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Ethical Consumption is a Myth

Proponents of capitalism point out the benefits the system provides to the masses, such as accessibility and the free market. In doing so, they gloss over the fact that these “benefits” enable private industries to cash in on human necessities and desires to create profit. No single trade embodies this exploitation more than the fast-fashion industry, which since its inception has taken advantage of human and environmental resources alike to make money. Fast fashion is a global phenomenon, with the majority of production occurring in various Asian countries like China, Bangladesh, and India (Ganz). However, American capitalist values and consumerist patterns best reflect the irreversible impact the industry has had on society and the planet. The history and goals of the fast fashion industry guarantee that net profit and cost-effectiveness are inherently emphasized over principles. This is an extension of the capitalist system, where large corporations value financial gain and efficiency over ecological morality in their business models. The fast fashion industry epitomizes these immoral priorities and leaves consumers with no way to shop that is concurrently ethical, sustainable, and economically viable. These factors ensure that true reform within the industry is impossible unless the deeper systemic issues of capitalism such as human and environmental exploitation are addressed.

It is necessary to examine the origins of the fast fashion industry to understand its function in the present day. The roots of garment manufacturing as a true industry can be traced to the modernization of the Industrial Revolution. Until the mid-19th century, garments were

made on an individual basis. Middle-class women enlisted local dressmaking shops, while lower-class women sewed their own clothes. Interestingly, this economic imbalance led to perhaps the first instance of exploitation within fashion. The businesses that the middle-class women relied on outsourced production to “‘sweaters’, or people who worked from home for very low wages” (Idacavage). Today, the industry continues to rely on decreasing manufacturing costs by outsourcing production. Very little changed in terms of the mechanics of the industry until World War II, which created the need to ration materials and placed an emphasis on functionality in clothing. This led to “an increase in standardized production” and an altered post-war mindset: consumers were more appreciative of the accessibility of mass-produced clothing (Idacavage). This mindset not only survived into the 1960s and 1970s but thrived, as the Mod style gained prominence and “cheap, simply constructed fashion became... a signal of youth rebellion” (Maxwell). This interest led to the creation of companies like Zara and H&M, which were founded on a significantly smaller scale than the massive retailers that they are today. While cheap fashion may still be synonymous with youth, it is no longer a form of rebellion but rather mainstream. To fully understand the development of fast fashion, we must also examine the economic system, capitalism, from which the industry derives its values.

The violence, colonialism, and exploitation used to establish and uphold capitalism reveal the system’s inherent lack of regard for human welfare. Capitalism is a product of colonial expansion, an endeavor that is always driven by a quest for power and profit and always involves unprovoked violence. Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore link both the birth of capitalism and the Anthropocene (or as they suggest it should be called, the “capitalocene”) to 15th-century European settler colonialism (Patel and Moore 3). They make the argument that capitalism “exists only through frontiers” (Patel and Moore 19), defining a frontier as “a site where crises

encourage new strategies for profit” (Patel and Moore 18). Capitalism has always and will always prioritize individual success over collective welfare, evaluating success by the amount of personal wealth one can amass. Considering the systemic context, this determinate for success makes sense- you can't have capitalism without capital, after all, at whatever cost the pursuit of it requires. Patel and Moore continue to explain the underlying issue with the capitalist system: that it “has thrived not because it is violent and destructive (it is) but because it is productive in a particular way. Capitalism thrives not by destroying natures but by putting natures to work-- as cheaply as possible” (Patel and Moore; 19). The plural usage of the word “nature” here is crucial. Not only is physical nature (the environment) taken advantage of to advance the capitalist agenda, but human nature is as well. No system with origins as awful as capitalism can be a platform for ethical or sustainable industries, and fast fashion is no exception.

The fast fashion industry’s business model is centered around the concept of planned obsolescence, allowing it to prioritize profit above all else. Investopedia defines planned obsolescence as “a strategy of deliberately ensuring that the current version of a given product will become out of date or useless within a known time period” (Kenton). By catering to trends and producing low-quality garments that quickly deteriorate, the fast fashion industry can guarantee that consumers will buy more clothing and subsequently that companies will make a consistent profit. Planned obsolescence is a capitalist theory, and like capitalism, it elevates the desire for profit over any consequences that occur as a result of the pursuit of said profit. In the case of fast fashion, this “strategy” is what makes and keeps the industry “fast”. While high fashion houses like Dior and Chanel still release collections on a seasonal basis, the fast fashion sector “runs on about 52 micro-seasons a year” (Sharma). This leads to excessive amounts of pollution and waste, overburdened workers, and contributes to excessive consumerist shopping

patterns. In other words, the inhumane exploitation of labor, environmental harm, and a detrimental psychological impact on the industry's target consumer base, teenage and young adult women, are all consequences of fast fashion.

While fast fashion may make life easier for millions of consumers by providing them with accessible and affordable clothing, it does so at the significant expense of human life. Dr. Mark Sumner, a professor at the Leeds University School of Design, has proposed the only positive theory relating to fast-fashion that I have encountered: that the industry "democratized" fashion and allowed people of all backgrounds "to engage in [its] hedonistic and psychogenic pleasures" (House of Commons 7). However, it's important to remember that once again, capitalism is at the root of the industry: in order to minimize work costs, fast fashion companies sacrifice the ethical treatment of their laborers. They see working expenses from a capitalist perspective: as a detriment to their net profit, not as a reflection of fair workplace conditions. Instead of spending less money on massive quantities of stock, these companies pay their workers unlivable wages. In Sri Lanka, the average pay for garment workers is around \$197/month, while in India workers earn about \$92/month. These figures constitute less than half of a livable wage in their respective countries (Chua). Garment workers are not only deprived of fair pay but physical safety in the workplace. As long as textile factories have been in operation, there have been preventable workplace tragedies that have resulted in the loss of workers' lives. One of the earliest recognizable instances is the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, where 146 workers died as a result of locked doors around the building (Triangle Shirtwaist Fire). In 2012, over a hundred people died in a fire at the Tazreen Fashions Factory in Bangladesh when the factory owner forced laborers to continue working through fire alarms. And less than six months later, the collapse of the Rana Plaza building took the lives of over a thousand people and

injured thousands more. This event is the most horrifying example of profit-driven priorities: despite knowing that there were massive structural issues with the building, the garment factories demanded that their employees return to work. The clothes sold by the fast fashion industry are physical manifestations of human suffering, and the legacy the industry will leave on Earth will only inflict more.

Through the exploitation of natural resources and massive contributions to global pollution, the fast fashion industry has severely abused the environment. Not including other sectors of the fashion industry, fast fashion alone is estimated to produce 1.2 billion tons of carbon dioxide every year. This is more pollutive than international shipping and aviation industries combined (House of Commons 28). In this period of global warming, humanity needs to be conscious of our consumption of energy and resources to slow the effects of climate change. And yet, “The fashion industry is projected to use 35% more land for fibre production by 2030— an extra 115 million hectares that could be left for biodiversity or used to grow crops to feed an expanding population” (House of Commons 28). This usage of the land doesn't just deprive it of a sustainable or ethical contribution, but directly adds to material pollution. Microfibers are shed when clothing is washed or worn, and more than 60% of them include petrochemicals. To make matters worse, almost 40% of microfibers end up in bodies of water like the ocean or rivers- the annual weight equivalent of microfibers in the ocean is 50 billion plastic bottles (Sharma). Annually, 20% of global industrial water pollution comes from “the dyeing and treatment of textiles” (Ellen MacArthur Foundation 21). Humanity’s development and utilization of nature have always been motivated by personal (monetary) gain. Large corporations see the planet as an inexhaustible resource and pay no mind to the footprint they leave behind. Take for example the poultry industry, where sixty billion chickens are slaughtered

each year. Centuries from now, trillions of chicken bones will be fossilized reminders of our current ecological thoughtlessness (Patel and Moore 4,5). The cycle of capitalism and environmental exploitation are interdependent, and the fast fashion industry is no exception to this rule. Recently, however, the renewed focus on stopping climate change has highlighted sustainable reform efforts that could decrease the industry's environmental impact.

The discussion of sustainability in the fast fashion industry mainly revolves around the reduction of microfiber shedding. Decreasing the number of microfibers that make their way into our ecosystem is the most efficient and accessible method of directly reducing the pollution that the industry creates. Multiple routes can be employed to achieve this, but the most effective is to employ better strategies of preventing microfibers from corrupting our natural resources. One way to do this is through the development of filters that can separate the microfibers from water. The British House of Commons's Environmental Audit Committee recommends filters in both laundry machines and water treatment sites but notes that "even relatively high capture rates in wastewater treatment may still result in substantial emissions" considering the sheer quantity of clothing that is discarded annually (House of Commons 34). Another forward-thinking way of addressing the issue is presented by the company Intrinsic Advanced Materials, which "has developed an additive that helps polyester microfibers in fabrics biodegrade in the environment" (Sharma). Although the ideal is the removal of microfibers from the environment, this is a realistic interim solution. It recognizes that industrial change takes time, and allows companies to reduce their environmental impact without being forced into completely changing their ways. An element of this is dangerous, however, as it could give these companies a false sense of comfort and lead them to feel as though they've done enough for the cause of fighting climate change. In

fact, the only semblance of “enough” is a continuous devotion to progress. But what does this continuous devotion look like?

Establishing sustainable practices in the fast fashion industry will not be enough to create true reform. Sustainability is about preserving the balance between human patterns and natural resources. The foundation of fast fashion is to produce as much as possible, as quickly as possible, because that is how companies can generate the most profit. Zara and H&M can put as much effort and as many resources as they want into trying to decrease their environmental impacts, but at the end of the day, the fast fashion industry still produces millions of garments that collectively use 79 billion cubic meters of water every year (House of Commons 29). While ecologically conscious reform efforts make the industry appear sustainable, the true issue lies with the capitalist system that encourages the cycle of mass production and consumption. The journal article *Fashion, Sustainability, and the Anthropocene* makes the argument that “What is not on the agenda is challenging commercial interests, questioning high-tempo fast-fashion models of production and consumption, or proposing alternative models of social relations that constrain the opportunities for market growth and profit accumulation” (Brooks et al. 493). This omission is intentional. Fast fashion can still be profitable if it enacts the previously discussed changes regarding microfibers because nothing about the industry’s operating patterns has to change- society just has to find ways to adjust to them. If consumption patterns change, however, the industry will lose its source of profit. According to the British House of Commons’s Environmental Audit Committee, “ By 2030 global apparel consumption is projected to rise by 63%, from 62 million tons today to 102 million tons” (House of Commons 7). The fast fashion industry wouldn’t exist if consumers weren’t driven to buy clothes in unnecessarily large

quantities. The blame, however, does not lie with consumers, but with the capitalist system that prioritizes profit over ethics.

The phrase is common: “there is no ethical consumption under capitalism”. What we should be emphasizing, however, is that capitalism provides no space for ethical production to exist. It’s a matter of accountability: large corporations are allowing lives and the planet to be harmed to make money (Tang). This is a trait that is not only inherent to capitalism but to the industries that embody it- fast fashion is one of them. Ultimately, the nature of the fast-fashion industry makes the ethical reform of it impossible. The concept of fast fashion cannot be separated from the current business practices used to make the industry function, namely exploitation and violence. The same stands for capitalism itself: no entity with as much blood on its hands as capitalism does has the capacity to separate itself from the past. Fast fashion’s reliance on planned obsolescence guarantees that everything will go out of style eventually. But what will it take for the industry itself to become obsolete? Industrial change is not the issue- systemic change is. And until the capitalist system and its values genuinely evolve and we begin prioritizing life on earth over materialism, it never will. After all, all life on this planet is interconnected. Bodies of water, people, animals- all of us make up the ecosystem of this planet, and as the dominant species that lives on it, we as humans have to take care of it.

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