

## ***Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion***

By Elizabeth L. Cline

Published by Penguin Group, 2012, 221 pages

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What do over-flowing landfills, globalization, fast fashion, the dwindling of America's middle class, and the fact that people no longer care to mend their clothes have in common? Everything, if you read Elizabeth L. Cline's compelling book, *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*. In her book, Cline takes various seemingly disparate threads and weaves them together to give readers a big picture view of how their consumption of cheap and trendy fashions are at the heart of so much redistribution of wealth and health on our planet.

Cline uses the topic of clothing—something we all use and can relate to—to help us understand how our shopping choices create high demand for certain clothes and in turn for the dirt cheap labor needed in order to extract a profit. Using a rich compilation of research, historical data, and first-person interviews, Cline takes readers with her to Manhattan's famed Garment District; to South Carolina, where textile production once employed hundreds of thousands of middle-income Americans but is now highly automated; to the Los Angeles garment workers struggling to survive on minimum wage; then to the dorms of Chinese factory workers earning about \$1 an hour; to the now hopping garment industry in Bangladesh; to the humble home of a unionized seamstress in Santo Domingo; and even to the Sub-Saharan African ports, where much of our unwanted clothing makes a haggard, last-ditch appearance.

For first-year students, this book provides many entry points for deep thought and even deeper conversations and lively debates concerning economics, psychology, ethics, history, and the environment. This book could serve well for programs that take a global or historical look at topics. It's a great vehicle for analyzing a situation on the micro and macro level. Surprisingly, it even touches on immigration and government policy.

One interesting thread that Cline introduces is that of the immigrants who were able to come to the United States and find skilled work that gave them a chance at middle-class life. Sewing was more than just a hobby; it was a valuable skill that workers without college degrees or a command of the English language could still access. This part of Cline's book resonated on a personal level as both my mother and aunt emigrated in the early 60s from Ecuador to New York, and their sewing skills allowed them to start their lives in a new country. For beginning college students, there may be a personal connection as well through grandparents or other relatives who found work in the garment or textile industries.

On page 143, Cline takes us back in time to the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York, where about 150 people, mostly young, teenaged women were burned alive in the locked factory or desperately jumped to their deaths 100 feet below. The tragedy led to important government policies that impact the workplace, many of which now affect our lives on a daily basis:

A Factory Investigating Commission was set up and more than thirty state workplace safety and employment laws were passed within two years. Robert Wagner, who chaired the commission, went on to sponsor Social Security, the National Labor Relations Act, and many other New Deal legislations. Francis Perkins, also on the commission, went on to become the Secretary of Labor under Franklin D. Roosevelt and established the 40-hour work week, as

well as the first minimum wage and overtime laws. (p. 143)

One of Cline's strengths is that she doesn't take a judgmental view of consumer habits and even looks at her own role in the problem. In the introduction, she empties her closet and takes a cold hard look at just what's in there. She finds 354 pieces of clothing.

My wardrobe is what the average American produces in a little over five years...I owned more clothing than I did anything else and probably knew the least about it of anything I bought. I checked the label on my eggs, but not on my T-shirts... I knew nothing about garment construction, nor could I recognize quality. (p. 5)

As a young American shopper, she formerly prided herself on her ability to snap up cheap clothes at her favorite retailers: H&M, Forever 21, Target, or Old Navy. She said, "I paid less than \$30 per item on average for each piece of clothing in my closet" (p. 3). She frequently went shopping on her lunch break. "Each of those purchases seemed almost inconsequential in the moment, a deal here, a deal there" (p. 4), but extrapolate that kind of high-volume conspicuous consumption, and see where it gets us all.

Cline writes about the impact buying habits are having on the world's resources, "We are buying and hoarding roughly 20 billion garments per year as a nation. We're running out of oil and water. Icebergs are melting. We've permanently altered our climate. China, where most of our clothes are now produced... is in environmental crisis" (p. 3). In order to produce clothes more cheaply, manufacturers are skimping on fabric quality by using plastic in the form of polyester blends, bargain buttons and threads, less structured designs (which require less stitching), and, of course, the lowest cost labor they can find.

The fact that we are gorging on cheap fashion means consumers are also more likely to throw clothing out instead of mending it. For example, "Every year, Americans throw away 12.7 million tons or 68 pounds of textiles per person...The Environmental Protection Agency estimates 1.6 million tons of this waste could be recycled or reused" (p. 122). Because consumers are used to cheap prices, they are also getting less quality, so a garment might last only a couple of washes, seams might come apart more easily, fabrics might feel skimpy, or buttons may fall off or crack in half within a few wears.

The obsession with buying the latest cheap duds has even created new products and services: professional organizers, stores that sell containers, companies that remodel closets, devices to shrink wrap clothes so people can put them in storage, and YouTube "haul" videos where young women show off their shopping finds. Ironically, Cline writes despite all the items of clothing she owns, she frequently feels as if she has nothing to wear or that the things she does own don't fit quite right, which is consistent with, "One in four American women own seven pairs of jeans, but only wear four of them regularly" (p.121).

One possibility for readers is that they might come away with feelings of outrage or hopelessness as the book slowly and sometimes repetitively builds up the evidence of how consumer spending is at the root of many problems. However, if readers can get past the first two thirds of the book, there are signs of hope.

For those students who want to take some steps toward a less destructive way of shopping for clothes, Cline discusses several ideas. One is just raising awareness. "To calculate the wages of the people who make your clothing, just look at the "made in" label and then do an Internet search for that country's minimum wage" (p.141). Another is to research organizations that monitor the ethical treatment of workers in clothing manufacturing and to be more mindful of purchases. Students who want to take action may be interested in The Great American Apparel Diet, where they can pledge

not to buy any new clothes for one year or in the campaign called Six Items or Less where participants choose only six items of clothing and wear only those items for one month.

Some students may be moved, as Cline was, to pick up a needle and thread. “Learning to sew wasn’t necessarily about making everything I wear,” she writes.

It taught me that clothes aren’t static and unchanging. They can be altered, mended, and even totally rebuilt. Virtually everything in my closet suddenly had some potential to be something I’d get more use out of and maybe even love. Sewing also gave me the ability to recognize garments crafted with skill and care, and made me crave quality clothing.  
(p. 198)

Cline introduces us to the refashioning movement, where users take fabrics from existing unwanted clothes, and give them a new life by turning them into something people want and will use—like a cool new throw pillow. She discusses the idea of renting special occasion dresses, rather than buying them outright in order to wear something really well made without having to go into debt. She also writes about the slow clothing movement, which, much like the slow food movement, engages consumers to think about locally or domestically produced products, organic fabrics, and classic styles rather than fashion that is fast and disposable.

If Cline’s goal was to use fashion as a starting point for a multitude of conversations, she’s absolutely attained that. After reading *Overdressed: The Shockingly High Cost of Cheap Fashion*, I’ve gained a number of new perspectives, and isn’t that what college is for?