, and healthcare.” There is simply no way that this can be achieved while producing a shirt that retails for \$5.

However, this comment raises the question of “the impact [that] just one person can really have.” We are sometimes told that individual action does little, as it is just a drop in the bucket. For example, why shouldn’t we get on that airplane, as it will take off regardless of whether our seat is filled or empty?

However, if 200 people do this, it will mean that one less flight will happen.

Individual action is part of the equation, but, as I never tire of saying, it has to be coupled with activism and political action. In this case, laws need to be enacted across the planet to protect the rights of workers, as well as protect the planet itself. Although we might think that this only applies to places like Bangladesh and Cambodia, as I noted above, we need major reform in the United States as well.

Incidentally, paying a lot for a product does not ensure that more money goes to the people who actually made it. iPhones are an example.

Let’s assume that an iPhone costs \$1000, which is in fact a little less than the base cost of Apple’s current top-of-the-line model. What percentage of this cost do you think goes to the people who actually made that phone? 10%? 20%? 30%

In fact, [just 2% of an iPhone goes to the workers who make it](#). Just \$20.

It might seem that because this is such a high-tech device, most of that \$1000 would go to the components. However, 51% (i.e. \$510) of the cost goes to profits for Apple. Hence, since Apple is already a wildly profitable company, if they reduced the amount of the purchase price that goes to profits by just 2%, they could double the amount that goes to workers.

Think about that for a moment. Apple could double the amount that is going to workers with an almost negligible impact on their profit, yet they don’t.

Just how bad are the working conditions in the factories that make iPhones? Starting around 2010, the number of deaths by suicide in the Foxconn plants that produce iPhones became so great that the company “[had large nets installed outside many of the buildings to catch falling bodies](#).”

I learned about the horrific factory worker conditions in my world history class as well. There was an incident the professor mentioned that was similar to the Rana Plaza collapse that happened during the industrial revolution. In the spring of 1911, a fire broke out in the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. The company was one of the largest garment factories on the east side of Manhattan. There were 146 Jewish and Italian young women working at the time that were trapped inside on the 9th floor of the factory. All 146 of those women burned to death, asphyxiated or jumped to their deaths. The sad truth is that the fashion industry hasn't really changed since the industrial revolution. There have been so many deaths that have occurred inside of these factories and nothing happens to correct that. The fast fashion industry still exists and people are still dying because of the exploitation of this industry. It's inhumane, unjust and destroys the planet.

This is an important point. Although fast fashion is relatively new, the problem of worker's rights is not.

During the 1911 fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company this person references, the 146 women were not just, as this person notes, "trapped inside on the 9th floor of the factory," they were locked in, as "[the doors to the stairwells and exits were locked – a common practice at the time to prevent workers from taking unauthorized breaks and to reduce theft.](#)"

The 1911 fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company proved to be something of a watershed event in worker's rights, as "[public outcry inspired workplace safety laws that revolutionized industrial work nationwide.](#)" One of the people who witnessed the fire, Frances Perkins, "[subsequently helped organize and implement reforms, later becoming President Franklin Roosevelt's labor secretary and the first female Cabinet member \[in the US\]. Perkins later said the fire was 'the day the New Deal was born.'](#)"

"The True Cost" really made me rethink the harms of the fashion industry. Living in South Korea, fashion is a great influence among all people; determining a critical view of wealth, appearance, and general well-being. People in Korea take fashion seriously and regularly change their clothes according to trends; accurately portraying "fast fashion"...I believe that this documentary holds an important message that Koreans must understand before taking too much value of clothing.

Another great point.

Although we may think of fast fashion as a US phenomenon, something that is part and parcel with the so-called American Dream, this Dream has now spread around the world. As this comment aptly notes, fashion has taken on a symbolic meaning as "a critical...[indicator]... of wealth, appearance, and general well-being. People in Korea [as well as across the planet] take fashion seriously and regularly change their clothes according to trend."

Although in some sense it has taken centuries, the fact that the fashion industry has yoked our very sense of self with the clothes that we wear is an astonishing achievement,

especially as it is now a worldwide phenomenon. Of course, clothes have always played a symbolic role, but it was globally never mass marketed to such an extent – and arguably so successfully.

Instead of looking and listening carefully for signs of inner “general well-being,” we have been trained to see clothing as an indicator of health and happiness, as well as prosperity. Of course, even if you think about it just a little, it is obvious that it is not, in any way, such an indicator. Moreover, now that fast fashion has driven the cost of clothing down, it no longer functions as an accurate indicator of wealth.

And yet, it continues to have this symbolic importance, which marketers are happy to continue to promote and exploit.

This week, watching the 30-minute episode of, “The Ugly Truth of Fast Fashion,” was very refreshing. Its humorous approach delivered important information in a friendly format that was easy to receive, and yet all of the information was a giant slap in the face of just how horrible fast fashion really is. Even though Hasan would joke about the actual ridiculousness of a society that has, “52 fashion seasons per year,” he didn’t take any of the seriousness away from the issue. In fact, just when viewers started to think that maybe the problems weren’t as bad as they seemed, he brought down some very undeniable statistics that really made the audience think. As a person who has trouble getting people to care about some of the things that I think are most important, it was almost revolutionary for me to watching this comedian get just about anyone to stop and pay attention to such an important issue like fast fashion.

How, indeed, do you get people caring about issues that are important, such as the climate crisis?

One option is to entertain while explaining the issue. Perhaps surprisingly, entertaining through comedy can prove to be surprisingly effective.

However, this can be a dicey business, as going too far can make the whole thing seem like a laughing matter. Not something that you would want to do with the climate crisis. Alternately, baiting people with the promise of entertainment only to hit them with some really disturbing information could cause them to turn the show off.

Shows like *Patriot Act*, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, and *The Daily Show* have worked at perfecting a satirical approach to important issues, with short comedic interludes, that really seems to work (not all the time, but often). Consequently, the host of *Patriot Act* was able to, as this comment notes, “joke about the actual ridiculousness of a society that has, ‘52 fashion seasons per year,’ [yet] he didn’t take any of the seriousness away from the issue.”

Regarding the notion that there are now “52 fashion seasons per year,” instead of the original Fall and Spring seasons from a generation ago, it may seem ludicrous that stores would need to replenish their slack on a weekly basis. However, as the following notes, there may indeed be more than one shipment in one week.

I worked in clothing retail, at a mid-range department store (Macy's, if you care to know). When Hasan says "drowning in clothing" as the model for fast fashion production, I had vivid flashbacks to spending HOURS upon HOURS in the docks unpacking boxes, stripping off plastic bags, and hanging, folding, and adding sensors to garments. We received two shipments of clothing per week, plus whatever trucks came randomly...I couldn't imagine everything selling at a rate to warrant how many articles we put out on the floor, but people bought it. Everyone is ravenous for cheap clothing. Everyone believes in the fundamental right to express themselves through their fashion choices. It's unbelievable.

It is interesting to think about their being a "fundamental right to express" ourselves through "fashion choices." I don't recall that being in the US Constitution. Yet, as this person really notes, many people seem to believe that this is one of their rights.

This must be enormously rewarding for marketers, as people have been turned into consumers who believe that they have the right to buy as much as they want in order to express themselves. As I noted earlier, our very sense of self has been interwoven into what we wear.

What is rather surprising is that fast fashion has sold us on the idea of quantity rather than quality. In fact, marketers have convinced us to wear poor-quality clothing in order that we may have more of it.

Traditionally, and by that I mean up until roughly the middle of the 20th century, well-off women in wealthy countries had just five or six dresses and men as many suits. In order to add variety to the look, people wore things like interesting scarves and neck ties. Although people didn't own many items of clothing, these were generally of relatively high-quality and carefully tailored to the individual. In the US, most people wore clothes made in the US.

Exploiting the fact that garments could be made less expensively in other countries, [the American clothing industry entered a period of swift decline](#), starting about 50 years ago. Although unfortunate for the US clothing industry, this meant that more and more people in the US could have more clothing. In other words, you didn't have to be wealthy to have five or six nice outfits.

Soon, nearly anyone could, which meant that marketers suddenly had a much larger market than just relatively well-off individuals. And, as they have been able to continue to drive costs down over the past few decades, this meant that people could buy more and more articles of clothing.

When someone mentions climate change, the first issues that pop up in our heads are probably rising sea levels, polar ice caps melting, coal mining, oil rigging, or global temperature rise. It would be unlikely for the fashion and clothing industry to make it to that list. Yet little do we know, the fashion industry is the second most polluting industry after oil. (How did I not know this?)...

It's true, when we think about the climate crisis, we often think about the consequences, like "rising sea levels...[and]... polar ice caps melting," or root causes, like "coal mining...[and drilling for]...oil." We do not, however, often think about our own personal actions and the industries, like fashion, encouraging environmentally worrisome practices.

Although we may not think much about its climate footprint, "[\[t\]he fashion industry is responsible for 10% of annual global carbon emissions](#)." When you consider that many people in wealthy countries like the US are literally purchasing ten times more clothing than they need, you can see how cutting back on this rampant consumerism could result in immediate and significant reductions of global greenhouse gas emissions

It is also unfortunately the case that, now that the climate crisis is increasingly on our radar, we forget that there are all sorts of other environmental problems caused by industry, such as the polluting of land, air, and water by certain industries. The fashion industry is a prime offender here. For example, "[\[a\]round 20 % of wastewater worldwide comes from fabric dyeing and treatment](#)."

The silver lining here is that this is something that we can tackle right now. We do not, for example, need technological breakthroughs to tackle this problem. Of course, technological innovations are always welcome. For example, "[Textile mills generate one-fifth of the world's industrial water pollution](#)." There is promising new technology that can reduce the water used in producing garments.

However, even greater gains can be had by approaching this as a cultural problem. After all, since 10% of global carbon emissions come from the fashion industry, we could cut this in half if we all purchased half as many clothes, everything else being equal.

Moreover, as social justice and environmental issues are deeply intertwined here, by addressing the climate crisis as a cultural rather than just technological problem, we can implement solutions that will improve both.