

1 Introduction

Many of the smaller branded goods on sale to consumers in Europe and North America – the latest in clothing and footwear or the smart toys and electronic gadgets on offer – are made in factory ‘sweatshops’. Found in the backstreets of modern, Western cities, but more often than not a feature of the poorer parts of the world, factory sweatshops are an integral part of today’s global economy. Increasingly, as you can see from Figure 1.1, they are to be found in East Asia, in parts of China, Indonesia, Cambodia and Thailand, but they are just as likely to be located in Mexico and Central America, and on the Indian subcontinent. Goods that require little in the way of technology or expensive investment, are suitable candidates for sweatshop production: a term which takes its name from the working conditions under which such goods are produced. As these are primarily places of small-scale, flexible manufacturing, sweatshop workers – mainly women, sometimes children – are commonly subjected to long working hours, forced overtime and a relentless pattern of shift work. Wages are often below subsistence level and the working environment is frequently unhealthy, dangerous and sometimes intimidatory. Job security is largely non-existent and those who protest their exploitation or organise in response to it are likely to lose their jobs, often without warning. Similar things have been said about work in call centres in some countries, although not to the same degree or extent. Workers in factory sweatshops often have to endure poor working conditions and few commentators go out of their way to deny such a state of affairs.

A question that is worth asking, then, is given that many people in Europe, North America and other wealthy contexts benefit from the lower prices afforded by sweatshop exploitation in faraway places, should we involve ourselves with the fate of such distant workers? Or are we, quite simply, too far away to care?

Campaign groups, such as Oxfam, the Clean Clothes Campaign and various trade union organisations, have long argued that consumers should be involved and they have achieved considerable success in recent years in making the link between sweatshops ‘abroad’ and the benefits reaped by consumers ‘at home’. Through a mix of highly charged media campaigns, boycotts and protests, such groups have used the labels of the big ‘brands’ – companies such as Nike, Gap, Puma, Adidas and Wal-Mart – to make their geographical point: that the daily hardships suffered by sweatshop workers in places such as Cambodia and Indonesia to produce goods for the already privileged should concern us. In a globalised world, they argue, there is a connection between what we wear every day and the poverty wages behind the label.

Activity 1.1

You have already glanced at Figure 1.1 and some of the working conditions highlighted by Oxfam in one of their campaigns. Now consider the images in Figures 1.2–1.5, which have all been used by campaigning groups at various times to convey the message that it is consumer demand for cheap clothing and other basic goods which perpetuates sweatshop conditions.

Figure 1.2 gives you a sense of the scale of the factory workshops and together with the other images provides an insight into sweatshop working conditions.

Do such images connect with your life? Are you moved in any way? Or are they simply too remote to register in any meaningful manner?

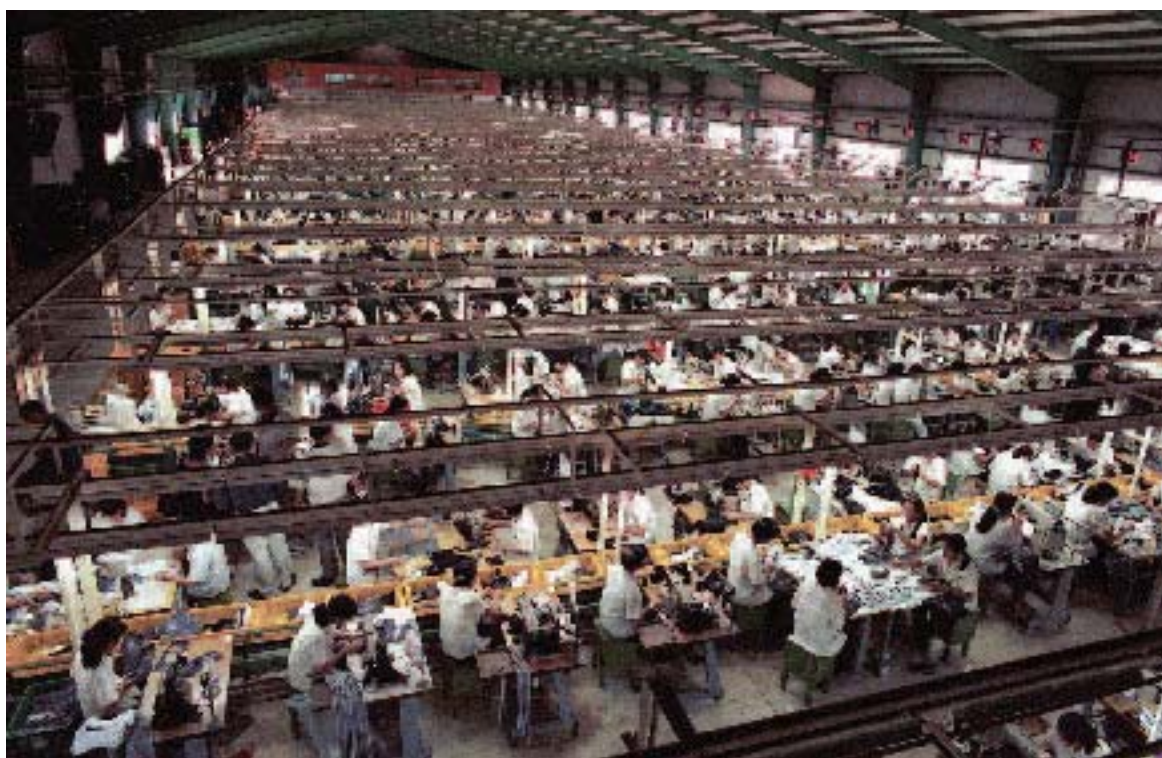


Figure 1.2 Workers assemble shoes at a Nike factory in Vietnam



Figure 1.3 Working at the bottom of the global supply chain in Cambodia (used by the Clean Clothes Campaign)



Figure 1.4 Line workers fix and shape shoe mouldings in a footwear factory in Vietnam



Figure 1.5 A sewing station in a Chinese factory (used by the Clean Clothes Campaign)

The difficulty perhaps is that things which happen at some distance from the everyday routine of our lives are often hard to place or connect with. Moreover, it has to be said that not everyone views factory sweatshops in quite the same way as groups such as Oxfam, or indeed endorses their negative claims about the use of cheap labour in places such as East Asia. For that is what the statements of such groups are: *claims*. And they are far from uncontroversial.

In fact, it is possible to mount a quite different claim which insists that the location of poorly paid sweatshops in developing parts of the world is not only a positive phenomenon, but also the key to a poorer nation's economic development. For some economists and pro-market thinkers, factory sweatshops represent a way out of poverty: the price of an entry ticket into global markets. Previous low-wage economies such as Hong Kong and South Korea, we are told, turned their countries around economically by exploiting their low-cost advantages in global markets. Best to leave well alone, is their message to the antisweatshop campaigners, and let the markets do their work.

Broadly speaking, for our purposes, the claims and counter-claims around sweatshops, as sketched here, underpin two contrasting *demands*: one to be involved in matters of economic inequality and injustice, no matter how remote; the other to leave such matters well alone, to remain distant from but not necessarily indifferent to the plight of others elsewhere. The aim of this chapter is to explore both positions in order to examine the idea that we should assume some *responsibility for elsewhere*, and how this is understood to work in the arguments of the antisweatshop movement and its more pro-market opponents.

Arising out of this, a major concern of the chapter will be to show how – *in both demands* – what we take to be near to us and what we experience as far away is less rigid than may at first appear. In the case of the antisweatshop movement, a critical part of its campaign has been to try to bring exploitation and injustice in some parts of the world to the attention of people in other, richer parts. Through a series of well-orchestrated campaigns, a distant world of sweatshops has been deliberately drawn closer in an attempt to make present to those in the affluent parts of the world what life is really like elsewhere. Conversely, those who view the use of cheap labour in parts of Asia as the beginning of something better, economically, have tended to distance consumers from what is happening there by insisting on the complex, fragmented nature of the marketplace. In a world where physical distance is measured in miles and kilometres, such concerns may seem odd at first glance, but the intention is merely to ask you to think carefully about how, in the context of globalisation, some demands can

lead to issues being brought close to us, while others can make them appear increasingly distant.

In the next two sections, I spell out in more detail the claims and the counter-claims which have been made around factory sweatshops. Following that, in Section 4 I look more closely at how these claims are translated into demands to take responsibility at-a-distance for conditions in sweatshops, considering both those who take a benign view of the global marketplace and those who see it as an institution which effectively obscures our geographical responsibilities. For the moment, though, I focus on the highly charged issue of the virtues and the vices of global factories overseas.

Chapter aims

- ◆ To examine the extent to which consumption of cheap branded goods makes consumers responsible for the conditions under which they are made.
- ◆ To consider the arguments for and against overseas sweatshop exploitation.
- ◆ To explore how consumers are distanced from overseas sweatshop exploitation and, conversely, how the antisweatshop movement has attempted to make the issue live and proximate.