Transforming our society into a place that values people over material goods gives our lives meaning. Taking the necessary steps to make sure that everyone has the right to a clean environment, a decent job, and a safe, thriving community lifts us all up. Across the country and especially in New York, the generosity, bonding, and community building that took place in the aftermath of September 11 helped remind us that taking care of those in need makes us better as a people. If we build on that model, we have a real chance to create a society we can all be proud of.

CLEANING THE CLOSET: TOWARD A NEW FASHION ETHIC

Juliet B. Schor

I love clothes—shopping for them, buying them, wearing them. I like good-quality fabrics, such as wool or linen. I cultivate long-term relationships with favorite items, such as sweaters and scarves. I delight in a beautifully tailored suit, everything perfectly in place. And I love to find a bargain.

I confess these sartorial passions with some trepidation. Love of clothes is hardly a well-regarded trait by my friends in the environmental, simplicity, feminist, labor, and social justice movements. And for some good reasons. Much of what we now wear comes from foreign sweatshops. Textile production, with its toxic dyes, often poisons the environment. Fashion is a sexist business, which objectifies and degrades women. Young people adopt a must-have imperative for the latest trendy label. Adults have problems too: The typical compulsive shopper, deep in credit-card debt, has been supporting a shopping habit focused mainly on clothes, shoes, and accessories. Even a cursory look at the making, marketing, wearing, and discarding of clothes reveals that the entire business has become deeply problematic. But my friends have other objections that I find less compelling. Many believe that clothes are trivial—not worth spending time or effort on. Some feel they are irreversibly tainted by the excessive importance society has placed on them, or the power of the greedy behemoths that dominate the industry.

One school of thought—call it “minimalist”—takes a purely utilitarian stance. Clothes should be functional and comfortable, but beyond that, attention to them is misplaced. The minimalist credo goes like this: Buy as few clothes as possible, or better yet, avoid new altogether, because there are so many used garments around. Make sure your garments don’t call too much attention to themselves. Shun labels and “designers.” Purchase only products whose labor conditions and environmental effects can be verified.
This ethic has gained its share of adherents in recent years. A growing number of young people critique their generation’s slavish devotion to Abercrombie, NorthFace, and Calvin, preferring the thrift-shop aesthetic. Simplifiers advocate secondhand stores, clothes swapping parties, and yard sales. The market for organic clothing, despite its generally inferior design and high prices, is expanding. No Logo has developed its own cachet.

Clothing minimalism is certainly a morally satisfying position. But most people do not and will not find minimalism appealing, and not because they are shallow or fashion addicted. Rather, minimalism fails because it does not recognize the centrality of clothing to human culture, relationships, aesthetic desires, and identity. Ultimately, minimalism lacks a positive vision of the role of clothing and appearance in human societies.

But what could that positive vision be? First, it will affirm the cultural importance of clothing, rather than trivialize it. It will embrace the consumer who buys conscientiously and sustainably, but who also has a prized and beautiful wardrobe hanging in her closet. It will recognize that apparel production, which after all has historically been the vanguard industry of economic development, should provide secure employment for millions of women and men in poor countries, a creative outlet for designers and consumers, and a technological staging ground for cutting-edge environmental practices. A “clean-clothes” movement has begun in Europe. Can we transform it into a “clean and beautiful clothes” movement here in the United States? If so, it holds the potential to become a model for a wider revolution in consumer practices. For if we can work it out with a commodity as socially and economically complex as clothing, we can do it with anything.

CLOTHES BY THE POUND

For an introduction to the insanity of the industry, a good place to start is a used-clothing outlet. I chose the Garment District, a hip, department-style warehouse in East Cambridge, Massachusetts. Inside, it’s chockful of every retro and contempo style one could imagine. Outside, huge eighteen-wheeler trucks deposit giant, tightly wrapped bales of clothing, gleaned from charities, merchandisers, and consumers. These clothes sell for a dollar a pound, and seventy-five cents on Friday. That’s a price not too much above beans or rice.

Over the fourteen years that the Garment District has been in business, the wholesale price of used clothing has dropped precipitously, by 80 percent in the last five years alone, according to one source. Renee Weippert, director of retail services at Goodwill International, reports that prices in the salvage market dropped to two to three cents per pound by late 1999 and are now in the seven to eight cent range. In this supply-and-demand oriented “after-market,” the price decline has been caused by an enormous increase in the quantity of discarded clothing. Throughout the 1990s, donations to Goodwill increased by 10 percent or more each year.

And what of the clothing that is not resold to consumers? The Garment District sells its surpluses to “shoddy mills,” which grind up the clothes for car-seat stuffing and other “post-consumer” uses. Or they send it into the global used-clothing market, where it is sold by brokers or given away by charitable foundations. Ironically, the influx of cheap and free clothing in Africa, under the guise of “humanitarian aid,” has undermined local producers and created more poverty. And that’s not the only irony—the excess clothing that ends up in Africa, the Caribbean, or Asia, probably also started out there.

THE POINT OF PRODUCTION:
SWEATED LABOR AND THE POISONED LANDSCAPE

Textiles have become the vanguard industry in the emergence of a new global sweatshop, where women—who comprise 70 percent of the labor force—work for starvation wages, making the T-shirts, jeans, dresses, caps, and athletic shoes eagerly purchased by U.S. consumers. The brutal exploitation of labor and natural resources is at the heart of why clothes have become so cheap.

Consider the case of Bangladesh—which by late 2001 was the fourth largest apparel exporter to the United States. The country, with a per capita income under $1,500 per year, a 71 percent female
illiteracy rate, and 56 percent of its children under age five suffering from malnourishment, is one of the world’s poorest. While proponents of corporate globalization claim the process is lifting people out of poverty, a recent study by the National Labor Committee reveals otherwise. Wages among Bangladesh’s 1.6 million apparel workers range from eight cents per hour for helpers to a high of eighteen cents for sewers. Workers are forced to work long hours and are often cheated of their overtime. When demand is high, they work twenty-hour shifts and are allowed only a few hours of sleep under their sewing machines in the dead of night. The workers, most of whom are between sixteen and twenty-five years old, report constant headaches, vomiting, and other illnesses. Even the “highest” wage rates meet less than half the basic survival requirements, with the result being that malnutrition, sickness, and premature aging are common. Ironically, apparel workers cannot afford to buy clothing for themselves—a group of Bangladeshi women factory workers who recently toured the United States report getting only one new garment every two years. The university caps they sew sell for more than seventeen dollars here; their share is a mere 1.6 cents per cap.

These conditions are not atypical. Disney exploits its Haitian workers who make Mickey Mouse shirts for twenty-eight cents an hour. Wal-Mart, which controls 15 percent of the U.S. market and is the world’s largest clothing retailer, has Chinese factories that pay as little as thirteen cents per hour, with the norm below twenty-five cents. High-priced designers also exploit cheap labor—Ralph Lauren and Ellen Tracy pay fourteen to twenty cents, Liz Claiborne twenty-eight cents. Nike, despite years of pressure by activists, continues to exploit its Asian workforce. At the Welco and Yue Uen factories where its shoes are made, the company was paying only sixteen to nineteen cents per hour, requiring up to eighty-four hours per week including forced overtime, and employing child labor. A recent estimate for a Nike jacket found that the workers received an astounding one half of a percent of its sale price; a study of European jeans found a mere 1 percent went to workers. By contrast, “brand profit” accounts for about 25 percent of the price.

But low wages are only part of the horror of the global sweat-shop. Many factories and worker dormitories lack fire exits and are overcrowded and unhealthy. Workers sewing Tommy, Gap, and Ralph Lauren clothes have been found locked inside the factories. They are routinely harassed—sexually and physically—by their supervisors. The Bangladeshi workers report that beatings are common and that they are forbidden to speak inside the factory. Permission to go to the bathroom is severely curtailed, many are forced to work while ill, and companies typically fire those who become pregnant. Unions are bitterly resisted, with terminations, physical harm, and intimidation by employers. The retailers who contract with local factories have tried to build a wall between themselves and their subcontractors, but this is little more than a callous ruse.

Manufacturers are also exploiting the natural environment. While clothing is not typically thought of as a “dirty” product, like an SUV, plastics, or meat, a closer look reveals that this clean image is undeserved. From raw material production through dyeing and finishing, to transport and disposal, the apparel, footwear, and accessories industries are responsible for significant environmental degradation. Consider cotton, which makes up about half of global textile production. Cotton cultivation is fertilizer-, herbicide-, and pesticide-intensive, endangering both the natural environment and agricultural workers. The crop comprises only 3 percent of global acreage, but accounts for 25 percent of world pesticide use. In some cases, the crop is sprayed up to ten times per season with dangerous chemicals, including, among others, Lorsban, Bladex, Kelthane, Dibrom, Methaphos, and Parathon. The toxicity of these chemicals ranges from moderate to high and has been shown to cause a variety of human health problems, such as brain and fetal damage, cancer, kidney and liver damage, as well as harm to birds, fish, bees, and other animals. Not surprisingly, farm workers suffer from more chemical-related illnesses than any other occupational group. Chemical run-off into the nation’s drinking water has also been extensive—Aldicarb, an acutely toxic pesticide, has been found in the drinking water of sixteen states. Conventional cultivation also depletes the soil and requires large quantities of irrigation water.
Additional hazards arise from chemical-based dyeing and finishing of cloth. The most common chemical dye, used in textiles and leathers, is the so-called azo-dye, which is now believed to be carcinogenic and has been banned in Germany. Formaldehyde, penta-chlorophenol, and heavy metals remain in use despite their toxicity. A little-known aspect of these toxins is their human health impact on both workers and consumers. One German study found that 30 percent of children in that country suffer from textile-related allergies, most of which are triggered by dyes. An estimated 70 percent of textile effluents and 20 percent of dyestuffs are still dumped into water supplies by factories. In South India, where the (highly toxic) tanning industry grew rapidly in the 1990s, local water supplies have been devastatingly polluted by large quantities of poisonous wastes. The various stages of textile production (from spinning, weaving, and knitting to dyeing and finishing) also require enormous energy and water use. For example, one hundred litres of water are needed to process one kilogram (2.2 pounds) of textiles. Environmental effects can also be more indirect. The consumer rage for cheap cashmere has led to unsustainable expansion of herds in Mongolia and, subsequently, to overgrazing, desertification, and ecological collapse. The growth of new fabrics, such as the wood-based tencel, is contributing to deforestation in Southeast Asia.

Environmental impact does not end at the point of production. The globalization of the industry has led to increased pollution through long-distance transport. And eventually, the products enter the waste stream. Clothing, footwear, and accessories are a staple of municipal landfills.

SUPERFLUITY, NOVELTY, AND EXCLUSIVITY: HALLMARKS OF THE CLOTHING INDUSTRY

At the core of the disposal problem lie two developments: Clothes are cheap and Americans are buying them in record numbers. Since 1991, the price of apparel and footwear has fallen, especially women’s clothing, with the drop especially pronounced after 1999. (This was most likely due to declining wages in Asia, caused by the Asian financial crisis.) It is no surprise that as clothes got artificially cheaper, Americans began accumulating more of them. Indeed, when prices are low, the pressure on manufacturers and retailers to sell more becomes intense. In 2000 alone the United States imported 12.65 billion pieces of apparel, narrowly defined (i.e., not including hats, scarves, etc.). It produced another 5.3 billion domestically. That’s roughly 47.7 pieces per person per year. (Women and girls’ rates are higher; men and boys’ lower.) From Bangladesh alone we imported 1.168 billion square meters of cloth. That’s a lot of caps.

Paradoxically, the system of low prices and high volume is anchored at the top by outrageously priced merchandise. At the high end, thousand-dollar handbags, dresses running to the many thousands, even undergarments costing a hundred dollars are the rule. A look at the nation’s distribution of wealth provides one clue to why high-priced clothing is flying off the shelves: The top 10 percent of the population now own a record 71 percent of the nation’s total net worth, and 78 percent of all financial wealth. (The top one percent alone own 38 and 47 percent of net worth and financial wealth.) The existence of such an upscale apparel market is a troubling symptom of a world in which some people have far too much money and far too little moral or social accountability in terms of what they do with it.

But the high-priced venues serve another purpose as well. Designer merchandise becomes available at discount stores at a fraction of its top retail price. This affordable exclusivity is part of what keeps middle-class consumers enmeshed in the system. Clothes cascade through a chain of retail outlets, prices falling at each stage. The system has led many consumers to purchase almost mindlessly when confronted with irresistible “bargain basement” prices of highly regarded designers and to spend much more on clothes than they intend or even realize. Eventually even the desirable designer merchandise ends up being sold for rock-bottom prices—on the web one can find surplus clothing sites selling clothes at a fraction of their retail prices. I found $5,000 designer dresses going for $1,000, women’s coats that retail at $129 available for $22 each; men’s down jackets for $12. I found Hilfiger,
DKNY, Victoria's Secret. Brand-new "high-quality mixed clothing" can be had for twenty-two cents a pound.

The core features of contemporary fashion—fast-moving style, novelty, and exclusivity—also contribute to spending. A seasonal fashion cycle based on climactic needs has been replaced by a shorter timeline, in which the "new" may only last for two months, or even weeks, as in the extreme cases of athletic shoes. The exclusivity that is relentlessly pushed by marketers also contributes to high levels of spending—the product is valued because it is expensive. As it becomes more affordable, its value declines. Similarly, when the consumer aspires to be a fashion pioneer, she seeks rarity. The impacts of these core features of the fashion industry are profound. Many middle- and lower-middle class youth are working long hours to buy clothes. For poor youth, with limited access to money and jobs, the designer imperative has been linked to dropping out of school (because of an inadequate wardrobe), stealing, dealing, even violence. Failing to keep up with the dizzying pace of fashion innovation undermines self-esteem and social status.

But it is not only fashion-orientation that accounts for the enormous volume of clothing that is sold in this country. Shopping for clothes, footwear, and apparel have become habits, even addictions, especially for women. Just something to do because we do it. People shop on their lunch hours, on the weekend, through catalogs, or in the mall. They spend vacations at outlet malls. Americans typically have something in mind they want to buy, and for women that something is often clothing. In my interviews of professional women who subsequently downsized, a common refrain was the enormous superfluity of their closets. It's clear we need to get our relationship to clothes under control.

WHY CLOTHES DO MATTER

To create sustainable, humane, and satisfying apparel, footwear, and accessories industries, we need to understand the functions of these products. Their utilitarian features are obvious. We need garments to cover our bodies, hiking shoes to climb a mountain, a watch to tell time. But this is just the beginning of what clothing really does. Throughout history, clothing has been at the center of how human beings interact. Not always with humane purposes, of course. Clothing and footwear have long identified rank and social position. Before the nineteenth-century, European governments passed sumptuary laws that regulated dress, particularly to control those of low status. Intense conflict was waged over whether one could wear a wig, choose a certain color, or sport a particular fashion style. Not surprisingly, clothing was equally central to struggles against those very inequities. Working people often asserted their social rights by choosing dress that elites deemed unworthy of wearing. Clothing has been key to both the repression of social groups and their struggles for human dignity and justice. (Closer to home, consider how incomplete any account of the political challenges of the 1960s would be without attention to blue jeans, tie-dyed shirts, and long hair.)

Clothing has also been at the heart of gender conflicts. As early-twentieth-century American women attempted to break free of patriarchal strictures, they rejected corsets and confining dresses. In the twenties, they defied convention with cigarettes and short skirts. In the 1970s, the women's movement rejected the fashion system and created its own sartorial sensibility. Clothing has historically also been an important site of intergenerational bonding and learning between women, along with hair care and other beauty rituals. I am quite sure that I got my love of clothes from my mother. Being a good shopper, especially in the complex world of women's clothing, requires finely honed skills, which are passed on from generation to generation.

What we wear is important to the way we experience our sexuality. Our age. Or ethnicity. It allows us to show respect for others (by dressing specially for a social occasion) or to signal community (through shared garments or styles). Finally, clothing can be part of the aesthetic of everyday life. There is genuine pleasure to be gained from a well-made, well-fitting garment. Or from a piece of clothing that embodies beautiful design, craftsmanship, or artistry. Throughout history, human beings have exercised their creativity through clothing, footwear, and accessories.

In sum, dressing and adorning are a vital part of the human ex-
perience. This is why any attempt to push them into a minimalist, utilitarian box will fail. Clothes embody far more than our physical bodies; they are also a measure of our basic values and culture. So, while we may not all take great pleasure in what we wear, we should all recognize that clothes do matter. They are about as far from trivial as any consumer good can be. Which means that a new fashion ethic will be about affirming social and human values, the commitments of daily life, and our hopes and aspirations for a different kind of world.

PRINCIPLES FOR A NEW KIND OF CLOTHING CONSUMER

1. Quality Over Quantity: Moving from Cheap and Plentiful to Rarer and More Valuable

In the past, clothing cost more, and its use was far more ecologically responsible. Only the rich bought more clothes than they wore, in contrast to current habits. Expensive clothing was worn sparingly when newly acquired. In some places, as a garment wore out, it cascaded through a social hierarchy of uses, from esteemed social occasions to the everyday public, and eventually to the most mundane private and domestic uses. Clothing was cleaned far less frequently than today, thereby extending its useful life. Women had the skills to make clothes, and even as ready-made garments became more common, to restructure and upgrade them. Style could be attained through "refashioning" garments, rather than discarding them and buying new ones. Such refashioning could also involve new ownership. Historian Neil McKendrick has identified the origins of the eighteenth-century consumer revolution in Britain with the trickle-down from elites to servants, as maids took their mistresses' cast-off dresses and turned them into newly stylish outfits. Thus, basic principles of ecology and frugality were maintained—take only what you need, use it until it is no longer useable, repair rather than replace, refashion to provide variety.

The history of clothing practices provides guidance for fashioning a new aesthetic whose central principles are to emphasize quality over quantity, longevity over novelty, and versatility over specialization. For example, if we reject the need to keep up with fashion and can be satisfied with a smaller wardrobe, we can spend more per garment, as consumers do in Western Europe. The impact on the earth is less, and it contributes to longevity, because better clothes last longer by not skimping on tailoring or quality and quantity of yardage. Consumers are better off because high-quality clothing is more comfortable and looks better.

Ultimately we could begin to think of clothing purchases as long-term commitments, in which we take responsibility for seeing each garment through its natural life. That doesn't mean we couldn't ever divest ourselves, but that if we grew tired of a useful garment we'd find it a new home with a loving owner, kind of like with pets. Of course, to facilitate such a change, consumers would need to reject the reigning imperative of variety in clothes, especially as it pertains to the workplace and for social occasions. Just because you wore that dress to last year's holiday party doesn't mean you can't show up in it again.

With such an aesthetic, consumers would demand a shift toward more timeless design, away from fast-moving trends. Clothes could become more versatile in terms of what they can be used for, their ability to fit differently shaped bodies and to be altered. Consider the Indian sari, a simple, rectangular piece of cloth that is fitted around the body. It accommodates weight gain and loss, pregnancy, growth, and shrinkage. Couldn't designers come up with analogous concepts appropriate to Western tastes? Pants with waistbands that are flattering but also can be adjusted through double-button systems or through tailoring. Basic pieces that can be complemented by layering and accessories. Expensive, classic clothes already have some of these qualities—extra fabric for letting out and the capability to remain flattering after they have been altered.

Striving for longevity through versatility facilitates what we might call an ecological or true materialism. The cultural critic Raymond Williams has noted that we are not truly materialist because we fail to invest deep or sacred meanings in material goods. Instead, our materialism connotes an unbounded desire to acquire, followed by a throwaway mentality. True materialism could become
part of a new ecological consciousness. Paying more per piece could also support a new structure of labor costs. Workers would work less, produce fewer but higher-quality items, and be paid more per hour. Such a change would help make ecologically clean technologies economically feasible.

Finally, paying more for clothes does not mean adopting the premise of social exclusivity. In luxury retailing, much of the appeal of the product is its prohibitive price or the fact that only elites have the social conditioning necessary to pull off wearing it. An alternative aesthetic would value democracy and egalitarianism through the fashioning of garments that are high-quality but affordable.

2. Small and Beautiful: Creative Clothing for Local Customers

The aesthetic aspect of clothing is and will continue to be important. But the values represented by the fashion industry are unacceptable. Despite decades of feminist criticism, the industry continues to objectify women—and increasingly men—through de-meaning, violent, and gratuitously sexualized images and practices. In the late nineties we got “heroin chic,” glamorizing drug abuse and poverty. Now it’s teen and “tween” styles, with bare midriffs, tightly fitting T-shirts, and sexually explicit sayings emblazoned on the garments. Furthermore, the industry is comprised of megacorporations employing a small number of mostly male designers. They, in turn, produce a monolithic fashion landscape—massive numbers of copycat garments. Suddenly all that’s available are square-toed shoes, or short-handed handbags, or hip-huggers.

An alternative vision starts from the recognition that many young people, especially young women, yearn to be fashion designers, producing garments that are artistic, interesting, funny, visionary, and useable. And consumers are increasingly desirous of that type of individualized clothing. The industry could return to its roots in small-scale enterprises, run by the designers themselves. The British cultural analyst Angela McRobbie has envisioned such a shift, calling for small apparel firms located in neighborhoods, op-

erating almost like corner stores. They would cater to a local clientele whose tastes and needs they come to know. These face-to-face relationships between female designers and the immigrant women who labor in domestic-apparel production also have the potential to reduce the exploitation that currently characterizes the industry. Instead of driving to a mall with its cookie-cutter stores, one might walk to a converted factory housing three or four designers with workshops-cum-showrooms. The consumer could also become active in the creative process, helping to fashion an interesting or unique look for him or herself. If she didn’t see what she wanted, it could be made to order, so that fit, color, and style were just right. Such a system would yield substantial savings in the areas of transport, branding, advertising, and marketing as well as a dramatic reduction in overproduction. Those savings could be used to pay decent wages, install environmentally sustainable production technologies, fund better quality materials, and support designers.

Such a vision could be realized through a combination of activist pressure, consumer mobilization, and government policies. The federal government could offer special subsidies for training and education for designers and enterprise loans to small business owners. Local governments could support apparel manufacturers through tax incentives and marketing initiatives.

3. Clean Clothes: Guaranteeing Social Justice and Environmental Responsibility

Relocalization is an important part of a movement toward a just and sustainable apparel industry. But it must go hand in hand with improvements in wages and working conditions in factories and small production units abroad. Such reform is essential to relocating on a global scale, because it will be the foundation for creating purchasing power in India, China, Bangladesh, and other southern countries. For now, the north must continue importing in order to provide employment for impoverished foreign workers. But as wages rise abroad, these workers can produce for their own domestic markets.
One of the most important social movements of the past decade has been the coalition of labor, student, and religious activists opposing the exploitation of garment workers around the globe. The Gap, Nike, Kmart, and others have been embarrassed by their labor practices. Students have demanded that their college's insignia clothing not be produced by sweated labor, and more than ninety institutions have complied. Most American consumers now believe that the workers who make their clothing should be paid decently, and surveys indicate they are willing to pay somewhat more to achieve that goal.

To date, however, the industry response has been inadequate. While some progress has been made, far more energy has gone into winning the PR battle than has been devoted to substantive reform. Companies remain opposed to free association in unions, which is the only true long-term solution to abuse. Nevertheless, the principle of what Europeans call "clean clothes" is making headway. In Europe, major clothing retailers have committed themselves to codes of conduct that ensure reasonable working conditions, free association, and other labor rights. For example, the British chain Marks and Spencer has joined the Ethical Trading Initiative, which is a government-sponsored initiative bringing together nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), unions, and businesses. Next, another British chain, works with Oxfam on ethical trading.

Indeed, the successes of the European clean-clothes movement are worth looking at, particularly for extending beyond labor rights into environmental impacts. In 1996, the Dutch company C&A instituted rigorous controls over its suppliers—monitoring more than one thousand production units annually—to guarantee labor conditions and environmental impacts. It uses the Eco-Tex label for environmental certification, and many of its own brands sport it. Marks and Spencer has begun an organic cotton design project with the Royal College of Art.

The German company Otto Versand, the largest mail-order business in the world, has perhaps gone farthest in terms of environmental sustainability. It has reduced paper use in its catalogs and packaging; its mail-order facility uses wind and solar power; and it is moving to incorporate sustainability throughout its product lines. Otto subsidizes the production of organic cotton in Turkey and India, and last year offered 250,000 organic cotton products. The company has reduced the use of harmful chemicals in textiles and has certified that 65 percent of its clothing passes a strict "skin-test" for dangerous substances. In the late 1990s, Otto worked with Century Textiles (India's largest textile exporter), to phase out azo-dyes. The company has also introduced its Future Collection, which is oriented to production ecology through conservation of energy and water resources. To encourage consumers to adopt a long-term perspective, they offer a three-year replacement guarantee for all their clothes.

To be sure, the shift to just and ecologically sustainable clothing is not simple. The price of organic clothing is currently high, putting it out of reach for many consumers. But activist pressure can help solve this problem, as the European successes are showing. And the U.S. market is already increasing. Nike and The Gap have begun to use some organic cotton. If one or two major U.S. companies commit to a substantial program of organic cotton use, demand will grow and prices will fall. And even a high-priced company such as Patagonia has made some accommodations for affordability—all its clothes carry a no-questions-asked indefinite replacement guarantee and the company operates a number of discount outlets.

The successes of the European campaigns suggest that comparable progress is possible on this side of the Atlantic as well. For example, Eileen Fisher, a high-end women's retailer, has signed on to SA 8000, an international social and environmental standard. U.S. manufacturers and retailers are sensitive to the need to maintain their public image. If we can educate consumers and mobilize activists, we can "clean" the American closet. Doing so would be a substantial step toward a sustainable, but also fashionable, planet.