

Fast fashion, killer fashion

Ornela De Gasperin Quintero

Fast fashion is emblematic of the irrationality of the dogmas of the current economic system, of the extractivist economic model that rules the world, and of the exploitation of the Global South (or the economic periphery) by the Global North (or the economic centre)—all for the immediate but suicidal long-term benefit of capital.

Science has defined certain biological, climatic and physical axes whose limits should not be transgressed to keep humanity in a safe zone (the planetary boundaries). Of these nine axes, we are transgressing six, pushing humanity out of our safe place (Rockström et al., 2023).¹ One of these six limits is climate change. The climate crisis is currently displacing around 30 million people per year and current climate projections place us at very high risk, with a level of global warming that may exceed the adaptive capacity of human societies (Kemp et al., 2022; Steel, DesRoches, & Mintz-Woo, 2022). The United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) assesses that, without radical changes, between 3.3 and 3.6 billion people will be living in highly vulnerable places to climate change by the year 2100.

According to the IPCC's sixth and latest report, the transformations needed to combat the climate crisis are 'fundamental changes in the way our societies function, including changes in values, in political and economic systems, and in power relations.'² However, despite the unequivocal scientific consensus on the anthropogenic causes of the climate crisis for



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¹ ↪ Richardson, K., Steffen, W., Lucht, W., Bendtsen, J., Cornell, S.E., Donges, J.F., Drüke, M., Fetzer, I., Bala, G., Von Bloh, W. and Feulner, G., 2023. Earth beyond six of nine planetary boundaries. *Science Advances*, 9(37), p.eadh2458.

² ↪ IPCC Sixth Assessment Report: [FAQ 6: What is Climate Resilient Development and how do we pursue it?](#)

decades (Stoddard et al., 2021) and its catastrophic current and future consequences, economic dogmas that are incompatible with a habitable planet remain constant (Stoddard et al., 2021).

One of these dogmas is to grow 'the economy', as measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP), exponentially and infinitely. Irrationally and surrealistically, this dogma assumes the growth of all economic sectors that contribute to GDP, regardless of whether that sector is useful to humanity (health, education, sports) or not (fast fashion, single-use plastics, industrial livestock, weapons, private jets, yachts). Current economic dogmas project no end to the growth of all economies and economic sectors that contribute to GDP despite the planet's limited resources. Illogically and irrationally, this economic growth is encouraged to produce capital accumulation, not to satisfy human needs.

Since neoliberal reforms and the globalisation of the economy, production chains have become international. This arrangement reduces the costs of producing and moving products, including clothing and textiles, as labour is outsourced to countries on the economic periphery (Nikolina, 2019). In this context, the fast fashion model emerged, which is based on the mass production of clothes with frequent replacements. The aim is to bring new styles to the market as quickly and cheaply as possible. Clothes are made not to last and to be soon discarded as rubbish. Currently, one in six people are employed in fashion-related jobs, 80% of whom are women (UNECE, 2018).

Fast fashion appears to democratise consumption through low cost, but this low financial cost to the consumer hides a high human, environmental and ethical cost. The actual cost of fast fashion is enormous, from the excessive use of natural resources to the exploitation of labour on the global periphery, and it is currently borne by the planet and vulnerable communities.

Fast fashion and the textile industry produce terrible damage to human welfare. Firstly, although estimates vary, the textile industry is estimated to produce 10% of total carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions, equivalent to 1715 million tonnes of CO₂ per year (Chrobot et al., 2018; Nikolina, 2019). Under the irrational dogma of growing this economic sector, it is estimated that emissions from fast fashion production will increase by 50% by the year 2030 (Oxfam, 2019). Sixty per cent of global fibre production goes to the fashion industry, and the rest goes to home interiors, industrial textiles, geotextiles, agrotiles and hygienic textiles, among other uses (Muthu, 2020). To provide perspective on the significance of emitting this amount of CO₂, it is conservatively estimated that injecting 4,000 tonnes of CO₂ into the atmosphere directly leads to the death of one human being because of the resulting temperature increase (Bressler, 2021). This means that the textile industry is responsible for the death of 400,000 human beings per year. Furthermore, it is important to stress that this estimate is conservative, as it only considers temperature-related mortality; it leaves out many climate-related mortality pathways, such as infectious diseases, civil and interstate wars, food supply and floods (Bressler, 2021). Fast fashion garments are often made from materials such as polyester, a cheap, synthetic fibre from petroleum, to maintain a low production price. This non-renewable fossil fuel takes 200 years to degrade and is the highest-emitting garment produced (Niinimäki et al., 2020).

The textile industry is also a major consumer of freshwater, another of the nine planetary boundaries already transgressed (Richardson et al., 2023; Figure 1), consuming 79 trillion litres per year. Producing a single shirt requires 12m³ of water (12,000 litres; Niinimäki et al., 2020). In comparison, it would take a person about ten years to drink 12,000 litres of water.

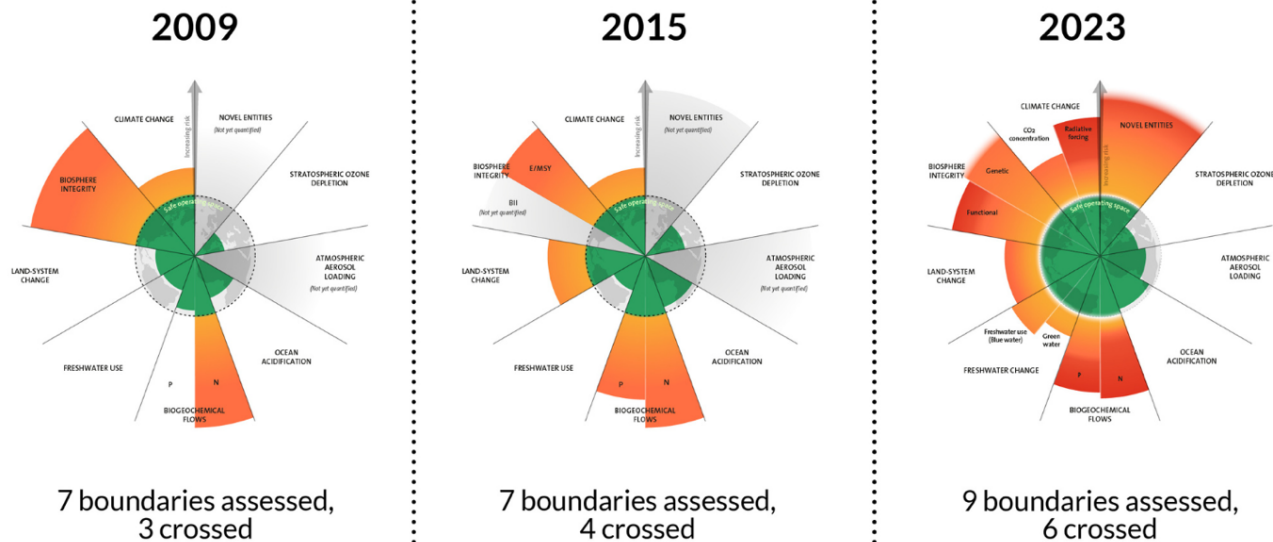


Figure 1. The nine planetary boundaries and how they have been increasingly transgressed despite the scientific consensus on the importance of keeping them within their limits. Credit: Azote for Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University. Based on Richardson et al. 2023, Steffen et al. 2015, and Rockström et al. 2009.

The textile industry also generates 20% of industrial water pollution (Kant, 2011), contributing ~35% (190,000 tonnes per year) to primary ocean pollution by microplastics, and produces >92 million tonnes of textile waste per year (Niinimäki et al., 2020). Water pollution resulting from the discharge of untreated chemicals in dyeing processes damages aquatic ecosystems and endangers the health and livelihoods of surrounding communities. Chemical exposure harms women workers in textile

A UN report estimated that One worker dies every 30 seconds worldwide from exposure to hazardous substances.

factories (most are women), as production workers are exposed to a range of chemicals, especially those involved in dyeing, printing and finishing. A United Nations report estimated that one worker dies every 30 seconds worldwide from exposure to toxic chemicals, pesticides, radiation and other hazardous substances. The riskiest jobs include those engaged in highly toxic livelihoods, such as mining, waste disposal and manufacturing activities, such as textiles and agriculture. In addition, these workers often work in close proximity to their homes and communities, sometimes accompanied or assisted by their children (OHCHR, 2018).



Figure 2. H&M, an example of fast fashion. Credit: Dana L. Brown.

Very soon after their production, fast fashion garments end up in the rubbish. It is estimated that 85% of textiles end up in landfills or are incinerated when most could be reused (Dahlbo et al., 2017). In the European Union, only 1% of garments are recycled into new clothes (Nikolina, 2019). What is more shocking is that it is estimated that up to 40% of textiles are never sold or used and end up as rubbish after having been around the world several times. Furthermore, most textiles end up as waste in the Global South (on the economic periphery), such as in the Atacama Desert in Chile (Bartlett, 2023).



Figure 3. A textile dump. Credit: Alex Proimos

Despite the fact that 85% of textiles end up in landfills or are incinerated, global per capita textile production continues to increase. For example, the amount of clothing purchased in the European Union per person has increased by 40% in just a few decades (Nikolina, 2019). Global textile fibre production per capita has increased from 5.9 kg to 13 kg per year from 1975-2018 (Chemiefaser, 2023), and fashion brands produce almost twice as much clothing today as before 2000 (Nikolina, 2019). Despite the increase in the number of items people own, lower clothing and footwear costs have led people to spend less on clothing. For example, in the EU and the UK, the price of clothing fell by 36% in the past few decades (Nikolina, 2019).

The fast fashion industry relies on cheap materials and labour exploitation in the Global South. According to the

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documentary *The True Cost*, 85% of the employees are women, many of them underage, earning two dollars a day and working under inhumane working conditions. Only 2% of the workers have

a wage that allows them to meet their basic necessities. In addition, garment companies often turn to countries such as India, Bangladesh and Pakistan to manufacture their products. A clear example of the inhumane conditions in which people work for fast fashion was the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh, where more than 1000 people died and more than 2000 people were injured (Figure 4). Furthermore, Bangladesh is one of the countries most affected by the consequences of the climate crisis: according to the IPCC, 20 million people are expected to lose their homes by 2050, as 17% of the country will be under water due to rising sea levels (Lee et al., 2023).

These resource and labour exploitation practices from the Global North to the Global South (and exporting back the pollution) are a general pattern of the current economic system.

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Recently, researchers assessed the scale of the net appropriation of labour and resources from the Global South to the Global North. In 2021, the economies of the Global North appropriated 826 billion net hours of labour from the Global South, generating 16.9 trillion euros of net gains for the North. According to the authors, this appropriation doubles the labour available for

Northern consumption, draining the South of productive capacity that could be used for human needs and local

development. Although workers in the South provide 90% of the labour that drives the global economy, they receive only 21% of global income (Hickel, Hanbury Lemos, & Barbour, 2024).



Figure 4. Left: Rescue efforts after the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh in 2013. Right: Thousands of garment workers and their unions rally on the first anniversary of the Rana Plaza collapse, in which more than 1,100 workers died. Credits, left: Animesh Biswas, Aminur Rahman, Saidur Rahman Mashreky, Tasnuva Humaira, Koustuv Dalal; right: Solidarity Center.

Fast fashion, as an emblem of the irrational, colonial, and unjust world economic order, undermines human rights, perpetuates poverty and inequality between regions of the world, and facilitates the continuation of a system where the dignity and well-being of workers and nature are sacrificed for corporate profits. The global economy is based on extracting and cheapening natural resources, exploiting labour through wage slavery, and exporting pollution to the Global South. In a democratic world, we would have a say in which economic sectors benefit humanity and deserve to continue growing and which do not. Fast fashion should be one of the first to disappear.

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