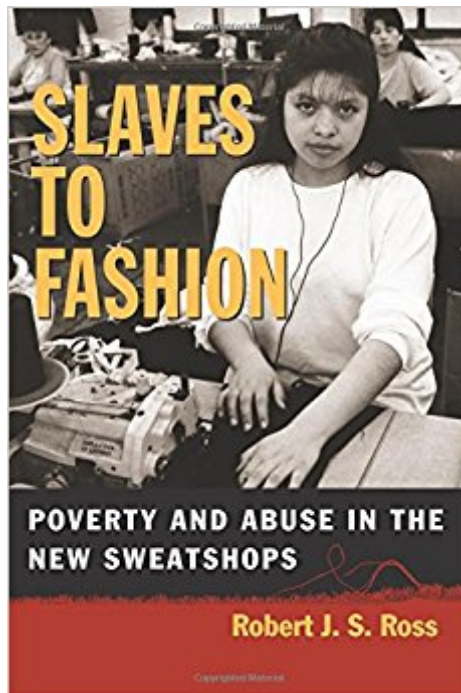




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Slaves To Fashion: Poverty And Abuse In The New Sweatshops



Synopsis

"A brilliant and beautiful book, the mature work of a lifetime, must reading for students of the globalization debate."---Tom Hayden"Slaves to Fashion is a remarkable achievement, several books in one: a gripping history of sweatshops, explaining their decline, fall, and return; a study of how the media portray them; an analysis of the fortunes of the current anti-sweatshop movement; an anatomy of the global traffic in apparel, in particular the South-South competition that sends wages and working conditions plummeting toward the bottom; and not least, a passionate declaration of faith that humanity can find a way to get its work done without sweatshops. This is engaged sociology at its most stimulating."---Todd Gitlin". . . unflinchingly portrays the reemergence of the sweatshop in our dog-eat-dog economy."---Los Angeles TimesJust as Barbara Ehrenreich's Nickel and Dimed uncovered the plight of the working poor in America, Robert J. S. Ross's Slaves to Fashion exposes the dark side of the apparel industry and its exploited workers at home and abroad. It's both a lesson in American business history and a warning about one of the most important issues facing the global capital economy-the reappearance of the sweatshop.Vividly detailing the decline and tragic rebirth of sweatshop conditions in the American apparel industry of the twentieth century, Ross explains the new sweatshops as a product of unregulated global capitalism and associated deregulation, union erosion, and exploitation of undocumented workers. Using historical material and economic and social data, the author shows that after a brief thirty-five years of fair practices, the U.S. apparel business has once again sunk to shameful abuse and exploitation.Refreshingly jargon-free but documented in depth, Slaves to Fashion is the only work to estimate the size of the sweatshop problem and to systematically show its impact on apparel workers' wages. It is also unique in its analysis of the budgets and personnel used in enforcing the Fair Labor Standards Act.Anyone who is concerned about this urgent social and economic topic and wants to go beyond the headlines should read this important and timely contribution to the rising debate on low-wage factory labor.Â Robert J.S. Ross is Professor of Sociology, Clark University. He is an expert in the area of sweatshops and globalization. He is an activist academic who travels and lectures extensively and has published numerous related articles.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I found this book to be informative, but not without its faults. There is new information on almost every page, and it is very well documented. However, Ross' approach frequently chafed: Using "they" to reference his own previous work has the appearance of appealing to an authority which happens to be himself. He should be using "we" when citing his own work. Ross argues that the apparel industry consciously plays their suppliers against one another despite the need for close supervision of contractors for quality control and innovation (see the section "Proximity, Time, Quality, and Efficiency") whereas Oliver Williamson (The Economic Institutions of Capitalism) and others have shown these "transaction costs" are the key motivation for vertical integration. I found the book's implied assertion that there is a gentlemen's agreement to divide and conquer the contractors to be unlikely and not very closely argued, but surely a massive conspiracy theory is not required? For example, it is the one manufacturing industry that has a high risk to would-be market consolidators thanks to shifting preferences (literally, "fashion") and a low threshold for entry thanks to the low cost of capital required. Note that Ross does not explicitly claim the conspiracy, but says that this is the strategy of the leading retailers without attempting to explain why they would have exactly the same motivations and opportunities as every other vertically integrated industry and then choose not to vertically integrate. Ross turns history on its head, claiming that factory owners in the late 19th century began to use a radical new organization to undermine and demoralize factory workers who were beginning to organize and make demands. This radical departure was to start farming work out to smaller contractors and individuals who worked at home. In reality, that is the way that the apparel industry started and continues to regenerate even to this day. See Hounshell (From the American System to Mass Production, 1800-1932: The Development of Manufacturing Technology in the United States (Studies in Industry and Society)), for example. The factory, not the homework, was the latest creation, not the other way 'round. Which leads to ... Homework is

portrayed as an unmitigated evil without argument. This is odd for several reasons. There are obvious advantages (at one point even alluded to) of homework: it allows people to remain at home to provide care to small children and/or adults with special needs, eliminates the need to commute, puts the worker out of sight of bosses and other on-the-job inconveniences, and allows the worker to set their own breaks and to enjoy the privacy of their own home. The second advantage should be obvious to anyone familiar with Marx: the worker, who presumably owns their own machine and other tools (scissors, etc.), owns the means of production and therefore their own destiny. During the Progressive Era, the assumption was that bigness was bad, so they supported antitrust legislation. Today, there seems to be a broad, tacit agreement amongst both right and left wing commenters that bigness is good, albeit for different reasons. Right wing commenters seem to believe that bigness is a natural result of survival of the fittest in a laissez faire economy, while left wing commenters (Ezra Klein, Brad Plumer, et al) seem to believe that innovation, high pay, and all goodness flow from largeness. Ross seems to come from a similar direction: retailer largeness is a given, decentralization undermines worker strength, and government intervention is The Solution. He never asks how retailers have become so big: trademark, copyright, corporate law, transportation subsidies, and other such considerations never appear in the book. Anyone reading this book would therefore do well to pick up one of Kevin Carson's books, especially *Organization Theory: A Libertarian Perspective* and *The Homebrew Industrial Revolution: A Low-Overhead Manifesto* for an explicit review of those questions.

This is the most comprehensive and up to date book I know of about sweatshops in the U.S. and worldwide. It is must reading for anti-sweatshop activists and anyone else interested in this ugly seamy side of globalized capitalism. Ross endorses the U.S. Government Accounting Office's definition of a sweatshop as "a business that regularly violates both wage or child labor and safety or health laws." Employing that definition, he concludes that there are about a quarter million sweatshop workers in the United States. Many are immigrants in the apparel industry. He shows that sweatshops were rampant in the U.S. economy at the beginning of the twentieth century. As a result of the 1937 Fair Labor Standards Act, they declined greatly from the 1940s to the 1970s. But then a confluence of factors--including globalization and industrial deregulation--resulted in the resurgence of sweatshop employment in the 1980s that has continued to today. He blames the international expansion of sweatshops on deregulated global capitalism that has produced a competitive race to the bottom among low wage countries. The last part of the book focus on the anti sweatshop movement and the development of effective labor standards.

ross's 337 pages is seemingly daunting with charts, statistics, historical and conceptual overview, until you read it. it is very accessible even for someone like me who is a new comer to the issue. it is written simply and non-technically. i didn't know anything, not really, about sweat shops. but from the beginning ross takes on a very personal approach by stating his reasons for writing this book - his parents were garment factory workers!he doesn't blame the re-introduction of sweatshops in the states and around the world on a single issue like global capitalism, which he does cite as the greatest contributor to it, but maps out a complex web of lack of unionization, lack of law-enforcement, and political philosophies.it is an extensively researched book that has helped me to understand the scope and the nature of the problem, that is violation of human dignity through unethical practice of power.the title is a bit misleading. it doesn't have much to do about the aesthetics, marketing, or the cultural psychology of fashion. fashion is used in much more literal way.

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