“What is to be sustained?”: Perpetuating systemic injustices through sustainable fashion

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ABSTRACT
There seems to be a consensus across both the fashion system and academia that “fast fashion” has a problem with sustainability. An increase in consumption of cheap and accessible clothing is behind the rise in extraction and pollution across the world seems obvious, and often the solutions offered span from material and technical solutions to awareness-raising and ethical education of consumers. But most of these interventions either implicitly or explicitly push blame on the consumers of cheap goods. It is “they” who consume too much, the consumers of cheap garments. While goods and behaviors readily available to the upper strata of society are deemed sustainable, it is the aspirational consumption of less affluent consumers that needs to be rectified. This article examines how the general discourse on sustainable fashion strikes unevenly at the lower rungs of social hierarchies, amplifying differences in privilege and wealth while also moralizing, preaching down to, and denigrating the desires of the poor. Using Felix Guattari’s framework of the three ecologies, the discussion examines some familiar tropes in sustainability discourse, focusing on three lines: the emphasis on industrial and technological solutionism, the undermining of democratic principles, and the emotional besmirching of aspirations. These three tendencies add up to a contemporary equivalent of sumptuary laws aiming to hold back the social mobility and lowly desires of the masses. While this may not be the intent of the promoters of sustainable fashion, a thoughtless and single-minded critique of fast fashion impacts the dissemination of agency and blame across the definitions of sustainability. The article calls for practitioners to examine the premises of sustainable fashion more closely. Any serious discussion around fashion must start with the question: What is to be sustained?

Introduction
There is a specter haunting the fashion industry today, a phantom quest of “solving” sustainability, especially the troubling issue of “fast” fashion. As defined within the sector’s scope, the problem is the waste and pollution from current production and consumption volumes. The connection seems obvious, “If a person buys more than he wears,” Roland Barthes (1983, 298) famously pointed out, “there is Fashion.” Thus, excess defines fashion, making waste and pollution the bastard sibling of fashion consumerism. The consensus is that “fast fashion” needs to be addressed (Cline 2012; Thomas 2019), while a more extensive and systemic perspective is often left unconsidered. In sustainability discourse, the fashion industry is the new technology to be “fixed” by recasting complex social phenomena as neatly defined problems that technological approaches can fix (Wang et al. 2020). For example, by innovative industrial processes and materials, or “ethical consumption” that emphasizes transparency and teaches the masses to be better consumers, the idea seems to be that sustainability can be cut clear from socio-cultural conflicts. Under the current socio-economic landscape, it may be tempting to equate luxury with sustainable and ethical fashion (Joy et al. 2012; Mohr, Fuxman, and Mahmoud 2021).

The emphasis on industrial solutions and ethical awareness effectively bypasses fashion’s entanglement in more complex and contested issues, such as globalization, social conflict, the politics of identity and community, labor organization, precarious work, and the imperative to achieve, and not least public and mental health. The hope appears to be of “fixing” sustainability without questioning the systemic impact of fashion in current societies. Before finding solutions, perhaps one should first ask: What do we want to sustain in fashion?

Such a question may at first seem abstract and idealist. But without questioning the basic
framework under which the work toward sustainability occurs, the risk is of sustaining unintended dynamics in fashion. Sustainability risks becoming a cloak under which to hide how injustices are made permanent, suffering made invisible, while maintaining social conflict and systemic inequities, rather than boosting the democratic principles the industry suggests it desires to sustain (von Busch 2018). Much everyday brand-initiated discourse on sustainable fashion is an excuse for keeping up the status quo, implementing surveillance regimes on goods and labor, and effectively blaming the poor for their aspirations and consumption.

To offer a framework through which to examine the dynamics of justice in sustainable fashion, this article suggests three domains of conflict in sustainable fashion, built on the model of Felix Guattari’s article. In Guattari’s model, each of the three ecologies frames a systemic level: (1) the environmental, (2) the social, and (3) the mental realms. As will be seen, the discourse on sustainable fashion suggests changes of a broad scope across the fashion system. Yet, these adjustments all tilt against poor and marginalized communities, making each level a vista for unresolved conflicts. On the environmental (or techno-organizational) level, there is a conflict between the aims to fix fashion through industrial, organizational, and material solutionism, while disregarding labor organization and global inequalities. On the social level, the fashion system uses discourse praising “democratic” fashion while simultaneously blaming the poor for their aspirations and consumption. On the mental, or individual level, the discourse on sustainability pushes a moralizing and classist agenda under the guise of “ethical fashion.” The aim of changing user behaviors and values comes to discriminate against and punish low-income consumer cultures, effectively suggesting the values and principles of the poor are not up to par.

The article’s organization is as follows. The first section lays out the basis of Guattari’s model of the three ecologies and explains how it can be applied to map out the current strategies of sustainable fashion. In the second section, we look at sustainability approaches within the first ecology of environment and techno-organizational solutionism and consider how they affect issues of distribution and justice. The third section examines the social ecology where principles of consumerism and democracy clash and current models of sustainable fashion come to stifle aspirations and possibilities for the poor. The fourth section investigates the mental or individual ecology of values and ethical consumption and how systemic inequalities are multiplied by focusing on cultural principles unattainable to the poor. Finally, the fifth section suggests a possible path toward more inclusive and constructive practices of sustainability in fashion that could affirm the aspirations of populations with fewer means.

**Tensions across sustainable fashion and the three ecologies**

While aspiring for sustainability in fashion is a worthy goal, it is also an uphill struggle, if not a paradox per definition (Clark 2008). Various approaches work across several fields to map out scenarios and practices in design, production, consumption, policies, and user behavior, to push for significant systemic change (Fletcher and Grose 2012; Niinimäki et al. 2020). However, many conflicting agendas are present that seldom get the attention that they deserve. One of the most obvious lapses is the conflict between praising “democratic” fashion and its impact on planetary systems.

The taxonomy of Felix Guattari’s The Three Ecologies (2000) can be useful for framing how these tensions appear across discourses and practices of sustainable fashion. Guattari laid out a model of three transversally connected dimensions or ecological registers: the environment (nature), human relations (social), and human subjectivity (mental). Guattari’s model spotlights how the currently unsustainable industrial paradigm ravages across all three ecologies. Guattari calls this paradigm the “Integrated World Capitalism” (IWC), a decentralized force that models the world according to the culturally seductive “American Way of Life,” of competitive individualism, medialization, and consumption, where the self-esteem of the individual is tied to lifestyle industries and fueled by norms around productivity, health, well-being, and meaning.

The typology of Guattari’s ecologies is organized from the outside in. First, the environmental ecology concerns the planet, environment, natural resources, and industries. Second, society, social relations, hierarchies, our modes of human relations, and togetherness belong to the social ecology. Finally, and in our heads, the mental ecology signifies the realm of psychology and desire, self-knowledge, self-esteem, and inner capabilities.

Through Guattari’s model, we can see three systemic dimensions tied together. The environmental dimension focuses on pollution and labor in global ecological sacrifice zones, with disposable environments, populations, and species. The dimension of human relations is the domain of the Western-centric colonial heritage of appropriation and exploitation through wealth, standards of beauty, and the equation of health and virtue in life practices. The
dimension of subjectivity is the entanglement of fashion and self-knowledge and self-esteem, undermined by judgment, envy, and exclusion. In short, IWC is not merely exploiting the resources of the planet and labor, but eroding social relations and penetrating the attitudes, sensibilities, and minds of consumers (Guattari and Negri 1990, 53). IWC stimulates the multitudes of desires in the unconscious ecologies to propel consumer capitalism to continuous demand for more and more. As they are systemic, Guattari highlights that “fixing” one level, in isolation from the others, is not possible; they must all be addressed simultaneously.

It is not hard to draw immediate relations between Guattari’s model of IWC and the current dominance of a specific type of consumerist fashion system. The three ecologies that nourish IWC feed the fashion system as well. As Guattari points out, the three interconnected ecologies all signify social and collective dimensions of injustice; that is, while The American Way of Life suggests individual responsibility, it effectively hides systemic imbalances. Parallels can effectively be drawn to consumers’ responsibility for sustainable fashion consumption. Even if more innovation is currently taking place in more service-oriented business models (Stål and Jansson 2017; Lang and Armstrong 2018), fashion still faces an asymmetrically distributed agency. Primarily aimed to satisfy the needs of the privileged, this betrays the potential to be available as a means for social mobility for populations on the lower rungs of the social strata. Looking more closely, we can find similar systemic injustices entangled across all three ecologies of fashion.

Recommendations for more sustainable consumption are tainted by top-down preaching to the less educated and the poor. While advice on sustainability may seem neutral in general, these guidelines often take certain social positions for granted and appear as preaching from the top down. For example, the influential organization Global Fashion Agenda (2021) advises consumers to “[t]reasure what you own to extend the longevity of your clothing... Repair clothes if they break... Shop less and buy smarter by shopping vintage, second-hand and ethical,” and finally to “invest in high quality and timeless pieces.” While these are praise-worthy suggestions, questions must be raised: To whom is this advice written? Who should treasure their possessions – the rich or the poor? Those surrounded by luxury or heritage goods or those who are in need? Who has the means and status to “invest” in quality? What type of goods are made to last, and what designs are timeless? Who has quality clothes to repair? Who can maintain a professional persona in vintage, repaired clothes, or obvious hand-me-downs? To put it more bluntly, whose behaviors do we need to adjust? Unpacking sustainability discourse across the three ecologies helps recognize some of the issues at stake.

Environmental ecology: between solutionism and regulating the poor

The first ecology concerns the natural environment and material goods, and thus sustainability often takes the form of industry-oriented fixes. These are the images consumers most often see as urgent production issues, from rivers polluted due to dying processes and toxic chemicals used in agriculture to microplastics in the oceans and the mountains of used and discarded clothes that end up in landfills. To address such polluting elements, the fashion industry is coming to the rescue with technological fixes, from special laundry processes (e.g., ionized water), less caustic chemicals and materials, and compostable and biodegradable textile materials. Consumers are meant to praise the industry as it starts to clean up its mess.

Overall, too little attention is paid to how the emergence of these issues plays out across double standards; what is considered wrong in one setting does not apply when others become victims of the same behavior. Many polluting production moments were established in former colonial countries as environmental regulations became stricter in the consumerist West. Thus, the issue of pollution is not seen in the same way across countries and regions. While this is perhaps most obviously happening in production, we see it as well under the umbrella of “circularity,” in recycling and waste management. It is also inherent in the label of “recycling” or “reuse” as garments are dumped in developing countries (Brooks and Simon 2012; Sandin and Peters 2018).

While the incremental fixes of the industry are not useless, they distort the overall picture. As production and consumption keep increasing, the industry’s improvements are not keeping up, and overall levels of extraction and pollution become worse still. As a larger proportion of the global population is seduced and led toward the pipelines of IWC fashion, the number of garments sold keeps increasing, and the wardrobes get bigger.

The small incremental changes across the industry easily fall into the trap of “solutionism,” which dominates sustainable fashion. Evgeny Morozov (2013) defines solutionism as the cyber-utopian lens of breaking down complex societal issues into technological fixes, which ultimately misses or even increases the initial troubles. As Morozov has it, technological solutionism is a perspective favored by
cyber-utopians, who always see technology through a lens of liberatory potential. It ties into design, as solutionism believes in the inevitable emancipatory prospects of innovation. Solutionism breaks down socio-political contestations into “neatly defined problems with definite, computable solutions or as transparent and self-evident processes that can be easily optimized” (Morozov 2013, 5). It is not about denying the effectiveness of quantification and cybernetic technologies, but how the thinking behind them comes to guide the approach to complex and contested issues; “it colonizes entire theories and domains, imposing its values – openness, transparency, disruption – on whatever it touches” (Morozov 2013, 33).

Solutionism is a "problem-solving infrastructure" going beyond optimization based on engineering principles. Technological solutionism is based on a worldview where sensors and actuators make every process a cybernetic feedback loop to be adjusted and tuned. With individualized solutions, systemic reform is bypassed for “smarter” systems that keep reproducing consumerism. It is an approach that overrides conflict by “promoting efficiency, transparency, certitude, and perfection – and, by extension, eliminating their evil twins of friction, opacity, ambiguity, and imperfection” (Morozov 2013, xiii). It sees every problem as something that optics and quantification can address. Any issue is managed by the same data-processed means – through transparency, surveillance, and choice architecture. Quantification through “fact-checking” or surveillance through “transparency” fuels a data-as-truth mindset where merely measuring is “seemingly objective and consensus boosting” (Morozov 2013, 245).

Focusing primarily on technological, material, logistical, and behavioral tweaks, the general discourse on sustainable fashion becomes overall fashion solutionism. It speaks a language that fits well with default organizational structures and business plans through quantification and transparency. Subjected to these parameters, the promise of sustainable solutionism in fashion is to reach ethical efficiency. As a matter of incremental fixes, it translates strategies to be adopted, assessed, and reported within existing corporate structures and supply chains. The challenges to sustainability are cut down to manageable size, and they get framed as problems with defined stakes and solutions. Pollution is reduced to ecologically friendly fibers, transparency is a street address to a factory on the product website, and ethics is a collection labeled “conscious.”

However, the central tension of the solutionist paradigm in sustainable fashion is what is seen as the problem, and even more so, who has a problem with fashion that should get solved.

Over the last decades, Main Street brands have implemented increasingly efficient integration of design, marketing, and supply-chain management to radically increase the turnover of items. This has been labeled as “fast fashion.” Fashion editor Michele Lee (2003) called it “McFashion,” a type of fashion consumption just as unsatisfying, commonplace, and utterly forgettable as the fast-food equivalent. On-demand consumption is not limited only to food, fashion, or a socio-economic segment of the market; we have “fast” books in bestsellers, “fast” streaming of music and movies. In addition, consumers expect same-day delivery of goods and the list goes on.

A hypocritical paradox emerges; vast amounts of goods consumed by the upper strata of society are seldom labeled “fast,” even though their practical use and lifespan may be as short as that of the cheap goods accessible to the broader market. This translation between terms becomes even more apparent when fast fashion is put parallel to fast food (Schlosser 2001). As with fast food, the habits of the poor need to get fixed, while the rich and the enlightened elite eat well and eat nutritiously. Solving nutrition in fast food is the technological approach to regulating the consumption of the poor – controlling the quality of what the poor should eat while still blaming them for not doing nutritious home cooking. Like in fast food, a larger systemic perspective is missing in the discussion. Poor hands in poor labor conditions feed the poor mouths under poor circumstances and constraints. As with fast fashion, fast food is equated with “bad,” whereas slow and artisanal directly translates to nutritious and healthy.

The technological approach to quality also effect-ively distinguishes who has, and who does not have, a problem. Luxury goods do not need to get “fixed,” while the versions consumed by the poor do. Luxury goods can get artisanal repairs, and this is promoted, while the actual repairing habits traditionally practiced by the poor are willfully ignored. By continuously returning to the virtues of craft and slowness, mass production, and serving larger populations with fashionable goods that they can access, the industrial tweaks let the consumption habits of the wealthy off the hook. As long as you buy quality and craft, you can consume as much as you like because now you support the right hands and heritage. Even if the working conditions of artisans in developing countries may be as bad as those in the factories, slowness and hands still count as better or more sustainable. However, artisans have a more challenging time organizing their labor and
protesting for better treatment. At the same time, their working conditions are harder to measure and quantify when paying living wages. When industrial labor gets domesticated, working at home means living in your factory, which affects family, health, and the possibility to organize labor struggles.

The technological solutionism in fashion boils down to quantification, regulation, and surveillance. Transparency gets easily mistaken for power. While it may be an ethical opportunity to see a photo of who works in a factory and know its address, it gives little agency to consumers to change the conditions of the workers. Instead, the same regime of transparency is used to hide abuse, shift blame, and increase surveillance of laborers and consumers while bypassing the systemic responsibilities of corporations and international trade negotiations.

An example of this being revealed to a consumer in the West can be the documentary *True Cost* (2015). Here, at the film’s climax, to the music of an emotional pop song, images are shifted between seductive catwalks, factory workers disabled by labor abuse, and western consumers storming into Black Friday sales, tearing at the goods on sale. The sad song highlights the desperation of all involved; the hunger for affirmation of models, the desperate conditions of laborers in developing economies, and the insatiable appetite for consumption among the poor in the West. However, the scene misses the political games of trade and globalization, the corporate C-suites, the growth of capital and stocks, and all systems of power promoting and profiting from the current paradigm. All, except the powerful, are to blame for the catastrophe we witness in the movie.

Under such narratives, solutionism seems like the only evident approach to realizing a more sustainable fashion industry. Still, by default, it also concludes that clamping down on the consumption of “fast fashion” is the best way forward, effectively regulating the behaviors of the poor. Simultaneously, the consumption of the rich becomes invisible, if not celebrated as more technologically sophisticated. Those who can afford to do so can enjoy splurging on more goods, as these are now from biomaterials, eco-friendly fibers, and artisanal labor. In the end, all goods end up in landfills. The desires and aspirations of the rich are labeled sustainable, while promoting “democratic” consumerism aimed to fulfill the same desires on the part of the needy is considered pollution.

**Social ecology: between democratic principles and the pollution of the masses**

Fashion is a social phenomenon. It exists between people, and replicates through mimetics and imitation. As such, it thrives in differences and tensions between groups and styles (Barthes 1983; Lipovetsky 1994; Kaiser 2012). When approached through the lens of critical theory, fashion does not necessarily claim much praise (Barnard 2002). Its deep entanglements with commerce and capitalism signify inequality and class dynamics, if not outright patriarchal, colonial, extractive, and exploitative processes (Paulicelli, Manlow, and Wissinger 2021).

If you are a designer, it is seldom uplifting to read an analysis of your professional field. Peek into most academic discussions, and the consensus seems to be that fashion does not bring much good to the table. It is a momentous question for fashion: What is worthy to sustain?

If we take a step back, perhaps there may be some things worth salvaging from fashion on the social and societal levels. Political scientist Joshua Miller (2005) connects fashion to fundamental democratic principles compared with political systems that have repressed both civil rights and fashion. From tee shirts with political slogans to veiling and revealing skin, clothes make suggestions and statements about life practices that speak of contestations and controversies. Clothes take place in societal deliberations. By taking place in public discourse and signifying living practices, clothes can become litmus tests of how democratic ideals are implemented; between citizens who “share approximately equal political power, status, and wealth” (Miller 2005, 6). The democratic ideals of personal freedom, mutual respect, and common action are often in tension in clothing and appearance. Similarly, the principled ideal is not uncontested, as liberties sought by the individual often come into conflict with traditions, solidarity, and community. This also comes to the forefront through fashion; “the pursuit of perpetual change in fashion is destructive to tradition and common ties, but fashion in the broader sense can also be useful to democratic movements” (Miller 2005, 9).

As Miller suggests, fashion supports the possibility of individual voice and political expression, solidarity between groups, and respect for difference. As much as it furthers the expression of the individual, “clothes can encourage a fellow feeling, and that feeling is crucial to democratic community and common action” (Miller 2005, 14). Nevertheless, Miller also warns, the democratic principles of fashion are corrupted in many ways under consumerism – reducing their potential for enhancing democratic capacities. Whether based on style or on class, when fashion helps to establish social hierarchies, it undermines the possibility of a democratic community” (Miller 2005, 13). We must thus not
see fashion as a pure success story of equality and social mobility.

To Miller's democratic principles could be added values central to the dynamics of liberal societies, how fashion supports individual expression, promotes social mobility, and fosters tolerance between different individuals and communities. As Gilles Lipovetsky (1994,9) similarly argues, fashion "is an ambiguous but effective vector of human autonomy, even though it functions via the heteronomy of mass culture."

Seen from a perspective of societal agency, and like its food equivalent, fast fashion serves a large population across consumer societies that have little agency to change the conditions of their existence outside of cheap and on-trend consumption. Purchasing fashion becomes an accessible means of gaining subjective agency, shaping one’s sense of selfhood, and participating in, or even manipulating, social hierarchies. Undoubtedly, fashion as an agency for self-authorship has always been played out with an unjust distribution of means, leaving groups excluded or silenced. We must not simply equate cheap and accessible fashion as the principles of democracy made tangible in goods as "democratic fashion." Still, nevertheless, cheap consumer goods make some of Miller’s democratic principles of fashion available for the masses. However, it is essential to notice that the very notion that affordable and accessible garments represent "democratic fashion" highlights how there has been an implicit principle across the industry that fashion is not meant to be democratic in the first place. Fashion consumption is intended to be undemocratic from the start, and the consuming hordes should be grateful for the social advances cheap consumerism has afforded them. As Elizabeth Anderson (1999) posits, selling consumerist tokens of inclusion while keeping most of the population excluded from setting the norms makes the consumer economy cover and patch up an inherently unjust system.

Equating “democratic” with “fast” and “unsustainable” fashion is a common misnomer yet prevalent across much fashion discourse. Lecturing to the hoi polloi that anything “fast” is terrible disguises how Miller’s democratic fashion principles are effectively undermined for the consumers of cheap and accessible goods. At the same time, it celebrates and preserves privilege for those with means. This becomes clearer when we examine some of the most common tropes in sustainable fashion as advised to the poor: (1) defining fast fashion as the problem, which undermines the democratic principle of solidarity; (2) suggesting buying less and keeping garments long, which undermines the principle of individual expression; and (3) urging people to invest in emotionally lasting pieces, which undermines the potential of social mobility. Let us investigate these sustainable tropes more in detail.

While we have discussed the definition of fast fashion as the problem earlier in this article, it is also moralizing the aspirations of the poor. Luxury fashion, by contrast, is deemed essential to the top strata of society and thus more sustainable. Even more so, luxury consumption is no longer considered excessive and unnecessary, and therefore unethical, but instead the epitome of quality, heritage, ethics, and sustainability (Woodside and Fine 2019; Cappellieri, Tenuta, and Testa 2020). With their longing for “democratic” tokens of inclusion, the masses’ desires quickly accumulate to unsustainable amounts of goods. More so, with their cheap copies, their goods do not support the cultural values of heritage brands or artisanal crafts. Their copies undermine the actual value of fashion. Thus, the consumption of the poor can only be shallow and vain. Through trickle-down, the poor are to blame for imitating the rich. They need to be lectured to and be made “aware” of the vanity of their fleeting and lowly desires. In contrast, the consumption of the rich serves as the cornerstones of a cultured society.

Getting the masses of consumers to buy less is thus a struggle. When not physically limiting the number of pieces people can buy, the sustainability discourse tries to make consumers “buy classic pieces.” But there appears to be little concern about who can afford the quality of such items. It is much easier to buy a classic piece when one is in a social position that cements this social standing, making it last over time. A classic piece must also fit into the rest of one’s status environment. It is easy to do this if I am higher in the social strata, but less so if I am poor or marginalized. The imperative to “buy classic” basically tells the needy; buy only what you can afford, stay at the low rung, and do not aspire to be one of us.

The second suggested method translates to something similar, like “buy things your kids can inherit.” That is easy to say if you live in a castle and want your kids to inherit your status, but less so if you are poor. Most people want to inherit a vintage Chanel bag, but less so the cheap copy. Inheritance is an idea that favors those with assets to inherit; it petrifies socio-economic hierarchies and shuts down avenues of social mobility.

Both approaches above, to buy classic and to inherit pieces, hampers the democratic potential of individual and political expression toward styles that signify the lasting values already established by social stratification. Expressions are aligned with
those in power, sanctifying their quality pieces with permanent signification, while social climbers are hindered from introducing usurping expressions.

Finally, the third suggested approach is the rhetoric around what is often called “emotional durability.” It is a theme that takes for granted the idea that clothes can embody pleasant memories, stirring affective recollections of the rustic values of the past. Here, it is assumed that memories are good and the past worth conserving, again a perspective that favors the privileged. With this approach, using fashion for social mobility is hampered. The focus on emotional durability impedes the possibility of the needy to use fashion as a model for moving on, forgetting, and celebrating new accomplishments. To populations emerging from poverty, fashion can be a tool to transgress being downtrodden and move toward new possibilities emotionally. This is the radical emancipatory and pragmatic potential of democracy; societal positions are open to question and not set by fate. In the bitter defeats in life, fashion allows us to desire change, however shallow this agency may be. Social mobility is again aligned to favor the privileged and well-off by emphasizing emotional durability.

All these approaches above are essentially contemporary sumptuary laws disguised under the overarching virtue of “sustainability.” They foster elitist judgment rather than tolerance, effectively highlighting how sustainability is something the poor must practice while suggesting the rich are already doing it and turning away the spotlight from their walk-in-wardrobes. As we have seen so far, the main consequence of this discourse is that it sustains systemic injustices while effectively blaming the poor for their aspirations to consume and be “democratic” in the ways the rich are.

**Mental ecology: between virtue and vice**

In the mental ecology, sustainability is promoted through the modification and dissemination of correct values. Familiar tropes suggest shifting values from desire, greed, and vanity to virtues such as authenticity, honesty, and the yearnings for a good life, beautiful as much as ethical. Beauty, purity, and perfection can even become interchangeable values mirrored in the perfected self (Widdows 2018). The wealthy set these standards with the modeling of the perfect life, while the poor are excluded and later cursed if they aspire for these same standards beyond their means. With a shift toward a discourse driven by values and inner qualities across the mental ecology, sustainability also has consequences for the discourse around the inner values and cultures of the consuming masses.

If discussing values, one may need to take a step back and ask: Can fashion promote any ethical values in the first place? It is a question not commonly appearing in academic inquiries. Karen Hanson (1990) suggested three decades ago that fashion stands in contrast to many of the foundational values and virtues of social reality that philosophers have examined over the ages. Across social organization, permanence is favored over continuous change, the profound over the inessential, the soul over the body, agency over passivity. To philosophers, Hanson suggests, the truth of life stands in the inevitability of death, and one must thus face death to see the truth, not like fashion, which denies or seeks to escape our final destination. In a search for truth, fashion is at best insignificant, at worst a conspiracy and outright lie. Examine the values of fashion, and philosophers find mainly vanity and the work of illusions.

When it comes to the values of consumerism, they are cursed in everything from religions and ethicists to psychologists and Marxists. Examples can be found in Theodore Adorno’s famous critiques of subjecthood under consumerism and The American Way of Life in *Minima Moralia* (2005), which exposes troubling shifts in the cultural transformation toward the individualist subjecthood and its dire consequences for sociality. It is a theme also approached in Christopher Lasch’s bestselling book *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), and the diagnosis of cultural self-absorption has been prolific across critics of consumerism. Under these settings, Lasch argues, the hedonistic need to acquire the symbols of affluence and status undermines the liberal possibilities of society and only comes to serve competitive consumption. Following Lipovetsky (1994), fashion is a movement that finally helps consumer society to overcome the old virtue of thrift and to make vanity not only acceptable but a precious cornerstone of contemporary identity production. This is only intensified with social media exposure and the need to achieve and perform (Han 2015). These forces emphasize the individual subject as the moral center of gravity aligned with what and how it consumes, or as Zygmunt Bauman has it, consumers “are, simultaneously, promoters of commodities and the commodities they promote” (Bauman 2007, 6). This move has shattering consequences for the discourse around sustainable fashion and how the issue is addressed as a call for ethical and virtuous behavior.

As noted above, the current discourse around sustainable fashion is mainly driven by consumers’ choice, and blame for the unsustainable conditions of fashion is generally assigned to “overconsumption.” This leads to the conclusion
that the desires and habits of the masses become painted as the planetary villain. Only by changing their culture can sustainability come about. This focus on changing cultures partly emerges from a cynical or limited reading of ecologist and systems thinker Donella Meadows (1999) model of “levers for systemic change.” Meadows famously argued that to find leverage for systemic change, one must intervene at points that shift the whole system. In Meadows’ line of thought, intervening at the level of parameters, standards, or taxes has a low impact factor, whereas changing incentives, values, and goals has a higher impact on systemic change. For increasing effectiveness, one must go for the “deeper” leverage points; cultures must change, and in this case, the cultures of the poor.

Meadows’ argument for culture and paradigm change, the parameters that have the most significant systemic impact, is a poignant critique against minor fixes and also against technological solutionism. Tweaking with materials and supply chains only offers so much leverage for change. As Meadows posits, even taxes and policies have limited applicability compared to changes in behaviors and incitements. In Meadow’s model, the most significant changes come from changes in values.

This focus on values and culture has profound consequences when applied in conjunction with individualism and consumer mindsets. If there is a problem with overconsumption and the values and culture must change, this affects the populations who let their unsustainable values and cultures guide their behaviors. As pointed out earlier, in the general discourse, the poor have a “problem” with their consumption of fast fashion. But now, it is not merely a matter of technological fixes or changing behaviors; it is the values and cultures of the needy that are to be corrected.

The moralization of consumption becomes increasingly apparent as the discourse turns toward “value-driven” branding, where companies strive to create deep, meaningful relationships with consumers, not merely selling goods (Bereman et al. 2020). In these settings, fashion is more than just cool stuff. Focusing on values, a customer buys a product that suggests something about their deeply held beliefs. As brands are “creating value for customers,” these values help define customers’ lives. When the buyer comes to identify with these values, brands are in the business of designating the importance and worth of people and their inner lives, esteem, and self-worth. Put bluntly, good consumers are good people, virtuous and worthy of respect, while bad consumers are rightfully condemned for their wickedness and vice. This becomes especially prominent when applied to the virtues of sustainability.

With value-driven sustainability, brands embrace a discourse to again speak down to the poor. Now the needy lack means and desirable assets, and they are supposedly also devoid of sustainable and ethical values. They are not aware, at least not like the enlightened consumers of sustainable fashion. Or worse, being deplorable, they are part of an inferior culture. The civilized (and prosperous) consumer, by contrast, can keep on buying couture or vintage undisturbed, and this is virtuous, civilized, and cultured.

Consequently, with superior style and morality, this sustainable consumer can now look down at the riffraff that rushes the sales on Black Friday. They lack exquisite taste, and more importantly, they lack the ethical, refined, and cultured values of the sustainable consumer. This light of virtue saturates the discussion around goods; brands take climate action, promote equity, restitution, and work close to their communities. By contrast, the poor are so wicked that they cannot even access the tokens of righteousness.

While the sustainability discourse explicitly celebrates the values of the rich, suggesting the moral codes of ethical consumption are equally distributed, it punishes the poor for their social condition. Brands sell their more ethical offerings at high prices, while blame is cast on the poor’s inferior and polluting values and culture. The standard of virtue, of purchasing virtuous goods, is set on the terms and wealth of those with privilege, while brands simultaneously withdraw avenues for the poor to aspire to the wealth of those with privilege, while brands simultaneously withdraw avenues for the poor to aspire and reach these standards. It must be noted that fashion is not equitable to start with, as it is played out on an unfair field of appearance, race, abilities, and affluence. The way sustainability is frequently framed vilifies the poor for their lack of means, and under a consumerist framework, equates this with a flawed character. While it may not have been its aim, the discourse around sustainability has become a new Victorian morale to regulate and harass those on the Breadline.

**Concluding discussion: sustainability beyond maintaining social stratification**

In each of the ecologies examined above, the values promoted through the current discourse on sustainability hampers the possibility of the poor using fashion to move beyond their precarious condition. In each of the three ecologies, surveillance is promoted, barriers are erected, and moralizing discourse limits how fashion can act as a vector for liberation for the needy. In the everyday workings, the democratic potential of fashion is preserved only for the rich or those with social status. On one
hand, the top strata need fashion the least for social mobility or a sense of control over their lives. Populations on the lower rungs of social hierarchies, on the other hand, are blamed for their unsustainable consumption; their behavior is seen as a problem to be fixed while their values and cultures must become “aware” and rectified.

So how can sustainable fashion discourse take these unintended aspects into account? A first step would be to emphasize and support sustainable practices with clothes, more than selling sustainable products (Fletcher 2016). Such a perspective would reveal that large populations already practice sustainability by caring for their clothes, making them last, and not binding sustainability to purchasing expensive or symbolic goods. As pointed out by Smelik (2021), a new materialist perspective of shared agency between producers, garments, and users, could open up and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of care practices beyond the objects themselves.

To fully embrace the democratic potential of fashion, a more socially beneficial aspect of democratic fashion could be to emphasize the experimentalism combined with limitations to power at the core of democracy. In doing this, the discourse on democratic fashion could build on the ideas of political philosopher Roberto Unger. As Unger (2007) points out, democracy is a form of radical experimentalism, not preserving the status quo. It leaves the future open for rearrangements by the people. Its purpose must be to make its people take part in socio-political rearrangements. This interest in the shape of society is essential to democracy, as Unger (2007, 242) suggests:

> Under democracy, this interest becomes paramount, for democracy grants the ordinary men and women the power to reimagine and to remake the social order. That is why under democracy prophecy speaks louder than memory. That is why democrats discover that the roots of a human being lie in the future rather than in the past. In a democracy, the school should speak for the future, not for the state or for the family, giving the child the instruments with which to rescue itself from the biases of its family, the interests of its class, and the illusions of its epoch.

Instead of a single-minded focus on fashionable products, both industry and researchers could widen the scope to examine the vital dynamics and social engagements with fashion (von Busch 2021). This would mean not limiting fashion to goods and clothing items that embody sustainable ideals but instead unpacking fashion as a social practice beyond consumerism and identity reproduction. Instead of the knee-jerk reaction to blame fast fashion, the discourse on sustainability needs a more holistic approach involving all three ecologies, where injustices across the three dimensions target intersectional redesign without stifling its democratic potential for agency. Mapping these suggestions back on the three ecologies means interlinking the many initiatives of sustainability across all three ecologies. The initiatives in the environmental dimension, such as industry change and circularity, must be linked with mitigation of social conflict in the dimension of human relations, decolonial practices, and affect-based perspectives on fashion. These initiatives, in turn, could align with the remodeling of fashion in the dimension of subjectivity, by the promotion of user agency, self-esteem, and “fashion-abilities” (von Busch 2008, 2020).

In the end, sustainable fashion must be more than a means for maintaining social stratification through covert sumptuary laws. While it is undeniable that increasing numbers of fashion items being sold is a global challenge for the industry to tackle, promoters of sustainability must be aware of the hypocrisy of luxury producers and be careful not to systematically punish the poor for their aspirations. Sustainability in fashion must enhance fashion’s democratic, dynamic, and vital principles while staying within planetary carrying capacities.

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