

FUTURELEARN/ UNIVERSITY OF EXETER FREE COURSE ON “WHO MADE MY CLOTHES?” WEEK 1 SYNOPSIS

I decided to take part on this course after seeing postings on social media about it and asking the Board if they felt it worth my while to dig deeper into the garment industry supply chain. The full course runs for three weeks, takes about four hours a week, and is free. It is via Futurelearn <https://www.futurelearn.com/> who run many free courses. This one is in conjunction with Fashion revolution, and gets participants to ask the question “Who Made My Clothes?” in light of the Rana Plaza building collapse in 2013. There are a lot of discussion groups and posting images of clothes and their provenance on an interactive map, which gets lots of thinking going between participants. It will also give the University a way of charting who their participants are, what they wear and where they live. I aim to do a synopsis every week for BAFTS’ members. From the Futurelearn website, it looks like you can register interest and the course may be run again in the future at some time.

The first week comprised a welcome, asking why the question “Who Made My Clothes” was raised by Fashion Revolution, how the Rana Plaza tragedy was reported around the world, asking participants what they were wearing, uploading images of the garments and countries they were made in, and getting participants to email companies about where the materials actually came from – often somewhere completely different to where the garment was sewn together. There were some difficulties in getting responses from some fashion companies, and discussions on findings were encouraged. I chose three fairly traded items of clothing which made it a lot easier.

Then we moved on to finding out about the traces of human labour in our clothes, researching a garment supply chain which could well have applied to our own garments, and seeing whose lives had been connected in the production of a lowly tee-shirt. For this we watched a very telling and interesting video from “Planet Money Makes a T-Shirt –The World behind a Simple Tee-shirt in Five Chapters”, <http://apps.npr.org/tshirt/#/title> a webdoc made by the US National Public Radio in 2013. It is well worth watching and, although already four years old, reminds us of some of the statistics, injustices and in-country challenges especially in extremely impoverished countries such as Bangladesh. It explains how garment supply chains have come to be so global due to ever cheaper container shipping, and reminds us of the toil and labour which goes into producing a simple piece of clothing, and the hidden human cost. I will take you through the five steps of production here, which will complete the first week of learning.

1) The Cotton Farmer

We were introduced to a cotton farmer in the Mississippi Delta. The US is the greatest exporter of cotton. Slaves of yesteryear have been replaced by machines which function at the press of a button, cutting human labour to an absolute minimum. Even the seeds are grown genetically in a laboratory, by such giants as Monsanto <https://monsanto.com/> in order to make them less susceptible to damage. 90% of cotton seed in the US is now genetically modified (this reminds me of stories of cotton farmers in India, from the film The True Cost <https://truecostmovie.com/> who had bought seed from Monsanto, but some clause stated that they didn’t actually own it, so that when the crops failed in their fields, they had no income, no food, and they were bankrupt.) Machines are used to bale cotton, haul it away, and do so much of the work that yields have nearly tripled in the last three years. This one farm in one year had produced enough cotton for 9 million teeshirts. 26 machines were used to 13 people. And US GM cotton is more resistant and produces greater yields, plus their testing of it makes it a guaranteed product even before you lay your eyes on it. Plus US subsidies protect the cotton farmers in case of crop failure, so the situation is unlikely to change. This also throws up what a massive challenge small fair trade companies have to deal with in order to compete, and already paints a picture of higher costs if not using GM-crops and preferring to make clothes by hand and traditional methods.

2) Machines

Once the cotton used has left America, it (in this and probably many other instances) travels either to Colombia or Indonesia. For some reason the mens’ teeshirts were made in Colombia, and the womens’ in Indonesia and then Bangladesh. The plant which had been grown and picked was now shipped across oceans to be made into fabric via all sorts of machines, which spun the yarn, made it into long rope-like yarns,

stretched, twisted it, and made it into yarn. Then it was transferred to giant spools in equally giant knitting machines. It was washed, dyed (how much water and chemicals/ pesticides were used was not explained but the environmental aspect is another issue) and turned into fabric. Hardly a human hand had touched it at this point. The whole process is very complex, as are the types of twisting thickness for various products eg denim, and the cotton here was often spun in Indonesia as their economy was relatively stable and their labour was cheap.

3) People

The teeshirts for women were sewn together in Bangladesh; those for men in Colombia. The differences between these two economies were also obvious; whereas the lady in Colombia earned four times more than her counterpart in Bangladesh, she also had a side-line selling pastries and hoped to leave the garment industry. She lived basically but comfortably enough with her mother on her wage. The Bangladeshi lady was nine hours' travel from her village, sent nearly all of her money home, was paying off debt for her sister's dowry, in a country where being female is an economic burden. She had one day off a week, shared a cramped dismal room with others, and had no running water. She earned 80 US \$ a month. In Bangladesh, 4 million people work in the garment industry (or did in 2013; it could be more by now). They earn the lowest wage and there are no alternatives. The narrator pointed out that those 1300 who died in the Rana Plaza disaster were trying to escape poverty, and had no other alternative to the work but even greater poverty.

The garment industry in Bangladesh is about social upheaval. However, many agree the situation would be even worse if the garment industry pulled out of Bangladesh. The US factories of the 1900s are reminiscent of Bangladeshi factories nowadays. The main problem is that Bangladesh is not expanding into other industries, and so the garment industry accounts for a much greater proportion of its exports than other countries.

4) Container shipping

..and ridiculously cheap container shipping at that, has revolutionised the garment industry since the 1960s, and made the global journey of clothing standard. Previously, loading cargo was laborious and could take weeks by the human hand; now containers are loaded by cranes, and carry vast quantities of the same product, and ships, trains and trucks transport garments in various stages of production around the world at a fraction of the cost of production and manufacturing. Some say that over-investment in an industry which has slowed down is partly the reason for such cheap costs –too little demand and too great a supply.

5) The Consumer

Lastly comes the consumer. The final link in the chain. The Colombian garment factory worker showed pride in her sewing and spoke of the entire world of people with lives, dreams and hopes behind the supply chain. She said with a smile that she imagined the people who bought the garments which she worked on to be gigantic gringos, referring to the sheer size of the teeshirts she was sewing. Again that connection was made with a person, with many people going about their daily lives, working hard, but having hobbies and a life outside of work if time off and any left-over earnings permitted. The video succeeded in creating that vital connection between consumer and workers, which gives a human face to those involved in garment production and makes us pause for thought to consider what we could and should be doing differently in our daily consumption habits.

Who Made My Clothes Week Two Synopsis -Digging Deeper

The second week put meat on the bones, asking participants to ask a lot more questions about the materials used in three selected items of clothes, and to note that the materials often came from completely different countries than the place of manufacture. The point was to highlight that a garment stating "Made in Bangladesh" might well be put together there, but the raw materials which were (eg if cotton) grown, picked, cleaned, twisted into yarn and dyed, probably all by one machine as we learned in week one) was likely to happen somewhere completely different. This is Tier One production. The second strand to this point was that getting this information out of most high street stores would be a journey in itself which could well result in a dead end. Many would not want to share this information even if they had it to hand.

Tier Two production is about the manufacture of the garment, the sewing, often one seam done laboriously time and time again by one person, then passed to someone else who sews the next bit eg a collar seam. The work looked soul-destroying, long hours, cramped conditions, ridiculous quotas expected, poor pay and often hours away from family and children, the women were lucky to be able to afford to get back to their families in the country once a year. They tended to work very long days, six days a week, and have a tiny bit left to spend on eg a cheap pair of earrings for themselves before sending the rest of the money back home. Parents tended to look after their children as the mothers were now in the cities, a long long train journey away, to earn enough money to survive. The tread mill is joyless, unrelenting, pitiful, and in countries like Bangladesh, there is little alternative due to poor expansion. It is a poverty trap which mercilessly exploits those who are trying to scrape together a little bit more to make ends meet.

One very helpful resource used during the course was a "Day in the life of" from the Workers Garment Diaries from Fashion Revolution. <http://fashionrevolution.org/day-in-the-life-of-a-garment-worker/> This raises many questions such as:

"If their wages cannot cover their necessities, how do they survive? Where do they get the money to cover basic expenditures? Do they choose between sending money to their families in rural villages and buying enough food to feed themselves for the week?

What goes on behind those big, metal gates? Do their supervisors encourage or berate them when a major clothing order is due? How frequently do they experience chronic pain from their work? What do they do when they are injured?"

The main point of one specific Fanzine <http://fashionrevolution.org/resources/fanzine/> from the Garment Workers' Diaries was to show the differences between workers in garment factories in Cambodia, India and Bangladesh, and how they split their money, what they spent it on, how much (never very much) time they had free, usually to clean, cook basic food for the week, what loans they had, what sort of medicines they needed, and showed many had long-term health problems associated with long hours of work and stress. It was a lowly existence, a drudge without any prospect of betterment. Pages 28-29, 30-31, 32-33, 34-35 illustrate these differences extremely well.

Knowing that it would be extremely difficult to gather information from mainstream companies, and having many fairly-traded items of clothing myself, I stuck to investigating one of those items which culminated in the research for week three and the article below. All along, there were discussions between participants and course facilitators about findings, or difficulties in getting any information from certain companies, and how worthwhile it was trying to find out about the people behind our products. The exchange of information was very helpful to read, support each other, as participants were from many different countries with vastly differing amounts of knowledge.

All along the course asked for feedback, and did have a session each Thursday (which I missed) with key speakers, discussing the implications of fast fashion, how we can explore re-using clothes or buying organic, and ultimately about transforming our spending power into a force for betterment.

Week Three: Research into a specific garment and write-up about the relationship with your garment and the connection with those people who made your clothes. Selecting a post-course action and reporting back on it.

This week the research continued into one specific garment, asking detailed questions about provenance of the materials, their journey to the place of manufacture, the people who made the garments, their pay, conditions, whether they were happy and fulfilled in their work, how their rate of pay differed it at all from normal rates of pay, and asking us as participants to DO something tangible after completing the course, so that we could take our message and things we had learnt out into the wider world and make a difference. My aim is to try and get a showing of the “True Cost” movie up and running, in connection with BAFTS and maybe with a local Fairtrade Town eg York, to widen the impact and raise awareness amongst many more people. Ideally I would love to get hold of one of the Fashion Revolution “Two Dollar Tee shirt” machines which show a video of the workers and conditions in typical fashion manufacture, and then let you choose between paying for your cheap tee-shirt or giving a donation towards Fashion revolution and its aims. The difference which awareness makes is eye-opening. People need to know.

WEAVING HUMAN CONNECTIONS THROUGH MY CARDI.....



Meet me (left, and below right at a work event) and my “People Tree” cardigan. We spend a lot of time together. It’s a cosy, reliable, beautifully hand-knitted piece of work from Nepal, and I fell in love with it because of the craftsmanship, lovely detail, comfort factor, the free-falling nature of it (three buttons at the top only) the three-quarter length sleeves and the fact that I knew it was fair trade when I bought it. I hope the producers get as much comfort from the extra pay, security, health clinic, literacy classes and school facilities provided for them as well.

I won’t have had to dig anywhere as deeply as much as many of you for information, with transparency being key to fair trade, but I have been impressed with the information which came back at me and the speed with which my enquiries were answered.

People Tree is an ethical fair trade clothing company which has been in existence since 2001, and my lovely cardi since 2012. People Tree purchases the majority of its Fair Trade products from marginalized producer groups in the developing world and guarantees most of their purchasing is committed to the World Fair Trade Organization and Fair Trade standards.



I already knew that the producer group was KTS (Kumbeshwar Technical School) in Kathmandu, Nepal and this information is readily available on the People Tree website <http://www.peopletree.co.uk/about-us/who-makes-our-products/kts> This NGO employs 2,302 artisans who produce hand knitted and embroidered cardigans, jumpers, hats, gloves and scarves for People Tree. Artisans are mostly women who work part time for People Tree and can look after their children at the same time.

KTS was initially established to assist the local Poda community of street sweepers - as a caste of untouchables, denied education and employment opportunities. Once again fair trade is renowned for working with disadvantaged and marginalised producers, not just for fairer pay, gender equality, and conditions. The first

programmes run by KTS were implemented in 1983: a childcare project for street cleaning workers, followed by adult literacy classes and a nutrition and health clinic, which included an immunisation programme. In 1984, KTS opened a primary school and started a carpet-weaving training programme for adults. The organisation now includes a free nursery and primary school for 250 children and offers welfare and education for up to 25 orphan/semi-orphan children in the KTS orphanage. KTS provides vocational training for women and young men in carpet weaving, hand knitting and carpentry and supports Fair Trade income-generating programmes for its producers, through the sale of high-quality Fair Trade carpets, knitwear and furniture, which fund and sustain the KTS activities. KTS also runs a day-care centre, for the children of trainees, producers and staff. That is rather an amazing gamut of facilities for a group of producers generally shunned by their own society!

I reiterate that it isn't the same asking questions of a fair trade company as of a mainstream company. You expect transparency and I got it. You don't have to dig half as hard and tend not to meet dead ends with your questions. So my story is quite different but hopefully goes to show what "best practice" can look like. I found out quite quickly that they use New Zealand wool in their garments although I did not find out which company was involved.

KTS, the NGO with which People Tree works in Nepal, was very forthcoming with all of their information and said:

"Regarding the wages we pay to our knitters, it is more than double *compared to usual rates* provided by commercial companies, on top of that we also provide other facilities such as health insurance, provident fund, education sponsorship and incentives which are not provided by commercial companies. Our knitters love to work with us and some only knit our products and prefer to stay idle if we do not have any work for them, despite complaining that our QC is stricter than other companies. We have found the details of the cardigan. We had paid NPR 760 in 2012/13. Wage for it now will be NPR 1,130. The cardigan was knitted by many producers, one of the group leaders who knitted the cardigan is Mrs Timila Maharjan, she is a group leader. Please find attached herewith her photo (left)".

It is delightful to see the face of one of the producers above, and to know that wages have risen notably since 2012/3. A short video interview <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWnwskwPECO> between People Tree and KTS explains that workers get three months' training and 50% advance payments are made, to help facilitate cash flow and workers' payments, as the NGO would not get loans from a Bank unless these were at very high rates of interest. The interviewee is Satyendra Khadgi, who is the same person as replied to my emails about who made my cardigan!

The workers are given the flexibility to work from home which means they can work around their children at hours which suit them. Additionally the number of knitters at KTS has grown rapidly since its involvement with People Tree, and so has the NGO's turnover. A quick check on Google showed that People Tree was also involved in 2015 in a Fundraising event after the Nepali earthquakes to help rebuild 146 damaged knitters' homes as well. So, all round the producers are well supported and helped by such arrangements.