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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Clothed in Misery

By M. T. ANDERSON

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass.

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Eleanor Davis

THE [collapse](#) last Wednesday of a Bangladeshi factory complex — the latest, deadliest chapter in the story of miserable labor conditions in the international garment industry — must seem distant to many Americans. Their tragedy is not ours because their working conditions, and construction regulations, are not ours.

But the story of manufacturing half a world away is as close as the Lycra-cotton cloth that swaddles us. It is as intimate to our private interests as our boxers are, stitched in those bunkers by hands we never see and rarely consider.

Similar disasters happened here in the first phase of our national industrialization — the 1878 Washburn mill explosion in Minneapolis, the 1905 Grover Shoe Factory disaster in Brockton, Mass., the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in Manhattan — but back when New England textile mills were the beating heart of America's mass-production infancy, the most notorious was the [1860 collapse of the Pemberton Mill](#) in Lawrence, Mass.

The upper floors of the Pemberton building were supported by cheap iron columns. Late on a Tuesday afternoon, Jan.

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10, too many of the weaving machines fell into rhythm, everything began to shudder, and the building tore itself apart. The columns cracked, the floors splayed, the walls bulged and then burst outward, and a hideous cataract of timber, men, women, working children and iron machines collapsed into a heap of blood and crushing tonnage.

Several hundred people were trapped or dead in the wreckage. Men and women staggered across the ruins, pulling bloodstained workers out of the tangle. As darkness fell, someone's lantern ignited the oil and cotton dust in the air, and the bones of the building became an inferno with women still pinned inside.

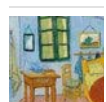
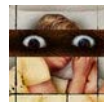
The writer Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, a child at the time, remembered that the women still trapped in the blaze tried to sing to keep up their courage.

"They were used to singing at their looms — mill girls always are — and their young souls took courage from the familiar sound of one another's voices," she would recall. "They sang the hymns and songs which they had learned in the schools and churches: 'Heaven is my home,' 'Jesus, lover of my soul,' and 'Shall we gather at the river?' Voice after voice dropped. The fire raced on."

In the end, 88 people died and 116 were seriously injured. As in the recent Bangladeshi manufacturing disasters, including one last November in Dhaka that killed at least 117 people, the dangers to workers had been pointed out in a routine inspection long before the disaster. The Pemberton Mill's flimsy metal columns had been marked as unsafe for years. It had not been profitable to replace them.

These Bangladeshi disasters do not merely share a kinship with the Lawrence one, but a genealogy. They are part of a cyclical system that has governed the textile industry since it moved out of cottages and into mills.

Again and again we see the same pattern, which stretches back to the original hiring of rural New England girls to operate the first spinning and weaving machines. The girls were delighted, for the most part, to leave behind rural drudgery. After a few decades, management began various cost-cutting measures that eventually became untenable. Labor activism spread rapidly and was countered, sometimes brutally. To avoid increased expenses associated with labor reform, the mill managers essentially would flush their working population and pull in a new one. Protestants were flushed in favor of destitute



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Catholics. The Irish were hired in the same New England mills in the 1840s, and then, when they became too demanding, the French Canadians, the Italians — waves of immigrants, one after the other.

In this way, for the last 200 years, garment manufacturing has flowed from ethnicity to ethnicity, as well as from region to region, from New England to the Middle Atlantic states, from North to South. Each group, when it begins to demand more accountability and a living wage, is discarded. Manufacturing change flows quickly to stay ahead of legislative change. Like water, industrial management seeks a route of least resistance — eventually flowing out of our shores altogether in the 1990s and, finally, flooding (among many other places) the alluvial plains of Bangladesh.

This cycle has its positive elements, offering an alternative to rural poverty and producing cheap clothing, sometimes for those regions and ethnicities that once were the system's underclass. There are those manufacturers (most famously, Levi Strauss) who have made a solid effort to serve their workers as well as their investors.

And yet, with unvarying historical predictability, the cycle also involves tremendous suffering: riots, like those in Dhaka last year; the persecution of labor organizers, like Aminul Islam, who was [tortured and murdered](#) last year; legislative dodges, like the perennial lagging of Bangladesh's minimum wage; child-labor infractions that leave whole populations reaching adulthood without money, education or hope; and the generations of workers who are laid off during downturns and end up with nothing to show for a life of toil. And then there are the catastrophic disasters arising from the interminable squeezing of expense.

The sad part is that the price of individual garments would not have to go up much — 1 percent to 3 percent, various estimates say — to provide a living wage and safer conditions for all those cutting and stitching what we wear. The cycle could slow or even stop. But that 1 percent to 3 percent would have to wend all the way down that river of production — past the eddies and breakwaters of corporate boards and middlemen, subcontracting agents and compradors, to reach those who really need it.

It's well past time for all of us to reflect on this cycle and how cheap it would be to break out of it if only there were enough public pressure on the apparel industry. The cost for us is minimal; the cost for others is great. Bargain-hunters at Wal-Mart and haute couture customers on Fifth Avenue alike should shame those companies that pass the savings on to us as they pass the suffering on to others we never see. This is not a remote or distant problem.

Take a look at the tag on your shirt. The problem is as close as your skin.

M. T. Anderson is the author of "Feed," "The Pox Party" and other novels.

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jeffrey ma

The lack of moral outrage at the labor abuses that provide so many of our goods stuns me. We pride ourselves on ridding ourselves of slavery, yet do not mind at all that so many humans are economically enslaved. We claim we have no responsibility, much as a buyer of cotton in the early eighteenth century probably claimed no responsibility. We seem to not see beyond our gloating about human rights to the suffering our habits inflict on so many. If we buy from those who disregard human life, we disregard human life. History will not treat our greed and callousness kindly, and it will come back to bite us. We need to insist that our wearable frivolity does not come at the cost of other human live; when we do not, we are less human.

April 30, 2013 at 8:12 a.m. RECOMMENDED 4



Winemaster2 GA

The third world nation Bangladesh at the lowest end of the subcontinent totem pole is no mystery and nor is the plight of the poor, most ignorant and likely illiterate people at the mercy of mother nature and greed creed, politicians, the rich and the crooked timber of humanity, the culture, traditions and the fundamentally flawed economic system, that the factory owners and the multinational use, abuse and exploit with coercion, reckless abandon and impunity.

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