POD PEOPLE

UNTEXTBOOKED – 407 - Sofi Thanhauser
ACCESSIBILITY TRANSCRIPT

Episode Title: What Do Our Clothes Reveal About History, Economics, and Gender?

EPISODE DESCRIPTION:

The clothes we wear say a lot about how we express ourselves. But an investigation into how these clothes ended up in our closets reveals a complex history dating back 400 years ago at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. Producer Ashley Kim sits down with Sofi Thanhauser, the author of "Worn: A People's History of Clothing" to learn how clothing can teach us about economics, gender and imperialism.

Sofi Thanhauser teaches in the writing department at Pratt Institute. She has received fellowships from the Fulbright Program, MacDowell, and Ucross Foundation. Her writing has appeared in Vox, Essay Daily, and The Establishment, among other publications.

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Show Notes:

(00:00) - What History Can You Find in a Thrift Store?
(01:54) - The History of Clothing is Intertwined with Economics
(04:40) - How the Clothing Industry Became Global
(06:16) - Gender and Clothing Manufacturing
(14:05) - Safety on the Factory Floor
(17:31) - Being an Ethical Consumer
(21:02) - Will Clothes Ever be Local Again?
(22:29) - Outro

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TRANSCRIPT:

Gabe Hostin:
You're listening to UnTextbooked. This is a history podcast for the future that gives young people like us agency and voice in our education. I'm your host, Gabe Hostin.

Ashley Kim:
And I'm producer, Ashley Kim.

Sofi Thanhauser:
I think that I was drawn to thrift shopping by an interest in clothing as an aesthetic product, you know, as something that I could use in my daily life to express something about myself or to create a certain shape or color.

Ashley Kim:
That's this week's expert, Sofi Thanhauser. Like Sofi, I'm an avid thrifter. I love sifting through racks of sweaters, bins of vintage jeans, and trays of antique rings, each of them carrying the stories of their previous owners across time and space.

Sofi Thanhauser:
But I pretty soon started to recognize that there were production histories kind of cataloged in thrift stores. And that's just something as simple as where was this garment made? What is the material of this garment? When, based on its construction, do I think it is from? And there's so much history in the thrift store.

Ashley Kim:
This week on UnTextbooked, I want to dig into this history of the clothing we wear and the people who made them. Sofi wrote the book, Worn: A People's History of Clothing. She traveled all around the world to tell the story of 400 years of clothing production and manufacturing.

Gabe Hostin:

You know, I'm a little vain, so I really love just putting together a nice fit at the beginning of every day and, you know, putting some creativity and style into it. But when I think of clothing, I don't really think of history.

Ashley Kim:

In history class, we only, if ever, briefly touched on the topic of clothing, but as we'll discuss today, the history of clothing is rich, intertwined with economics, globalization, gender, and more.

Sofi Thanhauser:

This is all connected. You cannot think about a shirt without thinking about the history of imperialism, without thinking about water, without thinking about technological history, without thinking about gender. There's no line that divides, you know, economics from history, from science. Like, there- there's these connections that I think we have to think through.

Ashley Kim:

I wanna start with an example that Sofi shares in her book. She was touring a screenprinting factory in a region of southern India called Tamil Nadu. A shirt destined to be sold in the United States caught her eye.

Sofi Thanhauser:

So it was a T-shirt, and it had Wisconsin printed on it. And I think there was, like, a fish and a fishing pole and a lake.

Ashley Kim:

India produces approximately 40% of the world's cotton, and they manufacture about 25% of that cotton, including the T-shirts, jeans, and more that we wear around the world today.

Sofi Thanhauser:

And all of this, uh, is really water-intensive. So the irony to me of seeing this lake printed (laughs) on this T-shirt was very rich. You know, like, this T-shirt is literally sucking water out of this extremely arid region of the world to pipe it to the United States, where it will be purchased by someone who wants to take on this identity of someone that has visited or is from Wisconsin.

Gabe Hostin:

Yeah, I see the irony there.

Sofi Thanhauser:

Clothing really is something that people have always used to think about and reflect on and telegraph regional identity to wear something to say, this is where I'm from. Like, the- these are my people, this is my community. And I think there's nothing wrong with that impulse.

Gabe Hostin:

Being someone who wears their Harvard merch all the time, I see the pride in representing your school and your team.

Ashley Kim:

Beyond the symbols on our clothing, the material itself tells its own story. And to a degree, logos can convey a lot about who we are and what we're passionate about. But even before those logos inevitably peel off, it's worth exploring what the fabrics themselves have to say about what we stand for.

Sofi Thanhauser:

If you actually look at weave structure or material, those can say a lot more about an actual place, I think, than text. They're saying on the one hand, you know, the University of Wyoming, but the cotton isn't from Wyoming. The dye isn't from Wyoming.

Gabe Hostin:

But this wasn't always the case.

Ashley Kim:

Up until the past 50 years or so, a T-shirt being sold in places like Wisconsin or Wyoming would probably have been grown in, if not certainly produced in the US. So how did we get to this point where our clothing industry is so globalized in the context of mass production? It all started with the industrial revolution.

Sofi Thanhauser:

When I was taught about the industrial revolution, I pictured, like, steel, iron, railroads. But actually, the first product that really launched the whole thing was textile machinery.

Ashley Kim:

The industrial revolution started in Britain during the 18th century. Before this time, garments were sewn by hand at home or in small workshops, and were then repaired, re-worn countless times, and handed down across generations. Then a series of inventions sped up this whole process.

Sofi Thanhauser:

And these were the first factories where capital was brought into a building. The machinery that you use to mass manufacture textiles is too big and cumbersome to be owned just by one person. This is like the origin point of, you know, pooling capital to buy the machinery and buy the labor to make something at scale.

Ashley Kim:

Machine manufacturing brought clothing production out of homes and into factories.

Sofi Thanhauser:

So it's really the beginning of what we now understand to be, like, the main form of labor. You know, know you go to work, you get paid a wage for your labor. But at that time, that was really relatively new.

Ashley Kim:

Industrialization, specifically within the textile industry, introduced wage labor as we know it today. Workers started to depend on getting paid by their bosses to make a living, instead of relying on their own small businesses or self-sufficiency. And what's more. is that these earliest instances of wage labor reveal something else, how employers, then and now, value the work of women.

Sofi Thanhauser:

So when we look at the earliest payrolls for work in textile factories, this is where you are going to see how, from the very beginning, women's wages were about half of men's. So women and children were the main labor force, and they're just cheaper. So it's like when you go back and think about why is somebody cheaper than somebody else, like, it's hard to explain that exactly.

There's something you can say about their social power. There's obviously something at that time that, that indicates that women had less power than men in the most simple terms. And that's one of the histories that I trace in the book to an earlier age of European history that has to do with guilds and guild labor and women kind of being ejected from the guild economy. But it is a complicated question to think about, you know, where does this lack of wage parody start?

Ashley Kim:

Long before the industrial revolution, gender inequity certainly existed. As Sofi mentioned, this showed up in terms of who and who wasn't allowed to earn profit for their labor.

Gabe Hostin:

If we zoom out of Britain, we can see that as industrialization revolutionized the way people worked, there was another force spreading around Asia, Africa, and the Americas, colonization. In

addition to offering natural resources and markets, these regions supplied European empires with cheap labor.

Ashley Kim:

In the United States, forced labor in the form of slavery fueled the cotton industry, which was vital to the nation's economy from its inception.

Sofi Thanhauser:

And it's still something we deal with in the US, it's by race, it's by gender, it's, it's not true that people are paid equal wages.

Gabe Hostin:

Black women earn 70 cents for every dollar a white men earn. Hispanic women earn 65 cents on the dollar. White women take home 83 cents on the dollar. Asian women were closest to parody with white men, earning 93 cents as much as men. And that's all according to Pew research from 2022.

Sofi Thanhauser:

But it's interesting to go back to the very beginning of wage labor and see that the factory owner just could pay a child or a woman half as much as a man because of their lack of social power. And I do think that has to do with who owns land, who has access to work, where does the power that translates into the wage come from? It's a big question.

Ashley Kim:

More than half of the global textile and garment workforce today is female. But has this always been the case? I asked Sofi about the perception of clothing production being women's work.

Sofi Thanhauser:

It's not universally true that clothing is women's work. There are cultures in which men historically have been the main weavers, but there is, you're right, an association between weaving and sowing and women. But there are archeologists who believe that the reason that in many cultures women are associated with textile production is basically just that it's not a dangerous thing to be doing with a child nearby. So if you are, like, using a draft animal or hunting, that could be dangerous for a baby. But if you are weaving, that is not dangerous. Just ultimately, that it's compatible with having a little child nearby.

That's one of the theories that's been put forward for why this association. But I mean, today, certainly, we see that far more than half of the global textile and garment workforce is female. And it's been true for certainly the last couple of centuries that this is overwhelmingly women's work.

Ashley Kim:

There was a quote in Worn, that really stood out to me, and it was about how among working class women, the brothel and the sewing needle were like poles for a penniless female underclass to vacillate between. And that really stood out to me. So I was wondering if you could talk more about that power dynamic in the parallels between wage labor and that abuse.

Sofi Thanhauser:

Absolutely. I mean, so if you look at the 19th century American female worker, like you said, there's really two choices. One, is sweatshop labor, and the other is prostitution. I mean, there are some other alternatives like being a governess or starting a school, but some of these involve training and capital that an average working class woman wouldn't necessarily have. So it's like, if those are the only two options, then you have to look at how women were ejected from other professions. So why can't women be midwives, which was a historical profession? Why don't they have land to farm on? Why can't they be doctors? So, like, there's a process of exclusion from the economy and from paid work that precedes this terrible narrow range of options. And that was what I wanted to focus on, and the violence that is involved in creating such a tiny range of vocational options for women.

Because unless you understand the violence that brought that situation about, it just seems natural. It seems natural. "Oh, yeah, women. They, they just have, you know, their, their seamstresses, or their prostitutes, or their wives, and they rely on the male wage." And that's been a myth for a long time, really since the origin of wage labor that the male wage will provide for the whole family, and the woman doesn't need to be paid. And that's never been true. It's never actually operated that way, but it's a very pervasive myth, and it's still operating today in a lot of ways.

Ashley Kim:

Clothing production today is also characterized by the globalization of our supply chains.

Gabe Hostin:

Like the Wisconsin T-shirt made in India.

Ashley Kim:

Right. Clothing production primarily happens in Asia, Africa, and Central America. The garments produced in these regions are sneakers, jeans, dresses, you name it, are then shipped thousands of miles away to North America and Europe. Many of these regions where production happens were previously colonized. Now, corporations from western nations continue to leverage economic power to extract cheap labor and resources, a phenomenon referred to as neo-imperialism.

It struck me that history is repeating itself.

Sofi Thanhauser:

There's a lot of repetition in terms of the language that's used. "Oh yeah, the, the woman's wage doesn't need to be livable because the male wage will cover it." This argument is even less true in the context that it's used today than it was in the original iteration in the 19th century. Part of the reason for that is that, in the 19th century, men did have access to industrial jobs that often were better paying. Whereas, today, if you go to an export processing zone in a place like Bangladesh or Honduras, the work that's available to men is also very low wage.

Gabe Hostin:

An export processing zone is a fenced in region within a country that encourages foreign trade and export.

Sofi Thanhauser:

It's not industrial work, it's not work that's contributing to the growth of an economy. So there are some basic differences in the kind of exploitation that is happening today, and that there's sort of an imperial element on top of a gender element because they're foreign-owned companies paying low wage workers, often women, to make clothes. And this isn't happening in the context of industrializing economies or economies that are growing. It's just extraction, basically.

Ashley Kim:

History also has lessons around safety. Fires are a huge concern for workers. In 2013, a nine-floor industrial building called Rana Plaza collapsed in Dhaka, Bangladesh. More than 1,000 workers died, and more than 2,500 were injured. More than half of these workers were women. Rana Plaza's landlord, as well as factory employers were well aware that the building was not structurally sound, yet garment workers were forced to come to the factory where many of them met their death.

Sofi Thanhauser:

One common ground we could talk about is just fire and building collapse. I mean, there was a lot of interest in the wake of a huge, huge factory collapse in Bangladesh. You know, a lot of people were talking about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, and how there was so much common ground between the unsafe conditions that women seamstresses are working in today, and the common ground they share with those early 20th century American factories. And those commonalities are there. So there's a couple of things that I would say we could learn from this. One is to point out that this history is not continuous. So it's not the case that clothing began in a sweatshop. It's always been in a sweatshop. It will always be in a sweatshop. That's really not true. And that was one of the things that I wanted to do with this book is to show that in mid-20th century America, garment work was unionized.

These women who started off in sweatshops, worked really hard, made a union, fought for their rights, and created a situation where garment-making was a middle class job with good wages, with healthcare, with cultural opportunities. And this worked. This was how clothing was made. And so, it can be done because it, it has been done. The challenge today is that, as you said, the industry is so globalized that even if a factory worker, say in Bangladesh, were to unionize, the company that is sourcing their production at that factory can just easily pick up and move to Vietnam.

Gabe Hostin:

In these global supply chains primarily run by Western corporations, garment workers do not have much of a voice.

Ashley Kim:

They really don't. It brings up the huge issue of forced labor, which is essentially modern day slavery.

Sofi Thanhauser:

So I wrote a article a couple of years ago about Xinjiang in China, where unfortunately, a lot of the production of first the rock cotton for clothing and then textiles and garments themselves is, is happening in the context of forced labor and internment camps. So this is something that groups in the US and Europe really internationally have been fighting for, is how do we get forced labor out of the supply chain? So there's a lot of different ways in which workers in factories who are on the ground and in the factory are working to unionize. Consumer groups are working to get the word out about traceability and to ask consumers to think more carefully about their clothing. And then they're activists that are acting governments to act, to make sure supply chains don't contain forced labor.

Gabe Hostin:

So we've looked at the industrial revolution and today's global manufacturing supply chain that allow us to get clothes brought to our very doorstep. As consumers, we are part of the supply chain too. You, me, our listeners, we all need to dress ourselves.

Ashley Kim:

And with dressing ourselves comes responsibility. What we wear is an expression of ethics in class as much as it is an expression of art.

Sofi Thanhauser:

There's a real question of equity when it comes to clothing, right? Because cheap clothing is really something that is almost a necessity in an age when the minimum wage is so low, right? So we can't ask people who are making $10 an hour to buy like a $400 shirt.

Ashley Kim:

No one can tell us what we can or can't wear, or what we can or can't spend our money on. But as it relates to sustainable fashion, Sofi provides valuable insight as a historian to help us ask the right questions. As consumers, how can we better choose clothing that reflects our values?

Sofi Thanhauser:

Great question. One of the first steps has been education really, and learning these histories and learning about the supply chains that bring things to us because they're intentionally kept really opaque. I think there are many reasons why manufacturers don't really want you to know. So there's a lot at stake financially for brands in keeping things shrouded in mystery. There isn't necessarily one easy answer. It's not like, "Okay, stop buying this brand and start buying that other brand." It's not really like a quick fix kind of a situation. So I do think that grounding oneself in these big histories can be a really important place to start. Some very simple things to think about, I think, are how long a garment is going to last, what it's made of, where it was made, who it was made by.

I hated it when I was young, when old people would say like, "It's up to your generation to do this or that." But I do think it's exciting that your generation has been expressing so much interest in how to be more conscious and how to reject some of the models of consumption that are being presented to you. So I think it's very heartening and cool that even in the midst of this unbelievable barrage of advertising that's unlike anything we've ever seen. Your generation is sitting back and thinking like, "Okay, how can we be discerning about this?" And at the same time, I don't think it's just up to the consumer to make good choices. And I think that has become almost like an advertising tool in itself, right?

Like, every single ad I get on my Instagram, for instance, which is marketed specifically to me, is this is the most ethical, this is the most sustainable, this is the most worker-friendly, this is the most earth-friendly, like X, Y or Z T-shirt, pair of underwear, bra that you will ever find, right? So it is now just a marketing thing too. And, and that's not to say that I think there are not worse and better companies because there really are, and there are also people that create rating systems now. But I, I think that these are positive developments, and that consumers taking their purchases seriously does make a difference, actually. So I, I don't mean to undermine it, and I also don't mean it to make it the solution to everything. I think a combination of education and activism and consumer choices can maybe start to push the dial a little bit.

Ashley Kim:

Um, do you think it's possible that we could ever return to a model of clothing production where the fabrics and the production all happen within a localized region?

Sofi Thanhauser:

Yes. In fact, I think it's already happening in a lot of ways. But on the level of the whole supply chain, not just the sewing, but the manufacturer of the textile, that model has been... I mean, in India it is already true that there are still regions where cotton is being manufactured pretty much in a small radius. There are government kind of programs and nonprofit programs, and for-profit companies. Like India specifically really invested in that incredible textile legacy. But with wool, there's things happening in England and the US really all over the world with people making wool garments from their own flocks, or from the flocks of somebody within the state.

There's something to be said about even just sewing a garment yourself. And I, I also am not here to proselytize about making your own clothes, but I think even just making one garment can teach you a lot about how much work it is to put a garment together. If you've ever sewed a dress or a shirt, it is impossible to look at one in a store and think, "Oh yeah, that should cost $5." It's just not possible because you know how much work it takes to sew that shirt.

Ashley Kim:

Thank you again to our guest, Sofi Thanhauser. Her book is Worn: A People's History of Clothing. She teaches at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn.

Gabe Hostin:

I don't think I'll ever be able to look at a T-shirt the same.

Ashley Kim:

Neither can I. And after reading Sofi's book and chatting with her, I don't think I'll ever wear a T-shirt without thinking about where it came from, who made it, or how or why I can or cannot answer these questions.

Gabe Hostin:

The implications our clothing industry has on economics, gender, and our collective history are both deep and extensive.

Ashley Kim:

Everything about my conversation with Sofi negated doubts I've had about researching fashion or pursuing it as a career. In the classroom, I feared the topic of clothing was frivolous and feminine, the two being intertwined with each other and rooted in internalized misogyny. Today's fashion industry needs to be addressed in terms of social and environmental ethics on a global scale. And to brainstorm, plan and execute these necessary changes, we'll need to acknowledge Clothing's role in our history and shine light on the marginalized groups which have built this industry and deserve to be heard, appreciated, and compensated for their work.

Gabe Hostin:

Listeners, if you want to learn more about environmental history, you'll want to hear next week's episode.

Dina Gilio-Whitaker:

Our national parks are the best idea America's ever come up with. Well, that leads to the question of the best idea for who? The national parks get all bound up with the processes of pushing the Indigenous people off the lands in order to create these wilderness parks. So we can't think of the environmental movement without understanding it in the context of the forced removal of Indigenous peoples from their lands.

Gabe Hostin:

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Ashley Kim:

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Ashley Kim:

That's all for this episode of UnTextbooked. I'm producer, Ashley Kim.

Gabe Hostin:

And I'm Gabe Hostin. Thanks to The History Co:Lab, Fernande Raine and CeCe Payne. UnTextbooked is produced by Pod People; Rachael King, Aimee Machado, Danielle Roth, Hannah Pedersen, Michael Aquino, and Shai Wottiz.
