

Where the Thread Starts: Power Imbalance in the Textile Industry

The textile industry in the U.S. has always been a source of great revenue for the country. Corporations in America have constantly looked to increase revenue by using cheaper materials, methods, and labour. They've undermined pre-existing workforces to take advantage of workforces in vulnerable places looking for any economic stimulus for those already at the top. Stephen Kinzer's book *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq* deals with American imperialism in the 20th century. Although he uses examples of the U.S. directly overthrowing foreign governments his argument that intervention with foreign countries is to benefit the U.S. by earning it power or resources or by changing others' ideologies can be applied to the textile industry in the U.S.¹ The behavior of these U.S. corporations supports and is supported by American capitalism which is influenced by colonialism.

The textile industry has been tied to vital moments in U.S. history. From the need for cotton to increase the South's desire for slaves to the Lowell mill employing some of the first female wage workers while underpaying them, textiles are a huge part of the economy and have shown up in social history accordingly. Another group exploited by this Western textile industry has been workers in Asia. The textile industry can be broken down into three parts, apparel 35% (clothing), interior textiles 35% (home furnishings), and industrial textiles 30% (vehicles, bandages, etc).² This essay will focus on apparel textile goods unless otherwise specified. Today

¹ Stephen Kinzer, *Overthrow: America's Century of Regime Change from Hawaii to Iraq*, Times Books, 2007, 1–3.

² Ingrid Johnson and Allen C. Cohen and Ajoy K. Sarkar, *Fabric Science*, Fairchild Books, 2015, 5.

most apparel textile goods are manufactured in Asia, the biggest Asian exporters being China, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and India.³ These countries vary in their production cost and quality but overall offer production at a cheaper cost than in the U.S.

The transition to outsourcing manufacturing began with the unemployment and ill-treatment of American textile workers. The demise of production of textile goods in the U.S. in the 1950s and 60's led to the unemployment of many Americans due to the cheaper labour found abroad. The transition to outsourcing textile production slowly lowered the wages of workers in the U.S. while increasing taxes of imported goods in an effort to prolong the transition as Ellen Israel Rosen shows in her book *Making Sweatshops: The Globalization of the U.S. Apparel Industry*. The fight to maintain textile jobs with fair wages in the states was generally fought by the federal government supporting big corporations that had been merging smaller mills together getting more powerful against American workers and unions. Workers in the field had traditionally unionized heavily. However, in the decades following World War 2 most small textile mills closed or merged with larger companies leaving many unemployed. Mills also moved to be more concentrated in the American South due to cheaper production cost and less worker unions.⁴ During this transition to the South, clothes manufactured in Japan began being sold in the U.S. By the 60's an American textile worker earned \$1.65 an hour on average, Japanese workers were making about \$0.15 an hour.⁵ The cheaper labour was perfect for the textile manufacturers who were pushing for cheaper labour within the states. This led to protests and boycotts of those sellers and furthered the split between textile manufacturers and textile

³ Ibid, 4

⁴ Ellen Israel Ross, *Making Sweatshops: the Globalization of the U.S. Apparel Industry*. University of California Press, 2002, 78-79

⁵ Ibid 82

unions/workers. The Federal government responded with protectionist taxes on foreign textile goods to allow domestic workers to compete. This effort to keep people in the U.S. employed just slowly burned domestic workers instead. The foreign goods although heavily taxed would still be cheaper than production in the U.S.. Domestic workers' already low wages were slowly cut to compete until the bulk manufacturing was finally outsourced.⁶ The capitalistic desire of American textile companies for cheap labour hurt their own domestic workers and would lead to the mistreatment of workers abroad.

Today Bangladesh is the second-largest textile exporter in the world and one of the poorest countries with an estimated GDP per capita of \$4,200 USD.⁷ Centuries prior to this Bangladesh was part of the British East India Company. Before the 1900s when natural fibres were the only option for textiles, fibres such as cotton and flax ruled the world. After the Industrial Revolution, Western cotton cloth and yarn dominated globally. It's low expense and high production rate eliminated business for small weavers. Competition was still presented by Bengali weavers who during Mughal rule in India produced famously high-quality cotton goods.⁸ Similar to America's protectionist taxes on Japanese products, the British East India Company eliminated the threat by taxing Indian goods and importing their own textiles to the country. They increased their capital in industrial textiles by forcefully eliminating competition and planted factories in another country; they forced their capitalism. Colonial policies create a system where territories become heavily dependent on the colonial power. The economic and

⁶ Ellen Israel Ross, *Making Sweatshops: the Globalization of the U.S. Apparel Industry*, University of California Press, 2002, 79-81

⁷ Central Intelligence Agency, "GDP per capita (PPP) South Asia," *The World Factbook*.

⁸ Mary Schoeser, *World Textiles: A Concise History*, Thames and Hudson world of art, 2003, 163-165

social structures of the territory cannot survive without the colonial powers and/or its supporters and fall apart when the colonial power leaves.

Though Bangladesh is an independent country today. It is highly dependent on American and European textile/garment companies for revenue. According to Siddiqur Rahman, former president of the Bangladesh Garment and Manufacturers and Exporters Association, “Fifty million people depend on the garment industry. Our economy is dependent on it.”⁹ There are approximately 160 million people in Bangladesh. In 2013 the Rana Plaza building in Dhaka, Bangladesh famously collapsed killing over 1,000 workers.¹⁰ More than a dozen U.S. and European brands produced their clothing there, such as Walmart and Gucci. Many brands didn’t even know due to the structure of apparel supply chains that capitalism easily allows; companies don’t work directly with their clothing manufacturers.¹¹ The collapse showcased the lack of care for textile workers’ health and safety in Bangladesh. It resulted in The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh. Created by a group of European clothing companies, the accords were created to keep Bangladeshi factory owners in check by increasing safety standards. Only until recently these accords were controlled by this entity of Western clothing manufacturers.¹² This past January the control was given to manufacturers in Bangladesh. The accords were made with the intent of protecting Bangladeshi apparel workers but it gave a lot of power to Western companies that the country’s economy is already so dependent on. South Asian textile workers were first hurt by the trade limitations of being Britain’s colony and then were exploited by

⁹ Dana Thomas, *Fashionopolis: the Price of Fast Fashion & the Future of Clothes*, Penguin Press, 2019, pp. 52–53.

¹⁰ Ibid, 58

¹¹ Ibid 58-59

¹² Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, *Join Statement Accord*, bangladeshaccord.org

Western textile manufacturing when cheap labour was what could be offered in post-colonial South Asia.

Rana Plaza has become an icon for the dangers of sweatshops. However, it doesn't highlight all the intricate ways in which workers are exploited. Citing Rana Plaza doesn't show other tragedies like the employment of underage, underpaid girls in factories, the long history of mistreatment of female workers in industrial textiles, the ridiculous work hours that don't allow for religious practice, and of course the unlivable wages¹³

A common argument made for textile industries in poorer countries to continue on the often exploitative path is that it creates a pathway to become more wealthy. Textiles can lead to economic growth. This can be seen with Japan, Hong Kong, and South Korea where the U.S. first began outsourcing apparel manufacturing; they both are now amongst the world's wealthiest countries having GDP per capita at 39,500 USD and above.¹⁴ This spins the story to show the West as saviors, bringing industry to the Third World. Bangladesh's economy has grown exponentially since it started producing garments. However, it's scarily dependent on that industry now. This narrative also ignores how the country became as poor as it was. That was a direct result of colonial rule in the area, the careless departure of Britain leading to partition and wars to follow. The West first took industry East when they made Bangladesh its colony and today the terrors of colonialism are very apparent. The terrors of sweatshops are easier to hide because capitalism allows the Western market to remove itself from where its goods are coming from so easily. To say the West has done this with good intent is dangerous. The U.S. hurt its own workers to create the current supply chain system. Today the industry has painted this image

¹³ Dana Thomas, *Fashionopolis: the Price of Fast Fashion & the Future of Clothes*, Penguin Press, 2019, pp. 64-66.

¹⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, "GDP per capita (PPP) East Asia/Southeast Asia," *The World Factbook*.

of good intent as well to bring textile production back to the West. An American textile textbook used in fashion/textile programs around the country, including Jefferson University, states “After World War 2, international trade agreements encouraged textile and clothing imports from many small, emerging markets countries to stimulate their industrial development. But now the textile and apparel industries in some of these countries have become so strong they pose a serious threat to the established industries in Western Europe and North America.”¹⁵

Aviva Chomsky explains how capitalism works well in American but not in a lot of other former colonies. Countries can try to fight this with different political or economic systems such as socialism. She shows how they can be haunted by a colonial legacy.¹⁶ Capitalism fails to deliver to those most in need. In the world economy countries like Bangladesh are most in need. American capitalism is closely tied to British colonialism. They both celebrate the extremes of capitalism. The current attitude that Asian textile manufacturers are a “threat” lines up with all the other times they’ve been a “threat” and have gotten the most hurt. What happens if American brands irresponsibly pull manufacturing away from Asia just how they pushed it there and Britain forced it there? Asia will again hurt the most from this modern-day colonialism.

¹⁵ Ingrid Johnson and Allen C. Cohen and Ajoy K. Sarkar, *Fabric Science*, Fairchild Books, 2015, 4.

¹⁶ Aviva Chomsky. *A History of the Cuban Revolution* John Wiley & Sons, 2015, 8–12.

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