



No Kids, No Fashion, No Future – Notes on the Missing Piece in the Discussion on Sustainable Fashion



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Opinion

In regards to fields of research and education on fashion and textiles, the question of how to make the fashion industry more sustainable is the most pressing of all. As assistant professor in fashion studies at Lund University and member of the board of the Swedish research program Mistra Future Fashion, this is a topic that I have worked with regularly for a number of years [1]. Recently, however, I have begun to despair: the topic is so wide it seems near impossible to cover a discussion on both over-production and over-consumption at the same time.

By 2050, we are expected to be nine billion people on the planet, which is the highest number in the history of all humanity [2]. At no point before, for as long as humans have existed, have we ever been this many. In addition, more people than ever before will now be part of the (albeit somewhat loosely defined) middle class, meaning that they will have a disposable income that they want to use for things that give them pleasure, fashion included. This fact is regularly introduced into discussions on sustainability, and people in panel discussions and research papers are usually all in agreement that the numbers do indeed underscore the severity of the situation, but very rarely do I see these debates leading to the proposal of any actual solutions. Instead, we continue to talk about how to get people to recycle, or to use their garments for an extended period of time or to buy fewer things. Small solutions to a problem that is not only infinitely complex but also with deeply philosophical underpinnings, connected to the question of the meaning of life and the organization of society.

On a national level, it is evident that few countries want to see their population decrease. A growing number of working citizens translate into more people paying taxes. For governments, in a short-term perspective, having more people equates more tax money to feed into the system in order to keep the constituents content. But, in a long-term perspective, supporting an uncurbed population growth is the same as ensuring the destruction of not only individual countries but also of humanity as we know it. To my knowledge, only China has attempted to regulate the allowed

number of children. In democracies, the same would be impossible, as no political party would survive even the suggestion of a similar line of political thought.

Statistician Hans Rosling claimed that the population growth that I am describing is in fact slowing down, and that the number of people feeling the need to have many children will decrease, as a direct effect of more people entering the middle classes [3]. The argument goes that with increased levels of education and developed social infrastructures, fewer people will feel the need to be dependent on their children to take care of them in their old age. While this prognosis is probably accurate in how it views the impact of increased education and financial stability, it doesn't take into consideration the greater cultural narrative that places reproduction at the core of what we today consider to be a meaningful life.

To be without children is in many people's view to not live life to its fullest. It is not only about the individual's choice to not have children but also about parents' desire to become grandparents and thus to continue to be part of the conversations that take part among their friends. For example, in the Swedish middle class today, the desired number of children is not one or even two but three. To only have two is considered not sufficient, from a lifestyle point of view. This demonstrates a gap of knowledge regarding cultural, societal and existential driving forces in Rosling's arguments, as he has looked at the question based in statistics, while at the same time disregarding how reproduction is viewed from a cultural studies perspective.

In the same way that no politician would survive professionally if asking people to have less children, it is also difficult to bring up the topic in the context of research, as most researchers-just like people in general have children of their own and therefore tend to feel personally criticized when the subject is brought up. No one wants to consider how they are contributing to the downfall of humanity simply by indulging in their personal desires to have kids of their own. Few people are satisfied with being just the aunt

or uncle, godfather or godmother. Most want to experience the pregnancy themselves, place the cradle next to their own bed and then see the children grow up, to then have children of their own. Reproduction, according to many people, is the true meaning of life, and to not reproduce is therefore an inherently antisocial act.

Feminist theorist Sara Ahmed has written about the importance of being a “feminist killjoy” [4]. This figure alludes to the need of sometimes ask the critical questions, highlight uncomfortable perspectives and not be afraid of destroying the congenial mood. The feminist killjoy refuses to play the part of someone who says that things are always getting better and is often considered to be too loud, too aggressive and simply too much when arguing about gender equality. Inspired by this feminist figure, I would like to encourage more of us to become environmentalist killjoys, and to specifically point out the things that are adding to the destruction of humanity. At its core, this means debunking the myth that

reproduction is the meaning of our existence, and to question the narratives regarding having children both on a governmental and on an individual level. The discussion on how to make the fashion and textile industries sustainable needs to be contextualized and unpacked in this larger and more philosophical perspective. We can no longer continue to talk about how to recycle cotton blend T-shirts, while remaining silent regarding the number of people who will be wearing them.

References

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3. <http://www.openpop.org/?p=719>
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