

Agendas Audio Transcript

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Introduction: Nina Stevenson

My name is Nina Stevenson and I'm the Education for Sustainability Manager at the Centre for Sustainable Fashion.

In this podcast we are going to be meeting four different experts from the world of fashion and sustainability and they will be introducing four different agendas for fashion and sustainability. All of them are working in the field in very different ways and their experiences, knowledge and personal values make them ideal for bringing the agendas to life.

First up is Liz Parker, an educator and campaigner from the UK. Liz will be speaking about the Social Agenda for fashion and sustainability and what this can mean. Secondly, we'll hear from Simon Mair, Research Fellow at the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity based at the University of Surrey in the UK. Simon will be looking at fashion and sustainability from the viewpoint of the Economic Agenda. Next up will be Alejandro Luna Castro, an Environmental Scientist originally from Colombia and now based in the UK. Alejandro will be sharing the Ecological Agenda. And finally, Alex Macintosh, the Course Leader for MA Fashion Futures at London College of Fashion will explain his take on the Cultural Agenda.

These four agendas act as the starting point for you to consider the diversity of perspectives on fashion and sustainability. We know that understanding sustainability can seem daunting and overwhelming at times, by considering these four agendas you'll begin to understand your own perspective more clearly, and therefore what is important to you to consider in your work going forwards.

So, let's start by introducing Liz Parker who can share a Social Agenda for fashion and sustainability.

Social Agenda: Liz Parker

I'm here today to offer my perspective on fashion sustainability through the Social Agenda. My name is Liz Parker and I'm a Lecturer and Researcher in Fashion Sustainability, and I've been working for organisations such as the Clean Clothes Campaign that support garment workers to defend their rights for over 12 years.

I believe what we wear is fundamentally essential to what it means to be human. Yet, inequality and social injustice pervades the dominant clothing system and counters the potential beauty and sense of belonging our clothes can offer us.

Human rights are enshrined in numerous international conventions, agreed by many countries. However, these rights are dependent on states to protect them, on businesses to respect them, and on access to appropriate justice and remedy when violations have been identified. Yet, these are not in place leaving space for human interactions – both within and outside of fashion – that create inequalities and create conditions for human rights violations to thrive.

I'm a white woman and I was born in the UK where I live and work. This gives me huge privilege in the world in which I live, and I want to use this privilege to spend the next few minutes exploring the social agenda in the dominant fashion system.

It could be argued that my voice should be replaced by the voice of someone who is a garment worker so that you directly hear their story. If we could do that, the chances are that you would be listening to a young woman of colour, whose opportunities for education through the formal state system have been limited. The majority of clothes globally are produced in Asia and Latin America where the stories many of you will be familiar with of long working hours, low wages, poor health and safety and sexual harassment are common. Yet, you might also be listening to a white woman in Europe, or a young man and very possibly a child also facing daily violations of their basic rights.

Luxury is believed to be immune from social injustices found in fast fashion because their products are believed to be made in Europe. This is not necessarily the case of luxury in premium brands producing all around the world. There are documented cases of workers rights violations in luxury fashion such as Prada and Mulberry in Turkey and neither is it the case that made in Europe necessarily means decent working conditions. Shoes labelled Made in Italy may well have been produced in

other countries and sent to Italy for finishing. In Italy itself, as well as in the UK and other European countries, conditions may be well below the standards we expect.

In fact, the gap between the minimum wage and living wage for garment workers in parts of Eastern Europe tends to be even larger than in Asia. And Eastern Europe is the production location for fast fashion as well as premium brands including Hugo Boss, Max Mara, Versace, Dolce & Gabbana and Prada according to the Clean Clothes Campaign 2014 report *Stitched Up*.

The truth is that we actually know very little about luxury supply chains or the working conditions within them, as there is a massive lack of transparency in these brands. Luxury and premium brands tend to be rated low along with fast fashion chains in ratings of supply chain transparency such as those by Fashion Revolution and Clean Clothes Campaign. They also rank much lower than fast fashion brands and a rating of overall efforts to protect workers and supply chains by Know the Chain. What is certainly true is that not a single mass market luxury brand stands at the forefront of industry initiatives and working conditions.

In other words, the notion that luxury brands are values that are synonymous with sustainability and that these values will permeate through supply chains may not be the case. Ian Davies, an academic from Bath University in the UK and his co-authors call this the 'fallacy of clean luxury'.

Though, it's clear that buying lots of cheap clothing fuels a race to the bottom to find the economically cheapest source of production. It is not the case that paying more for clothes is a guarantee of decent working conditions.

There are exceptions within niche luxury markets, Honest By is leading the way for luxury brand transparency by sharing information about its products right down to the very last detail. Pachacuti, the Panama hat supplier, has demonstrated that people can be respected while creating a luxury product. Tengri proposes to provide the luxury yak fibre through cooperative sources, and Alabama Chanin places deep value on the handwork skills of the women who create their high-end products.

There is a possibility for change within mass market luxury brands. Iciar Bravo Tomboley, a student from London College of Fashion, has put forward a proposition for social profit and loss accounting to Stella McCartney, offering a possibility for change.

All too often the people who make our clothes are treated like machines. Yet they are not helpless victims. Through the Clean Clothes Campaign network I've worked

alongside incredibly courageous and inspirational women and men from all over the world. Women and men who stand up every day to demand better conditions to have their voice heard despite huge risks. At risk of being put on the less desirable jobs of being blacklisted so they struggle to find work in the local area. And I've seen examples of such list complete with photos of activists, and they risk being physically assaulted and even assassinated. Killings are rare but they still take place.

Class, race and gender dynamics are weighted against workers. I sometimes wonder if I need to point out that the people who profit from the fashion industry tend to be white European or US men. Think of the owners of Inditex, LVMH, Nike, H&M, Kering who are numbers 4, 11, 28, 43 and 63 respectively in the Forbes list of the world's richest people.

The way women and men who make clothes are treated is not inevitable but it requires systems change. Luxury fashion has the potential to be at the forefront of driving change. This isn't about charitable or philanthropic activities –a seemingly preferred action amongst premium and luxury brands– but about addressing business practices. What does it take for the fallacy of clean luxury to be replaced by the authenticity of luxury and on equality for all involved in its practice?

[Economic Agenda: Simon Mair](#)

My name is Simon Mair, I'm a research fellow at the Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity, based at the University of Surrey, UK. Today I'm going to be talking to you about the Economic Agenda for fashion, because I think reimagining our economy is central to achieving a socially equal and just generally desirable society within planetary boundaries, and I believe that fashion is a great place to start this reimagining.

I see the economy as a system which is part of both the bio-physical and the social worlds. I see the economy as the relationships that govern how we transform resources – such as cotton and coal or work – into the things that we use in our lives every day – such as bedding or clothing; and at any one point in time, some of these relationships are more dominant than others. They create a systemic logic that determines how our economy works.

Today's dominant economic logic isn't delivering sustainability. The basic human needs of billions of people aren't being met. They don't have shelter, food or security. And at the same time economic growth is pushing us beyond planetary boundaries, we are hurtling towards catastrophic climate change and living in a time of rapid biodiversity loss. The economy is undermining the biophysical conditions

that allow it to exist in the first place. Luxury fashion is embedded in this system. In fact, luxury fashion is particularly interesting because many of the problems and the drivers of the dominant economic logic are especially pronounced in the context of economic growth.

Businesses are under huge pressure to grow, and to understand why, it's helpful to think about the nature of business. I tend to reject the neoclassical view that businesses are primarily or only motivated to maximise profit. Instead, I think the principle motivation for most businesses is to survive, to still be here tomorrow. Survival is a challenge because businesses operate in competitive and uncertain environments. And the pressures of uncertainty are particularly keenly felt in luxury fashion.

Luxury fashion is affected by macroeconomic variables. Exchange rates, for example, can cause spikes in costs. But luxury fashion also suffers from less tangible concerns. Emotion plays a big role in fashion purchases, and it can be hard to predict how consumers will be feeling when your next collection comes out. Growth is basically a way for luxury fashion businesses to try and manage uncertainty. Being big means having more power and more control. This means being better able to deal with uncertainty and competition. As a company gets bigger, we would expect them to have bigger financial reserves or at least better access to credit. So, businesses who are growing should be in a better position to manage financial shocks. Similarly, as you get bigger other things become easier and they become cheaper. Kering's CEO François-Henri Pinault has described some of the ways that this is true for luxury fashion he writes:

“When a young brand joins Kering, it gains access to a worldwide real estate team: We have people who know the stand-alone store locations as well as the malls of every big city in the world. We have relationships with landlords. We know the fair price for rent. If you're a small brand in London, opening a store in Berlin or Hong Kong can be daunting. Once your brand is part of Kering, our experts will help you get it done.”

Basically what he's saying here is that being bigger means having more control over your environment, and this gives you an advantage in the cutthroat world of capitalist markets. In the words of a philosopher David Schweickart in capitalist economies “the big fish tend to eat little fish”.

This is all a problem because economic growth drives environmental damage. In the quest for growth, businesses try to sell more stuff. We often associate increasing volumes of consumption with fast fashion and high street brands. But the trend is

also there with luxury brands, who are increasingly offering six rather than two collections for every year. And luxury brands are trying to tap into a rapid expansion of consumer spending in emerging economies as well. So although in environmental terms we're getting more efficient at producing stuff. The overall impact of his production is growing because of total amount of stuff is growing. A designer handbag produced today might be more environmentally friendly than one produced twenty years ago, but we consume and produce an awful lot more designer handbags, so the overall impact is still high. And the drive for growth is not only an environmental problem.

Growth is not just about selling more stuff, it's also about reducing cost. So selling the same amount of stuff but producing it more cheaply. This is what economists call productivity gains, and the problem with productivity gains is that they can degrade the production process. Productivity gains often come through a combination of specialisation and mechanization. And essentially this means, taking the craftsman who is part of the process from design through manufacture and into delivery, and breaking it down into many small repetitive tasks that can either be done either by unskilled workers or machinery. This makes production cheaper, but results in the loss of craft. And the loss of craft can mean stopping workers from having creative input. This is something that the art critic and political economist John Ruskin described as dehumanization.

Imagining an economy that isn't dominated by the dynamics of growth won't be easy, but to me fashion looks like a good place to start. Fashion is fundamentally creative, and parts of fashion industry have embraced different business models already. Some are moving to a more circular economy for example. And the way that luxury fashion emphasizes quality might also provide an opening for craft. None of these alternatives are complete, but they are the beginnings of new relationships for a sustainable fashion economy. The challenge for everyone doing this course is to reimagine the economy so that relationships like these are dominant. We know that Luxury Fashion needs to change to enable sustainable prosperity in environmental, social and financial terms. The question is, how?

Ecological Agenda: Alejandro Luna

My name is Alejandro Luna, I'm an environmental scientist and I work at the Centre for Sustainable Fashion and the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. Part of my research focuses in finding alternative natural fibres for fashion.

Eastern philosophies tell us that is when we are contemplating nature and seeing how the world exists beyond words and thoughts is when you are fully alive. Often,

we use words and phrases such as 'being part of nature' or 'reconnected with nature', but I think the reality is that nature is part of us, as we are part of nature. We are an extension of nature.

If we, humans, are part of nature then it is somehow ironic that in business we talk about 'ecosystem services' or 'management of resources'. At some point in the modern world we have forgotten about our connection to nature. Yet, there are still many indigenous communities that see humans as being part of nature, just another fruit of the tree of life. For example, in the Amazon rainforest of Colombia there is an indigenous group of people called Huitotos that see the ecosystem as a big tree. Where branches are rivers that support green forests, where fruits cannot be produced without healthy roots, where animals, plants and humans are part of the same tree. Through hundreds of years of contemplating nature Huitotos realized that we all – plants, animal and humans – need each other to survive.

There is no doubt that health, environmental health, brings us humans wellbeing, yet it seems that we have forgotten that in order to be well we need nature. According to the United Nations almost 55% of the world's population live in cities. Many of us city habitants like to escape to the countryside to reconnect or reconcile with nature, and I believe it's because nature gives us something we inherently need.

Then, it is not surprising that luxury fashion has recognised that connecting with nature can bring us a sense of happiness. Probably most of us have experienced the good feeling when we touch a piece of soft silk or a smooth cotton, or the luxury of touching a nice textured leather. In order to create these feelings fashion uses natural resources, raw materials that have been taken from the natural world. Unfortunately, the over use of natural resources such as water, land, plants and animals has generated huge environmental consequences. Our increasing need to connect to nature through touching natural materials has pushed fashion to exploit natural resources even further. And of course, the industry's need for economic and material growth also plays a role here.

Many natural environments have been cleared or altered to give space to production of raw materials like cotton. Cotton requires large amount of water, approximately 20 000¹ litres of water to produce a t-shirt and a pair of jeans according to the WWF. Water that comes from rivers and lakes and when exploited, disrupts local ecosystems - or for the indigenous Huitotos disrupting ourselves - and is linked to droughts and erosion.

¹ The podcast states '20 litres of water' – please note this is an error and the correct quantity is 20,000 litres.

Fashion has been called 'the second dirtiest industry in the world'. Many dyes and chemicals from processing plants, along with care products like detergents and fabric conditioners end up in rivers and eventually in the sea. According to the IUCN, cotton production accounts for almost 25% of the use of pesticides. Conventional cotton farming can be attributed to the deterioration of the health and wellbeing of farmers and therefore the livelihood of human communities in Central Asia. Nowadays organic methods of farming cotton are in place in certain locations, with lower environmental impact, but this still only accounts for a very small part of the total global cotton industry, and can not necessarily be linked to the luxury fashion industry.

Land and water use, soil pollution and water pollution have devastating impacts on the environment. Intensive land use for the production of natural materials such as cotton, silk, leather, wool and cashmere has reduced the habitats available for many species, bringing many species of plants and animal to the brink of extinction. Many ecosystems are being disrupted by the presence of hazardous chemicals that are killing organisms necessary for ecosystem equilibrium, eventually generating more biodiversity loss. Many garment workers at the bottom of the supply chain are also exposed to hazardous chemicals. These chemicals become a public health problem when they are poorly treated and disposed of in local water supplies. Lack of action to maintain human wellbeing from luxury fashion brands has been reported by organizations such as KnowTheChain.

Fashion needs to respect humans as part of nature, and needs to respect planetary boundaries. The problem is complex, fashion's environmental impact is not only related to raw materials and disposal, but also relates to many other issues such as carbon emissions from farming, manufacturing, transport, retailing, advertising, after care, and so on. Well, climate change is upon us. What we do know is that often complex problems such as these can bring about the most creative solutions. How can luxury fashion innovate to counteract these negative environmental impacts?

One of the reasons I have always been attracted to fashion is because I really believe it helps us to be part of nature, to be creative. Life as such is a difficult concept to explain, but when we think about life we sometimes think about a pulse of life, a movement or a vibration. I think fashion can help us to move, to vibrate. When we dance we feel alive and fashion can have the same effect on us, it helps us experience the pulse of life, the rhythm of nature. We need to find ways to keep the excitement which comes from fashion without compromising nature. I believe, if we connect with nature more deeply, and we explore our connection with nature, we might find new design opportunities, new innovations for sustainability. Luxury

fashion has a role in leading this, to connect us with nature while respecting nature, respecting ourselves. To be innovative! Who will take this mantle to lead? More over, how inspiring would fashion be without nature?

Cultural Agenda: Alex McIntosh

Hello I'm Alex McIntosh; I'm the course leader of the Fashion Futures masters program at London College of Fashion. I'm going to talk to you briefly about my perspective on the culture that defines and is to some extent created by luxury fashion today.

The Oxford English Dictionary offers three definitions of luxury:

Number 1 - A state of great comfort or elegance especially when involving great expense.

Number 2 - an inessential desirable item which is expensive or difficult to obtain.

Number 3 - a pleasure obtained only rarely.

My view would be that today the second definition has become the overriding idea of luxury; intrinsically linked to consumer culture and an understanding of success as the acquisition of wealth and power.

This view of luxury emerges from a philosophical and economic position that unquestioningly champions growth on an individual, national and global scale.

Today's luxury fashion industry could even be described as a direct manifestation of our obsession with increasing gross domestic profit or GDP. The problem is as Bobby Kennedy said of GDP: *"it measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile"*.

It's true to say that the luxury fashion industry does a good job of convincing us that without what it has to offer, life wouldn't be worthwhile. But is this just a beautifully constructed illusion? Perhaps the most truthful way for me to approach this question is for me to first tell you what luxury has come to mean in my life.

Before I say anything about this, I have to offer a caveat. I'm a white, middle class, middle aged man, living in one of the most affluent and cosmopolitan cities in the world. So, I could just say that my whole life is a luxury and leave it there; but I don't want to be churlish so I'll elaborate a little.

What I know is that by anyone's standards I'm lucky, but knowing is not the same as feeling. The hardest thing is to really feel lucky, not just to know I meet some generic notion of good fortune. These days, I place the greatest value on the moments in my life when I can look around and feel I have everything I need, and perhaps more importantly everything I want. At these moments, all material things and manufactured experiences tend to pale for me. It could be described as a sense of true wellbeing.

And returning to the third definition of luxury from the Oxford English Dictionary, it's certainly a pleasure obtained only rarely but it's invaluable when it comes. The sense of wellbeing I'm describing can and should come from the experience of fashion; but a constant bombardment of both object and imagery designed to conjure up a mythical and unachievable life, leaves me with a lurking feeling of inadequacy; the material goods extraordinary as they sometimes are never quite seem to fulfil the longing, and let's face it, we all know the dopamine hit that accompanies the purchase is short lived.

The early 20th century philosopher Martin Buber said: "The real struggle is not between East and West, or capitalism and communism, but between education and propaganda". Seen in the modern context his words still resonate; is the role of luxury fashion in our lives to provide us with a precious, rare product or experience? And can the quality of that product or experience be said to be truly authentic if it requires a highly constructed and ruthlessly effective propaganda machine built around it?

I suppose in essence I'm questioning the dominant aspect of current fashion culture, the role of brand and branding. Naomi Klein described the dismantling of infrastructure and the 'hollowing out' of brands in her seminal book No Logo, and reiterates the evolution of this trend in her most recent book No is Not Enough. She cites ,the ultimate 'hollow brand' now occupying The White House as the culmination of this trend. In a culture where the name is the number one selling point for most customers, do luxury fashion 'brands' have a role to play in resetting the dial? Stripping away the layers of artifice and celebrating the hundreds of people's lives and livelihoods contained in each object they create; a farmer, the spinner, the weaver, the printer, the seamstress and the list goes on.

The 'hollow brand' brand is complimented by the design oligarchy that pervades luxury fashion culture; it's unimaginable that a luxury fashion brand should exist without a maverick Creative Director bestriding all it's activities. What if a house were to truly celebrate collaborative creativity, foreground a variety of skills, roles

and contributions, rather than a singular vision? It's hard to imagine as the very fabric of luxury fashion is built on the mythical names of individuals but isn't it an intriguing thought?

According to Forbes in 2016 Louis Vuitton had the fifth biggest global advertising budget of any business, far outweighing the size of the brand. In modern luxury fashion the money spent on marketing and selling far outweighs the investment made in designing and developing the products. Celebrity endorsement, digital influencers, product placements, targeted advertising. If it were possible to strip away all of these layers from our cultural experience of luxury, what would be left? Without Jennifer Lawrence on the front row does Dior still shine?

If you want to truly challenge the luxury fashion sector and propose a more sustainable future for the industry we need to look closely at our cultural values and where those values are represented in the brands from whom we buy. Are the right things being celebrated, are the right structures in place to achieve change, do the right people hold the power and is investment being made in the things that really matter? Only when these questions are addressed can a true culture shift towards sustainability start to happen.

Concluding Remarks: Nina Stevenson

Thank you for listening. We hope these four agendas have given you plenty of ideas to reflect upon and to consider what your experiences of fashion and sustainability are, and therefore consider which of these agendas best fits your personal perspective.