

The Case Against Sweatshops

by **Anna Yesilevsky**

Oscar Wilde, in his fairy tale, “The Young King,” tells the story of the main character who, on the eve of his coronation, has three terrible dreams. He sees gaunt and sickly children crowded together in a large room weaving his robe, their hands red with blood. He sees slaves thrown overboard to hunt for pearls to decorate his scepter and men dying of plague in the wilderness while seeking rubies fit for his crown. Upon awakening, he refuses to put on the costly garments that have been fashioned for him:

Take these things away, and hide them from me.
Though it be the day of my coronation, I will not wear them. For on the loom of Sorrow, and by the white hands of Pain, has this my robe been woven. There is Blood in the heart of the ruby, and Death in the heart of the pearl.

In discovering the cruel practices that are involved in the production of his costly raiment, the young king engages in a relatively common practice: he boycotts. Like the young king, many Americans also adopt this practice when they realize that real-life sweatshops have practices horrible enough to be relegated to the realm of nightmares.

Indeed, boycotting may seem like the correct and moral solution.

Some however consider such agitation to be ill thought out and ultimately a hindrance to the very people it tries to help. Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl Wudunn in their *New York Times* article “Two Cheers for Sweatshops” (September 24, 2000) assert that boycotting fails to improve working conditions and instead causes sweatshops to close and workers to be fired altogether.

These are powerful contentions. However, neither viewpoint fully addresses all of the moral, ethical, and economic dilemmas that sweatshops present. Neither position goes far enough to redeem the dignity of the people harmed by sweatshops nor do they offer a solution substantially extensive and lasting. The number of flaws present in both the pro- and the anti-boycotting viewpoints presents the need for an alternative solution that goes further in agitating for positive, lasting change in the condition of the sweatshop workers.

Those who assert that boycotting is the correct answer certainly make a strong emotional appeal. After all, the status of some sweatshops is so dubious as to be called modern slavery by the American Anti Slavery Organization. Sweatshops sometimes operate using force and have conditions so dire as to be capable of causing lasting physical and emotional harm. In “Slavery: Worldwide Evil,” posted on *iAbolish.com*, Charles Jacobs writes:

Locked in a room and given no food until he agreed to weave on the looms, Santosh made Oriental carpets for nine years, working from 4:00 in the morning to 11:00 at night, every day, without breaks. He was never given a single rupee for his labor. When he cut his finger with a sharp tool, the loom master shaved match heads into the cut and set the sulfur on fire. He didn’t want the child’s blood staining the carpet.

Though most sweatshops stop short of such wholesale abuse, work conditions are undeniably poor and human rights violations are rampant. Workers suffer from dangerous equipment and safety procedures are few or non-existent. Hours are long and the work week is a full six or seven days. But agitating for better conditions results in termination of employment. Thus, given no leverage for negotiations and few economic alternatives, workers are forced to accept the sweatshop lifestyle or suffer even more abject poverty.

Such conditions are not only tragic, they are an affront to human dignity and an extensive violation of human rights. There are no words strong enough to condemn practices which exploit human beings to the point of depriving them of their humanity. Seeing these things or even merely reading about them can cause a strong emotional reaction. It is very easy to react as the young king does, by refusing to use any objects created by so much suffering. However, this gut response only serves to placate the conscience without necessarily alleviating the problem.

The results of boycotting are dubious at best. Boycotters insist that the ills of sweatshops can be fixed by refusing to purchase products made in them. The owners of

the sweatshops, they reason, will see that their products aren't being purchased and, succumbing to this economic coercion, will make the necessary changes to render their factories more safe, friendly, and considerate work environments. Kristoff and Wudunn explain, however, that when boycotts occur, rather than fixing conditions in sweatshops, large corporations will often shift production away entirely from countries with sweatshops, resulting in a loss of jobs for workers.

Furthermore, even if a boycott is capable of being effective, boycotters often have limited organization. This creates problems in determining a clear idea of what would constitute success. For instance, how is a sweatshop defined? Which practices are classified as being absolutely intolerable? What are the boycotters' explicit aims? Because a boycott is, in its very nature, a grassroots movement, it is often a more successful tool when a clear-cut target is easily defined.

For example, there was recently a mass boycott of Abercrombie & Fitch because that company had been selling T-shirts depicting Asian-Americans in what was recognized as a very racist manner. Shortly after the boycott started, Abercrombie issued a statement apologizing for the shirts and ceased their sales. In this case the boycott was an effective tool because there was a clear target goal upon which it was easy for the boycotters to agree. The boycotters were all aware when the goal was reached because the issue of the boycott directly affected their lives.

However, in order to alter the situation of workers in sweatshops, those engaged in the boycott would first have to agree on *what* specific measure of standards would guarantee success and then find some mechanism for oversight that would allow them to ascertain when that level of success had been reached. Participation in boycotts is spontaneous and voluntary, two factors which allow corporations to take advantage of boycotters. And because sweatshops are located far from the country in the which the goods are actually sold, multinational corporations are enabled to escape oversight. They may, in fact, claim that they have made the required changes when in actuality they haven't. Getting proof is difficult and, by the time it is available, the boycott has often run out of steam.

Thus more organization is needed to effect change than a simple boycott. Though there is contradictory evidence that boycotts do sometimes produce positive results (<http://www.sweatshops.org/educate/myths.html>), boycotting alone isn't the right answer. Results for the workers are mixed at best and, for each sweatshop victory, Kristoff and Wudunn point out that there are people whose lives are

worsened when the sole effect is simply to cause a shift in production. Some corporations have been known to respond to allegations of using sweatshops by simply becoming more secretive and covert but refusing to change their methods.

Yet the *laissez-faire* answer that Kristoff and Wudunn provide isn't any more satisfactory. Sweatshops, they explain, actually offer workers in poor countries a path to prosperity. Workers *like* the opportunities that sweatshops provide: pay is higher than at any alternative job and the money earned allows them to purchase medicines, send children to school, and engage in spending which will rejuvenate their country's economy. Hence, the best way to improve the conditions found in sweatshops is simply to purchase *more* products made in them, not less.

This justification, however, lacks empirical support. After all, what incentive would companies have to change their practices if the path to profit maximization lay in minimizing labor costs? A strong force would be required to keep these capitalistic impulses in check. Furthermore, sweatshops will often engage in deceptive practices, such as lending on credit, which results in virtual entrapment for the workers who can never make enough money to pay off their debts (<http://nate.clar47.rhno.columbia.edu/usas/>).

It isn't clear whether third world economies would be better off without sweatshops entirely. But the lesser-of-two-evils argument being used here to encourage people to consume more sweatshop-produced goods is inherently flawed. It is interesting that both of the options for dealing with sweatshops are relatively easy fixes from the standpoint of the typical concerned American: they require nothing more than a slight alteration of one's spending habits. What one gets in return seems to be an easy conscience—the belief that one is doing one's part to rid the world of labor injustices.

However, in placating oneself by saying that either boycotting or purchasing sweatshop-made goods ultimately *somehow* improves the condition of sweatshop laborers, one is essentially allowing a condition of slavery to exist because it seems that the alternative is death. Our duty to our fellow human beings is to strive for a world where everyone is guaranteed dignity. This is the key value that we should strive to uphold in selecting our response to the problem of sweatshops. It may seem as though we are being forced to pick between two ills. Using empirical arguments, one may even be convinced into believing that taking one route over another will eventually lead to an improvement in the condition of the workers. But we have a duty to our fellow

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human beings to seek to establish a global society where things like economic servitude and human rights violations don't exist, and where each person is free to live out the course of his or her life without these limitations. As such, we can't be content with employing only economic means.

Hence, the alternative I propose is to concentrate on neither boycotting goods nor purchasing them but rather in appealing to the U.S. government to pass laws prohibiting companies which sell products in American markets from violating human rights in the production of their goods. The best way to bring about lasting change is legally. Americans abroad are prohibited from committing certain acts that, while legal abroad are illegal at home. This prohibition stems from moral scruples. For instance, an American in a Middle Eastern brothel is prohibited from purchasing a child prostitute. Why can't we use the same reasoning and logic to prohibit corporations from employing labor practices abroad which don't conform to American standards of

workplace safety and human rights? After all, one of the key goals of American foreign policy is the protection of human rights. Thus we should prevent corporations which violate such rights from doing business in the United States.

As our world becomes increasingly interconnected, it is necessary to maintain our principles. We can't allow ourselves to be satisfied with empty gestures that make us feel better about ourselves without eliciting any actual change. Empathy is an important part of the process, but empathy is useless without action. To say that helping workers abroad is done by taking small steps at home is a wonderful way to garner publicity, but without a coherent, organized movement that ultimately culminates in legal change, it is impossible to guarantee all people the human dignity to which they ultimately have a birthright.

Anna Yesilevsky, a student at Harvard University, is twenty-two years old. This essay placed second in the eighteen-to-twenty-four-year-old age category of the 2004 *Humanist* Essay Contest for Young Women and Men of North America.

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ensure, in the words of William Faulkner, "that the indomitable human spirit...will not merely endure, but prevail."

The international courts of today are a good start, for at the least they have the potential to reduce needless human suffering. But beyond this basic role they serve a grander purpose: to test the limits of our imagination. An ever-expanding body of international humanitarian law, if followed to its natural conclusion, will relegate ideologies of power and fear to history's dustbin. To carry this torch of human progress from strength to strength is a charge we gladly accept. For this, in essence, is humanity in action.

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to the "civic spaces"—such as village greens, places of religious worship, or community schools. It is also equally important to focus on the education of youth in their native values and traditions. Teens especially need a counterbalance images of American consumerism they absorb from the media. Even if individuals or countries consciously choose to become "Americanized" or "modernized," their choice should be made freely and independently of the coercion and influence of American cultural imperialism.

The responsibility for preserving cultures shouldn't fall entirely on those at risk. The United States must also recognize that what is good for its economy isn't necessarily good for the world at large. We must learn to put people before profits. The corporate and political leaders of the United States would be well advised to heed these words of Gandhi:

I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.

The United States must acknowledge that no one culture can or should reign supreme, for the death of diverse cultures can only further harm future generations.

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