

How to Be More than a Mindful Consumer by Annie Leonard

The life cycle of a simple cotton T-shirt—worldwide, 4 billion are made, sold, and discarded each year—knits together a chain of seemingly intractable problems, from the elusive definition of sustainable agriculture to the greed and classism of fashion marketing.

The story of a T-shirt not only gives us insight into the complexity of our relationship with even the simplest stuff; it also demonstrates why consumer activism—boycotting or avoiding products that don't meet our personal standards for sustainability and fairness—will never be enough to bring about real and lasting change. Like a vast Venn diagram covering the entire planet, the environmental and social impacts of cheap T-shirts overlap and intersect on many layers, making it impossible to fix one without addressing the others.

I confess that my T-shirt drawer is so full it's hard to close. That's partly because when I speak at colleges or conferences, I'm often given one with a logo of the institution or event. They're nice souvenirs of my travels, but the simple fact is: I've already got more T-shirts than I need. And of all the T-shirts I have accumulated over the years, there are only a few that I honestly care about, mostly because of the stories attached to them.

My favorite (no eye-rolling, please) is a green number from the Grateful Dead's 1982 New Year's Eve concert. To me this T-shirt, worn for more than 30 years by multiple members of my extended family, is both useful and beautiful, not only because I attended the concert but because a dear friend gave it to me, knowing how much I would treasure it. The label even says "Made in the USA," which makes me smile because so few things are made in this country anymore, as brands increasingly opt for low-paid workers in poor countries.

Who sews those Tees?

And that takes me back to a day in 1990, in the slums of Port-au-Prince. I was in Haiti to meet with women who worked in sweatshops making T-shirts and other clothing for the Walt Disney Company. The women were nervous about speaking freely. We crowded into a tiny room inside a small cinderblock house. In sweltering heat, we had to keep the windows shuttered for fear that someone might see us talking. These women worked six days a week, eight hours a day, sewing clothes that they could never save enough to buy. Those lucky enough to be paid minimum wage earned about \$15 a week. The women described the grueling pressure at work, routine sexual harassment, and other unsafe and demeaning conditions.

They knew that Disney's CEO, Michael Eisner, made millions. A few years after my visit, a National Labor Committee documentary, *Mickey Mouse Goes to Haiti*, revealed that in 1996 Eisner made \$8.7 million in salary plus \$181 million in stock options—a staggering \$101,000 an hour. The Haitian workers were paid one-half of 1 percent of the U.S. retail price of each garment they sewed.

The women wanted fair pay for a day's work—which in their dire straits meant \$5 a day. They wanted to be safe, to be able to drink water when hot, and to be free from sexual harassment. They wanted to come home early enough to see their children before bedtime and to have enough food to feed them a solid meal when they woke. Their suffering, and the suffering of other garment workers worldwide, was a major reason the end product could be sold on the shelves of big-box retailers for a few dollars.

I asked them why they stayed in the teeming city, living in slums that had little electricity and no running water or sanitation, and working in such obviously unhealthy environments instead of returning to the countryside where they had grown up. They said the countryside simply couldn't sustain them anymore. Their families had given up farming since they couldn't compete against the rice imported from the U.S. and sold for less than half the price of the more labor-intensive, more nutritious native rice. It was all part of a plan, someone whispered, by the World Bank and U.S. Agency for International Development to drive Haitians off their land and into the city to sew clothes for rich Americans. The destruction of farming as a livelihood was necessary to push people to the city, so people would be desperate enough to work all day in hellish sweatshops.

Their proper place

The next day I called on USAID. My jaw dropped as the man from the agency openly agreed with what at first had sounded like an exaggerated conspiracy theory. He said it wasn't efficient for Haitians to work on family farms to produce food that could be grown more cheaply elsewhere. Instead they should accept their place in the global economy—which, in his eyes, meant sewing clothes for us in the United States. But surely, I said, efficiency was not the only criterion. A farmer's connection to the land, healthy and dignified work, a parent's ability to spend time with his or her kids after school, a community staying intact generation after generation—didn't all these things have value?

"Well," he said, "if a Haitian really wants to farm, there is room for a handful of them to grow things like organic mangoes for the high-end export market." That's right: USAID's plan for the people of Haiti was not self-determination, but as a market for our surplus rice and a supplier of cheap seamstresses, with an occasional organic mango for sale at our gourmet grocery stores.

By 2008 Haiti was importing 80 percent of its rice. This left the world's poorest country at the mercy of the global rice market. Rising fuel costs, global drought, and the diversion of water to more lucrative crops—like the thirsty cotton that went into the Disney clothing—withered worldwide rice production. Global rice prices tripled over a few months, leaving thousands of Haitians unable to afford their staple food. The *New York Times* carried stories of Haitians forced to resort to eating mud pies, held together with bits of lard.

But that's not all

Whew. Global inequality, poverty, hunger, agricultural subsidies, privatization of natural resources, economic imperialism—it's the whole messy saga of the entire world economy tangled up in a few square yards of cloth. And we haven't even touched on a range of other environmental and social issues around the production, sale, and disposal of cotton clothing.

Cotton is the world's dirtiest crop. It uses more dangerous insecticides than any other major commodity and is very water intensive. Cotton growing wouldn't even be possible in areas like California's Central Valley if big cotton plantations didn't receive millions of dollars in federal water subsidies—even as some of the poverty-stricken farmworker towns in the Valley have no fresh water.

Dyeing and bleaching raw cotton into cloth uses large amounts of toxic chemicals. Many of these chemicals—including known carcinogens such as formaldehyde and heavy metals—poison groundwater near cotton mills, and residues remain in the finished products we put next to our skin.

Well-made cotton clothing—like my 30-year-old Grateful Dead T-shirt—can last a long time, providing years of service for multiple wearers before being recycled into new clothes or other products. But most retailers are so intent on selling a never-ending stream of new clothes to their targeted demographic that they quickly throw away clothing in last season's style.

And here's one more problem with stuff: we're not sharing it well. While some of us have way too much stuff—we're actually stressed out by the clutter in our households and have to rent off-site storage units—others desperately need more.

For those of us in the overconsuming parts of the world, it's increasingly clear that more stuff doesn't make us more happy, but for the millions of people who need housing, clothes, and food, more stuff would actually lead to healthier, happier people. If you have only one T-shirt, getting a second one is a big deal. But if you have a drawer stuffed with them, as I do, a new one doesn't improve my life. It just increases my clutter. Call it stuff inequity. One billion people on the planet are chronically hungry while another billion are obese.

Citizens, not consumers

The problems surrounding the trip from the cotton field to the sweatshop are just a smattering of the ills that not only result from the take-make-waste economy but make it possible. That's why striving to make responsible choices at the individual consumer level, while good, is just not enough. Change on the scale required by the severity of today's planetary and social crises requires a broader vision and a plan for addressing the root causes of the problem.

To do that we must stop thinking of ourselves primarily as consumers and start thinking and acting like citizens. That's because the most important decisions about stuff are not those made in the supermarket or department store aisles. They are made in the halls of government and business, where decisions are made about what to make, what materials to use, and what standards to uphold.

Consumerism, even when it tries to embrace "sustainable" products, is a set of values that teaches us to define ourselves, communicate our identity, and seek meaning through acquisition of stuff, rather than through our values and activities and our community.

Today we're so steeped in consumer culture that we head to the mall even when our houses and garages are full. We suffer angst over the adequacy of our belongings and amass crushing credit card debt to, as the author Dave Ramsey says, buy things we don't need with money we don't have, to impress people we don't like.

Citizenship, on the other hand, is about what Eric Liu, in *The Gardens of Democracy*, calls "how you show up in the world." It's taking seriously our responsibility to work for broad, deep change that doesn't tinker around the margins of the system but achieves (forgive the activist-speak) a paradigm shift. Even "ethical consumerism" is generally limited to choosing the most responsible item on the menu, which often leaves us choosing between the lesser of two evils. Citizenship means working to change what's on the menu, and stuff that trashes the planet or harms people just doesn't belong. Citizenship means stepping beyond the comfort zones of everyday life and working with other committed citizens to make big, lasting change.

One of our best models of citizenship in the United States is the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. It's a myth that when Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus it was a spontaneous act of individual conscience. She was part of a network of thousands of activists who mapped out their campaign, trained to be ready for the struggles to come, then put their bodies on the line in carefully planned civil disobedience. Consumer-based actions, such as boycotting segregated buses or lunch counters, were part of the campaign, but were done collectively and strategically. That model has been used, with varying degrees of success, in the environmental, gay rights, pro-choice, and other movements. But consumer action alone—absent that larger citizen-led campaign—isn't enough to create deep change.

So yes, it is important to be conscious of our consumer decisions. But we're most powerful when this is connected to collective efforts for bigger structural change. As individuals, we can use less stuff if we remember to look inward and evaluate our well-being by our health, the strength of our friendships, and the richness of our hobbies and civic endeavors. And we can make even more progress by working together—as citizens, not consumers—to strengthen laws and business practices increasing efficiency and reducing waste.

As individuals, we can use less toxic stuff by prioritizing organic products, avoiding toxic additives, and ensuring safe recycling of our stuff. But we can achieve much more as citizens demanding tougher laws and cleaner production systems that protect public health overall. And there are many ways we can share more, like my community of several families does. Since we share our stuff, we only need one tall ladder, one pickup truck, and one set of power tools. This means we need to buy, own, and dispose of less stuff. From public tool lending libraries to online peer-to-peer sharing platforms, there are many avenues for scaling sharing efforts from the neighborhood to the national level.

After Rana Plaza:
We Can Do Stuff Differently

We can't avoid buying and using stuff. But we can work to reclaim our relationship to it. We used to own our stuff; now our stuff owns us. How can we restore the proper balance?

I remember talking to Colin Beavan, aka No Impact Man, at the end of his year of living as low impact as he could manage in New York City: no waste, no preprocessed meals, no

television, no cars, no buying new stuff. He shared with me his surprise at journalists calling to ask what he most missed, what he was going to run out and consume.

What he said has stayed with me as a perfect summation of the shift in thinking we all need to save the world—and ourselves—from stuff.

"They assumed I just finished a year of deprivation," Colin said. "But I realized that it was the prior 35 years that had been deprived. I worked around the clock, rushed home late and exhausted, ate take-out food, and plopped down to watch TV until it was time to take out the trash, go to sleep, and start all over again. That was deprivation."

Fortunately for the planet and for us, there is another way.