



Where Am I Wearing?: A Global Tour to the Countries, Factories, and People That Make Our Clothes

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Globalization makes it difficult to know where the things you buy come from. Journalist and travel writer Kelsey Timmerman wanted to know where his clothes came from and who made them, so he traveled from Honduras to Bangladesh to Cambodia to China and back. Along the way, he met the people who made his favorite clothes and learned as much about them as he did about globalization itself. Enlightening and controversial at once, this book puts a human face on globalization.

Where Am I Wearing?: A Global Tour to the Countries, Factories, and People That Make Our Clothes Details

Date : Published November 1st 2008 by John Wiley & Sons

ISBN : 9780470376546

Author : Kelsey Timmerman

Format : Hardcover 248 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Travel, Academic, School, Business, Read For School

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Jasmine says

This was a required reading for me. The author visited my school, and I was genuinely confused at how the man on stage and the man who had written the book were the same person. The writing was not fun to get through, I didn't relate to the casualness and I found it honestly pretty offensive. The author was supposed to be subjective but I still picked up glorification of good ol' American business and typical white savior self-gratification. The facts were facts, and it was a good book for introducing some globalist concepts, but just, I hated it.

Justin says

I was drawn to this book by the growing desire of many modern Americans to connect between producers and consumers. We've been treated to revolutionary writing in that vein through now-classic works like Michael Pollan's Omnivore's Dilemma. After Friedman and other globalization advocates have toured the advantages of labor re-allocation to the cheapest labor force (it helps them develop and helps us buy stuff right?)

I jumped at Kelsey Timmerman's Where Am I Wearing to put a face on globalization. The book exceeds in that regard, revealing the lives, wishes and desires of the people that make our clothes. Perhaps most importantly, Timmerman discovers that the corporate machine simply doesn't want us to think about this dimension of our purchasing. Now that 97% of our clothes are made overseas it is easy to forget that 'Made in Cambodia' means made by people living with hopes and dreams in Cambodia. Kelsey reveals that an argument can be made for factories employing children, primarily because these children will likely be relegated to scavenging landfills or attempting to falsify papers to simply gain employment in a garment factory. Americans are filled with guilt when thinking about child labor but the children of developing countries want to work as clothing manufacturers. Banning child labor removes our guilt and clears our consciences but does little else than assisting in placing the issue outside the reach of memory. However this "progress" comes at a cost, the jobs and exports of the developing countries of Bangladesh, Cambodia and China may lead to larger GDPs but families are separated as a younger generation migrates to cities.

Many of the garment workers live a dual existence, earning more than enough money to get ahead in life, to pay for an education, but send more than half of it home to an impoverished family, unable to survive in a modern farming environment. Is it really progress to doom millions to long hours (sometimes 100 hour weeks and 15 minute lunch breaks) just for development? Just to develop a middle class, a middle class better suited to the nomenclature of consumer class?

The alternative is grim, many of the Cambodian farmers unable to produce a living are forced to live in the Phnom Penh municipal waste dump. Seeking recyclables amongst the trash mountains, more than two thousand fight to earn less than \$1 a day. But they choose to do this, it is a better alternative than the quickly disappearing village lifestyle of abundant fresh air and limited food.

Some of the most touching moments in Kelsey's journey to the factories that made his clothes come when treating the workers to great meals at restaurants, taking them to an amusement park or witnessing poverty and its ability to magnify the audacity of the human spirit. The true problem is not the garment industry and its harsh working conditions. The problem is that in a world economy where poor farmers are now part of a lower class, the brutal factory lifestyles are their best option.

If the producer's job is to make, then what is the American's job in the current societal fabric? Simply to consume, Timmerman ponders as he tries to eat on a Chinese worker's salary, \$3/day. Could not buying when I want tear the world apart? We see that now as US consumption decreases and the global economy collapses. People aren't buying and the world is suffering. When laws against child labor have placed restrictions on US imports, children in these nations protested the decision. Once again, they want to work. Interestingly, the author's allusions to the advantages of a "stone age" lifestyle are in line with the exact same observations made by Charles Eisenstein in *The Ascent of Humanity* (which I just finished).

The truth behind the garment situation is far more complex than I ever could imagine. Its not just: sweatshops bad, made in USA good. From the most dedicated social activist to the deepest entrenched economic globalist, this is a refreshing take on the guilt many of us wear.

Amy says

Easy enlightening read. Made me more grateful for where I am living and put a face on the people who made my clothes. The author recounted his experiences of researching who made his clothes and then sort of made a quick conclusion at the end. I kind of wish there was a little more meat to the narrative or that it was a little more cohesive. But a good read overall.

Kristal Cooper says

A very worthwhile and interesting project. I nearly read it straight through, while wearing my favorite PJs (made in China).

Jared says

I really like the premise of the book and enjoyed Timmerman's approach to bringing to life the challenges of consuming in a global marketplace. He made me really pause and think about the way I consume. But, ultimately I'm not sure I have the will power, energy, or faith that changing my buying habits will change the lives of the front-line factory workers around the world. I guess I don't trust big businesses and their ability to pass the increased revenues earned from increased product costs down to the factory workers who deserve the raise. Even if we pay more for a product doesn't mean they will pay their workers more.

Unfortunately, *WHERE AM I WEARING* (like several other books in this same genre) has left me with a feeling of helplessness for our world. As much as I think about it, I can't wrap my mind around any solutions. And, I get frustrated that the authors rarely attempt to articulate solutions. I just wish we could live in a world where there was more equality and fairness...

As I pause and think about this book, the one point that really stands out to me is how lucky I was to be born where I was, into the family I have, and to live the life that I lead. I thought this quote on pg. 66 was super powerful and sums up my thinking: "If you've graduated from college, you are more educated than 95 percent of the rest of the world. One-sixth of the world lives on less than \$1.23 per day. Nobel Prize-winning economist and social scientist Herbert Simon estimated that "social capital" (a functioning government, access to technology, abundant natural resources) is responsible for at least 90 percent of what people earn in wealthy societies like the United States. Warren Buffett said, "If you stick me down in the middle of Bangladesh or Peru, you'll find out how much this talent is going to produce in the wrong kind of soil." We were born in the right kind of soil."

S. says

Thought-provoking. Takes on both sides of the "sweatshop" debate. I'm reading clothing labels--and getting an education. Highly recommended.

UPDATE: Now that I've finished reading this book, hmmm... Several thoughts. First of all, while it does not go "in depth" and take on the politics of consumerism, it does take on the idea that each of us needs to become aware of what goes on around us--as well as what goes on our backs. It's a balanced and reasonable approach to individual awareness and responsibility, instead of ending by telling us what to think, how to dress, where to buy our clothes. In the end, it's about each of us doing a little work for ourselves. I like that Timmerman has layed the groundwork without doing all the work for me. Now I can make my own choice as to how much involvement I put into the world around me on a consumer level. Not preachy or over-bearing but it does make me think about what--and where--I am wearing.

Laurie says

Parts of this book were interesting, but Timmerman's lightweight "I'm just an ordinary guy wearing these boxer shorts" style is a little too lightweight for the topic; I think the book would have been better served by more planning and research to support his exploration of where his clothes come from.

Starbubbles says

I give up on this one. I know that he grows up in the course of this book, but I just couldn't finish the complete transformation. I'm glad that he went from any excuse to go traveling to being responsible. It's a shame I couldn't bring myself to finish this and his journey. I got so bogged down in reading about his life, and experiences that I was exhausted by the time I get to the worker's experience. I found myself asking, "What is the point of this?" often, and about a number of things.

What was the point of this book? Wasn't it to enlighten the reader about the people who create our garments and put a face to those sweatshop workers? I thought that was the point, but I think I was wrong. Apparently this book is about his experience, backgrounds of the countries, about 10 pages on the workers themselves, and whatever update he felt like pursuing.

I stopped at the Cambodian jeans and the Americans complaining about a \$5 buffet. I get that I need some

information to set the scene, but it felt like that was all I was reading. Maybe if I had kept reading I would have a different opinion of the overall tone of the book and the approach. But I couldn't, so my view remains unchanged.

What about the dreaded child labor? I think that in addition to his Sociology 201, he should have taken Labor History 101. Never fear, I have taken such a class. If he had as well, he would have then known that we too, went through such debates in our workforce. That many (mainly southern) families depended on kids leaving school at the age of 8 or 10 and working. Our economy did not collapse because of them, or even minimum wage laws. It's a good thing I did take that Labor History class, otherwise I would still know nothing about factory workers.

But this next part is key. We, as Americans decided what to do with our child labor, not England (the leading industrialized nation and a leading global garment producer at the time), or any other country. We decided to use that opportunity to invest in our children's future, and therefore the betterment of our country. Funny fact, education was pushed not for some moral benefit of the poor being people too, but that schooling produced better and happier workers. Countries like Bangladesh have to make those choices for themselves. If they have something like child labor legislation forced upon them and they do not subsequently take that opportunity to invest in themselves, then we have essentially sentenced them to starve.

I had hoped for more. I read almost half of the book and felt like I sort of "met" one person in his silly adventure. I feel it should also be noted that I did not feel that it was silly until I reflected upon what I had read. All I got so far was a young man who needed another excuse to go traveling. I thought college kids that worked until they had enough money to go travel for a few months then work again, were the stuff of myths and legends. Instead of meeting garment workers and learning their stories, I met one of these mythical creatures and his name is Kelsey Timmerman.

javadiva says

I really enjoyed the author's journeys, how personal he got with each laborer, giving them a voice. What I have taken away from this book is their pleas to not boycott companies who outsource labor, because this is the only income these poor laborers have. It helped me to not take for granted the privileged life I have here in the US. I know I will never have to make the choice to leave my children to live in a big city to make money so that my children can get an education.

I really feel everyone should read this book.

Valerie says

I find the blog to book genre sloppy. Never as good as you hope.

However, many very interesting points and A LOT of food for thought, with some geography and history thrown in for good measure. I work in the clothing industry...made me consider and re-evaluate and see my vocation in new light.

Bookstax says

I really wanted this book to go MUCH more in depth into the ramifications of consumer society on the workers who support our ability/desire/insistence on the availability of cheap clothing, shoes and accessories. I also almost felt like the author approached the whole project kind of casually. I expected more...

Maya says

The author travels around the world trying to visit the factories where his favorite clothes were made (Honduras, Cambodia, Bangladesh, China, India, and the US).

This is not a feel terrible about yourself, the world sucks and it's so bad you're better off not thinking about it book. You will not want to slit your wrists when you finish. This is good, because instead you will see that there are real things that can be done to improve garment workers lives and as the consumer, you can have a say in getting them done.

Timmerman's writing is an easy read, but a serious topic. He handles it seriously but realistically. This book is for folks who truly care about doing the right thing but don't want to feel like they should slit their wrists because they happened to be born really lucky.

For better or worse we are in a global economy and I appreciate knowing more about the working and living conditions of garment workers overseas. I appreciate having a more complete perspective when I make my decision about where to buy my clothes. I hope everyone is thinking about these issues.

Molly Ferguson says

I read this book because I have to teach it, and it is a decent choice for the freshman seminar common book. But the author is trying so hard to come off as a folksy "just like you college students" flip flop dude that it gets tiresome. The factual parts were good, and I think my students will relate, but the writing made me cringe at times.

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Kari Shepherd says

The thing that interested me the most was that even though the factory workers are underpaid and have very long work hours, when asked what they thought about people who boycott their employers, they responded that it is still a job for them and helps them provide for their families. Timmerman's point was that boycotting may be more harmful than helpful, which I thought to be interesting. However this point of view still does nothing to alleviate the fact that my money is going to support sweatshops, so I think some kind of middle ground would be best.

Perhaps find fair trade companies to support so that the workers have good jobs at companies that treat them well.