



## Point of View by Juliet Schor

# CLOTHES ENCOUNTERS

*A fashion maximalist comes out of the closet*

I CONFESS that I love clothes. I enjoy shopping, and I like to look fashionable. Yet I have never revealed these sartorial passions to my environmentalist friends, suspecting they would disapprove. They mostly hew to what I call fashion minimalism: The attitude that clothes are utilitarian objects whose presence in our lives should be tolerated grudgingly.

I'm right in step with most American women and, increasingly, men, who now buy clothing at record rates. In 2002, the average American consumer acquired fifty-two new items of basic apparel. That's a substantial rise from forty-two garments in 1996, and an indication that we have entered the era of disposable clothing. The average household throws away 1.3 pounds of textile waste weekly. Exports of used clothing more than doubled in the last decade, to nearly a billion pounds per year.

One reason for the surfeit of clothing is rock-bottom prices; Old Navy now sells shirts for ninety-nine cents apiece. The price decline is largely due to relentless pressure on wages, now as low as seven or eight cents an hour in some Asian countries. Unaccounted-for environmental damage also keeps prices low. Toxic chemicals are used in nearly all dyes, and commercial cotton cultivation is pesticide-intensive. In Central Asia falling cashmere

prices have led to overgrazing and desertification. Maybe forty-dollar cashmere sweaters aren't the boon we thought.

These trends are almost enough to convert me to fashion minimalism. But not quite. Ultimately, fashion minimalism trivializes clothes and fails to comprehend our deep fascination with them. Clothing has been key to class struggles for social status—for instance, the poor of early modern Europe disobeyed sumptuary laws that forbade the wearing of certain colors, fabrics, and styles. Throughout history, individuals have used fashion to construct personal and gender identity, from 1920s flappers who flaunted conventional morality with short skirts to 1980s punks whose style was a statement against the hypocrisy of mainstream culture. A historical view shows there's nothing shallow about expressing values through what one wears.

What's hard in today's world is to express values of sustainability, justice, and solidarity. But it's not impossible. A Clean Clothes movement has emerged in Europe, leading major apparel chains such as Marks and Spencer and C&A to commit to principles of labor rights and environmental accountability. These are steps in the right direction.

Yet they're only a start. At heart I'm a

fashion maximalist, possessing an expansive vision for the industry that includes the relocalization of production and the growth of small-scale, designer-run workshops anchored in communities. I want a shift to higher-priced, more aesthetic garments made from sustainably produced, nontoxic fabrics—"investment apparel." I've already begun to accumulate a few of these pieces, including a pair of nicely tailored pants with an invisible double button to accommodate my fluctuating waistline and a sumptuous wool scarf that doubles as a skirt or headwear. I've also ordered a few custom-made linen tops and bottoms sewn by a local producer. I pick exact colors, the clothes fit perfectly, and they're repaired quickly and without cost.

I'd like my friends to see that it's possible to have a personally expressive, ethically responsible wardrobe. As the cultural critic Raymond Williams noted, it's not that contemporary consumers are too materialistic; it's that we're not materialistic enough when we choose disposability over respect, love, and commitment for the objects we fashion into our material world. ✎

*Juliet Schor is the author of Born To Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture, to be published in September by Scribner.*

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