

Ralph Nader Radio Hour Ep 424 Transcript

Tom Morello: I'm Tom Morello and you're listening to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*.

[Music] Stand up, stand up, you've been sitting way too long.

Steve Skrovan: Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. My name is Steve Skrovan along with my cohost Hannah Feldman. David Feldman is still attending to a personal matter but there wouldn't be a show without a Feldman, so welcome back, Hannah.

Hannah Feldman: Thank you, Steve.

Steve Skrovan: And the man of the hour Ralph Nader. Hello, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Hello, everybody.

Steve Skrovan: We have a great show today and some of you may be surprised, we're going to talk about fashion. We're going to spend the whole hour with Dana Thomas, author of *Fashionopolis: The Price of Fast Fashion and the Future of Clothes*. *Fashionopolis* lays out the case against fast fashion, its economic, environmental, and human rights devastation. And today we'll speak to her about *Fashionopolis (Young Readers Edition)*, which looks at those same themes of fast fashion's impact on the environment and social justice reimagined as a critical guide for young readers who are starting to make their own fashion choices. As always, somewhere in there we'll check in with our corporate crime reporter, Russell Mokhiber, but first, let's talk fashion. Hannah?

Hannah Feldman: Dana Thomas is the European Sustainability Editor for *British Vogue*, a regular contributor to *The New York Times*, and host of "The Green Dream," a weekly podcast on sustainability. She's the author of *Fashionopolis: The Price of Fast Fashion and the Future of Clothes*, and *Fashionopolis (Young Readers Edition): The Secrets Behind the Clothes We Wear*. Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Dana Thomas.

Dana Thomas: Thank you so much. It's a pleasure to be here.

Ralph Nader: Let me say, Dana, at the outset, this is a spectacular book - and I'm looking at the book she wrote for young readers, which should be for older readers as well. And any teacher in the middle school or high school who doesn't spend some time having the students read this book is missing out on a very, very important part of public education. Let me put it this way about its universal appeal, listeners: if you wear clothes, this book is a must read. Anybody who doesn't wear clothes may not want to read this book.

And so here's how important the textile clothing industry is. I'm taking this from Dana Thomas's book. "It's a three trillion dollar a year industry around the world. It produces about 100 billion

items of clothing annually. We buy 80 billion of them. The remaining 20 billion are destroyed, usually burned or shredded. The average garment is worn seven times before being thrown away, according to UK study. Roughly one out of every six people in the world works in this industry. Shoppers today buy five times more clothing than they did in 1980. In 2018, that average 68 garments a year. How did shopping for clothing become such an addiction? Why do we buy so many clothes?”

I must say, Dana, these figures astonish me. I mean, you're talking with someone who, in the last 20 years, may have spent a total of \$100 a year on clothes, minus three pairs of sturdy shoes. I don't know why people buy so many clothes. They buy several T-shirts a year according to your figures. Why since 1980 has it been this massive upsurge of people buying clothes?

Dana Thomas: Well, there's several different reasons. The first is because through marketing by fashion brands, fashion has become — shopping has become a pastime. Like we used to go to the movies, we go play golf, we went to play tennis, now we go shopping. So, more people go shopping all the time. At the same time, clothes have never been cheaper than they are today. Now you say, “What do you mean?” When I kept hearing this while I was working on the book, I didn't understand what people were saying. And then I read a piece from *The New Yorker* in 1940 or so. It was a big profile on Hattie Carnegie, the retailer. And she was talking about her clients during the Depression. And she said, you know, “I was importing these clothes from Paris, the Paris original luxury clothes from Chanel and Dior, and I was selling them for \$1500, \$2000 apiece.”

And I said to myself, wait a minute, that's the price that we pay for a Chanel dress today. And that was during the Depression, a 100 years ago when the price of eggs was in the cents, not the dollars, right? I started calculating like how much a pound of beef costs then versus today, and then how much a Chanel dress cost then and today. And the Chanel dress was the same price as it was during the Depression. But everything else was a fraction of the price. So clearly, prices of clothes had not gone up in that end on the luxury end with inflation.

But then she wrote that Raymond Chandler called it “the secretary special.” It was a line for young women who didn't make a lot of money and it was a proper suit and a pretty little day dress that you can wear to the office if you were a secretary. She was selling those between \$19.99 and \$25 during the Depression. And that's the same price you would pay for clothes at Zara or H&M or Uniqlo today.

Ralph Nader: That's why I want to tell our listeners that you've traveled to all these places, the factories in Bangladesh to sweatshops in Los Angeles, Vietnam, elsewhere, so these lower prices made possible by NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement]; and the outsourcing—

Dana Thomas: Going offshore.

Ralph Nader: Yeah, effect of these trade agreements. The price is on the workers. Tell us about the conditions in these factories overseas that are producing clothes that used to be produced by factories in New England, factories in North and South Carolina, which are now empty.

Dana Thomas: Which are now empty. Well, they're slowly filling up. But, yes, what happened was with the trade agreements during the Reagan era - NAFTA, which came a bit later, but there were others as well, CAFTA [Central American Free Trade Agreement], which is the Caribbean version of NAFTA - with these trade agreements, all our manufacturing moved offshore. And they didn't just move offshore because they're looking for better prices. They moved offshore because they were looking for the cheapest price possible. So, if they were paying a worker \$20 in North Carolina, they were paying a worker 20 cents in Guatemala, or Thailand, or Vietnam, or Bangladesh. Before they used to have corporate - what we call corporate paternalism - where they would do things like give money to the local Little League teams. They put up field lights at the local stadium. They gave donations to the local library. Plus, they paid maternity leave, vacation leave, 40-hour work weeks, benefits, all of that. When they went offshore, they didn't have to pay any of it. No Little League, no benefits, no maternity leaves, nothing.

So the cost of clothes bottomed out. Nothing. It costs nothing. The factories are a shambles. I visited them in Vietnam, I visited them in Bangladesh, I visited them in China. Yes, some of them were perfectly fine, and clean and as they should be. But for the most part, most of the time, they were shambles, I mean, 120 degrees. Big fans blowing dust around. Guys in the jeans factory walking around in waders in six inches of dye water on the floor because the drains are chocked. It's just a horror show. And they work nonstop. There were lots of people who argue and say well, "We're creating jobs for people in these places who wouldn't have jobs. They are terrible jobs. They have what we call "forced overtime," which basically means you're told to stay longer and work weekends and work nights, and you're not getting paid for it. They just won't let you leave because you're locked in the factory. You're searched when you come in; you're searched when you leave, because they're afraid you're going to steal from them.

When I went to Bangladesh, they were paying the workers \$68 a month – a month! And that was less than half of living wage, which is what economists calculate is what people in Bangladesh need to house, clothes, and feed their families. So basically you need to work two full time jobs just to meet the basic needs. It's basically corporate colonialism where we're going into these countries, we're just taking all their resources, we're making their workers work just one step up from slavery because we pay them a little bit, but they're working in terrible conditions and they're working nonstop to the bone. And if, you know, you're pregnant, you're fired. If you get married, you're fired. There's no insurance of any sorts or stability in your job. And why? So we can have cheap clothes that we can burn through and wear three or four or five times and then throw away.

Ralph Nader: And they get sick. Their toxic substances particularly in the workplace [overlapping 08:49]

Dana Thomas: Toxic substances, the waters, they dump dyes in the rivers. The rivers die. They're so opaque from dyes that nothing can live in them because the sun can't even go through the water. The destruction to the environment is epic. Epic, epic. I saw a dead river next to an old jeans factory outside of Ho Chi Minh. And it just made me want to vomit. It was so nasty. It was so, so nasty. And I thought this is just one little factory in one little village outside of Ho Chi Minh. There are thousands of these all over the world. We can't solve the climate issue until we

solve poverty. We can't solve the poverty issue until we deal with the labor issue. Every story today is a climate story; every climate story is a labor story.

Ralph Nader: Listeners, before you hear a series of stories that you cannot fail but remember and relate to your friends and fellow workers, name the brands that are profiting from these dungeon-like factories in Asia and elsewhere, Ethiopia as well, name the brands and the big stores in the U.S. where people go in and buy.

Dana Thomas: Well, many of them are publicly traded companies, so you can even see it in their annual reports. But H&M is one of the largest producers in Bangladesh and in Myanmar, former Burma. They're still producing there even though there's been a junta, there's martial law. They're still producing clothes there. They managed to be working with the bad guys throughout the democratic government. Gap famously has been caught many times producing in pretty sketchy situations like they were producing in sweatshops in Saipan, which is an American protectorate in the Pacific, and putting "Made in the USA" labels in it, and made everybody think that they were made in the USA like in San Francisco, when it was in Saipan where they were treating them like — where they were just sweatshops behind chain link fences with razor tops, and they were paying people pennies, and it was a horror show so.

Ralph Nader: And Walmart and Target --

Dana Thomas: Walmart, Walmart. Don't even get me started on Walmart. And Disney, Disney. When the Rana Plaza factory collapsed in Bangladesh, I believe Walmart was one of the brands that was found to be producing there and all the brands that were found producing there said, "Not our fault. Our agents on the ground subcontracted that factory, we had no idea."

Ralph Nader: Before we get into remarkable reversals of some of these grim stories mostly by women entrepreneurs, in spectacular ways of producing textiles, recycling textiles, renting textiles, all kinds of ways we're going to talk about, the thing that really was astounding in this book was that Vietnam has a \$30 billion a year textile industry. And almost half of it are factories designed to wear down and rub down this called "distressing" denims, so they look torn or worn for sale in the West. Can you describe the "distressing" process and what it does to the workers, the environment... and how stupid it is?

Dana Thomas: It certainly is. My daughter is 21. She's still wearing my jeans from the '80s, those 501 "shrink-to-fits" that were stiff as cardboard that we had to break in. They give you a wedgie for six months. Now, you buy them already broken in. So, they last for actually — to my mind the one she's wearing, so I said since the '80s, so they're like 30 years old, right? And they're solid as can be. But, if you go out and buy a pair of jeans today, they're already broken in. That's so they last six months then you have to buy more, and you have to buy more. It's supposed to be fashionable. And I guess sometimes it kind of looks cool, but I like the hard earned wear myself. But what they do is they rasp by hand, they sand by hand, they use these machines that kind of sound like a dentist drill [makes sound]. All day long they work on these shorts and jeans. Maybe if they spend five or seven seconds on it, it's a miracle. They just whip through them. They're working at a frantic pace. They've got this blue dust from the dyeing, the fabric flying all over the place. Most of the time they're not wearing masks. We're all used to

wearing masks because of COVID [-19], but I went to visit these factories before COVID [-19] where they say wear a mask because of the dust, because you don't want to get all these filaments in your lungs, and then you basically get the fashion equivalent to a black lung.

So, they weren't wearing masks. It's 100 degrees or it's 120 degrees. I was there in April not July, and it was blisteringly hot, and they're just wearing out these clothes for you, so you don't have to, which is kind of crazy. But then there was this great company that's come out of Valencia, Spain that does all this work with lasers in clean rooms, and the guys run the machines kind of like videogames with joysticks and put the jeans into this little box. And the lasers do all the work; and the vacuum sucks up all the dust; and it's clean; and it's quiet; and it's cool; and it's air conditioned because the machines will blow up if they get too hot. And it works faster; and the workers are paid more because they're doing much more sophisticated work, working with these digital laser machines. So, there are solutions to get rid of the sweatshops of people hand sanding your jeans, so you don't have to wear them in yourself. But it's not happening fast enough, that's for sure.

Ralph Nader: The one thing I didn't find in your book, which intrigues me, because you've dealt with the fashion industry, why are hundreds of millions of denims, brand new, ready to wear, they go through a process called “stone washing” or “distressing” to wear them down, make them look like they were worn out, split on the knees? What kind of idiot marketing is this? And who started it? And why do consumers put up with it? I saw on a street on Washington, D.C. that they had a model, and they had a pair of denim trousers for women, and there were big holes in the knee level, and it was hundreds of dollars. And I talked to the salesperson, I said, “Who buys this stuff?” He said “We can't sell them fast enough. What's going on here?”

Dana Thomas: It's something that's existed since the '80s. It came out of California. And it's basically that people didn't want to have to break into their jeans themselves, that they wanted them already broken in and you could just slide them on and you look like you've been wearing them for a year and you've just been wearing them for an hour. I mean, it took work to break in your jeans before. It's funny because blue jeans were the original sustainable garment. They were created for miners during the gold rush in San Francisco and in Northern California where these guys were crawling in the dirt and in the rubble all day long. And the reason the rivets were there weren't for decoration. They were to hold the seams together because they were so stressed from crawling around in the earth. And when a miner struck gold, he took his jeans and he gave them to the next guy and said “I hope these bring you good luck. I don't need them anymore, I'm good to go.” And he could go back wearing nice, clean, normal clothes again as opposed to these canvas riveting jeans that would withstand anything. And every once in a while, Levi's buys a pair that's been found in a mine in California that date to the 1860s, the 1870s, and they pay for them to have them in their archives. I saw one of these old pairs of jeans.

And there's decades of earth — you know, you didn't wash your jeans. You just wore them and wore them and wore them and then you pass them on the next guy who wore them and wore — and it lasted forever. And now we want them all broken in for us. We wash them, we put them in the washing machine, which kills them. It's kind of like they've lost their whole *raison d'être* [“reason to be”] they lost their mission. Now, they're the least sustainable garment we have.

Ralph Nader: Well, you also point out the one out of five clothing items is destroyed or put into landfills before it even reaches the stores. What's the explanation for that?

Dana Thomas: Well, they call that “economies of scale.”

Ralph Nader: We're talking about twenty billion items that are destroyed.

Dana Thomas: Economies of scale. It's actually cheaper to make a 100 and throw away 20 than it is to make 80, which I don't really buy because you're paying farmers more, you're paying for more water, you're paying for the impact of that 20% that you're just chucking. You can't be saving money. You're saving money in column A, but you're losing money in column B. It doesn't make sense.

Ralph Nader: Who does the chucking?

Dana Thomas: Everybody does. There was a terrible report that came out of Chile last fall where it was discovered — I don't know how they found it — that fast fashion brands have been dumping those unsold clothes in the Atacama Desert in southern Chile, the driest, most southern desert in the world. And they're dunes and dunes of unsold clothes with price tags still on them. Thousands and thousands of tons of clothes. And they're all made of polyester, which is essentially plastic, so they're just going to be baking in the sun for eternity. Dunes of clothes, unsold, never worn.

Ralph Nader: We're talking with Dana Thomas, the intrepid peripatetic author of the book *Fashionopolis: The Secrets Behind the Clothes We Wear*. So let's go through some of these portraits in your book that tell the story largely of your book. Who is Sally Fox?

Dana Thomas: Well, Sally Fox is this legend in the cotton business. She is what we call “the godmother of modern organic cotton.” Of course we had organic cotton for about 6,000 years. That's all we ever had. It's one of the oldest domesticated agriculture products we have. We've been wearing cotton, you know, Caesar was using cotton in his campaigns and in Rome, at the Forum. I mean, cotton goes back to the Egyptians. It's been around forever, right? We say Egyptian cotton.

But in the last 100 years or so, it's been completely destroyed, I guess you'd say, or got caught by big farming, big agriculture, which came up with herbicides and pesticides, of course, to fight the cotton boll, which was the boll weevil, which was a terrible blight on cotton during the 1930s and wiped out the American cotton industry to be sure.

But then they genetically modified cotton. And then all this genetically engineered cotton produces six times more per plant than it should. So, then you're giving it six times more water, and six times more pesticides, and six times more this. It's just been manhandled to a point that you can't even recognize what cotton is. It's terrible for the Earth. It's terrible for the environment. It's terrible for the people who work it and grow it, because they have to pick six times more cotton. We have too much cotton out there. And now what we call a conventional

cotton, this manhandled, big agriculture cotton, or for one kilo of cotton, so 2.2 pounds, you need one kilo of chemicals to produce it. And a good cotton requires no chemicals whatsoever.

So, we want to go back to organic cotton. And Sally Fox has been leading the charge on this for about thirty years. She was doing really well in that late '80s, early '90s. But the conventional cotton farmers fought her and fought her because she was trying to disrupt the way they did business and had done farming for years and decades. And they didn't like it. And it was a woman coming into a man's world, and they didn't like that. And they pretty much ran her out of town. But she didn't give up hope, and she kept fighting. And she still is trying to make organic cotton the norm.

Ralph Nader: Patagonia has gone total organic cotton, haven't they?

Dana Thomas: Yeah. But it still only makes up about 1% of all cotton today, which is crazy since it was 100% just a century ago.

Ralph Nader: Well, when all these pesticides and fungicides and all that stuff is put in clothing, what does it do to your skin when you wear the T-shirt when you wear the underwear?

Dana Thomas: Yeah, don't you want to know. Nobody wants to tell you that, do they? And you're perfectly fine, except that skin is your largest organ, and it's the most porous. Same with indigo - synthetic indigo - which is also only existed since about the turn of the century, late 1900s. It has formaldehyde and cyanide in it. I always joke that — you know in those war movies when you have the guy with the secret ring and he has a cyanide pill in it, when he gets caught, he can eat the cyanide pill and then he'll die and the bad guys won't get him? Well, you could just eat your jeans.

Ralph Nader: Let's talk about organic indigo. Stella McCartney was involved in that. The daughter of Paul McCartney, a remarkable entrepreneur.

Dana Thomas: Yeah, Stella, Stella, yes. Yes, she's wonderful. Absolutely.

Ralph Nader: Tell us about her.

Dana Thomas: Stella, of course, is the leader. She's been a real trailblazer in what we call “conscious” or “eco-fashion” where she sources organic cotton. She sources natural dyes whenever possible. She's never ever used animal byproducts in her clothing because she was raised a vegetarian. A lot of people sort of poo-pooed her when she started this, but she is the daughter of two of the most famous hippies of all time. So, this is in her blood. This is the way she was raised. She just didn't hurt animals. You didn't wear animals, you didn't eat animals.

And so, when she got into the luxury fashion business after studying in London at fashion school, she said, “I'm not working with leather.” And everyone said she was out of her mind. Now they're saying, “She might have actually had a point there.” And she proved that she could make her company soar without using leather or fur. Then she started tackling other things like PVC, which is a plastic coating on so many things like handbags, your umbrellas, plastic

umbrellas, the plastic vinyl — vinyl is PVC covered. And she's got rid of PVC including in most of the sequins in her collection. She found some that aren't made of that toxic plastic. I can't pronounce the word, it's like 75 letters with lots of Ys and Zs in it, but it's — the short version is PVC. And she got rid of the PVC sequins and found some biodegradable ones. But they're only a handful for the moment, but she's supporting and godmothering all these great startups that are doing good works supporting organic cotton farmers, natural dye makers, people growing silk in labs, people growing leather in labs. And she's using leather but made of mushroom root systems called mycelium. So, she's really great because she was seen as a kook 25 years ago and now everyone says, “Actually she might have had a point.”

Ralph Nader: One of the more fascinating people you described is Natalie Chanin from Florence, Alabama.

Dana Thomas: Florence, Alabama.

Ralph Nader: After Florence’s textile plants were emptied by NAFTA going to Mexico and Central America, she went back to Florence, Alabama. Tell us what she did. It's called “reshoring.”

Dana Thomas: Reshoring. So, she had been working in the fashion industry for about 20 years and saw the horrors of all that I've been describing. And she was from Florence, Alabama, which is Muscle Shoals, the home of R&B and Aretha Franklin, and the Rolling Stones’ “Brown Sugar” and Lynyrd Skynyrd. And so she decided to get out of the rat race of the New York garment industry and go back to Alabama and start her company where she only uses organic cotton jersey, mostly source in the United States. It's not 100%, but mostly. And she just has everything made to order. Like you would go online on her website, you see a picture of something you like, you order it on a Monday, she calls somebody, and she hires all these local seamstresses, they make the garment for you, much of it by hand, and then they ship it directly to you. So there's no waste, there's no over production because there's no warehouse full of clothes sitting, waiting to be sold. There's nothing that ever has to go on sale because there's no leftovers. And it's all organic. It's not cheap, but it's actually the price that you should be paying for clothes - if, when I was talking earlier about, like looking at the price of eggs back in the Depression versus today, and then looking at the price of clothes back in the Depression versus today - her clothes are actually the price you should be paying for clothes.

So, I bought a cotton, organic cotton T-shirt from her, and it cost me, I think \$65 or \$70. And you would say you paid \$70 for a cotton T-shirt? This cotton T-shirt was this beautiful, thick cotton. It was natural. It was naturally dyed. It wasn't bleached white, so it was kind of vanilla cotton. The seams were super strong. It was thick; it was soft. They grew the cotton themselves, picked it themselves, spun it in North Carolina, and then brought it back and made the clothes. And I've now had it for five years. When I say I wear it three times a week, I wear it — I probably wear it four or five times a week. I wear it all the time. And that cotton shirt is last saying, like, it's going to last me forever. It's so gorgeous. It's so sturdy. It's so soft.

And I thought right, so I've actually gotten my \$70’s worth because the \$10 T-shirt would have worn out in a couple of months. And I would have had to buy seven or eight of those in the time

that I've been wearing the same one. And it's going to outlive everything else that's in my closet, I'm sure of it.

Ralph Nader: You mention in your book that a \$10 T-shirt, the worker in Bangladesh gets 10 cents of the \$10 low price T-shirt. Let's talk about someone else who is making the mark and starting to go up. Maria Cornejo.

Dana Thomas: Yes, Maria Cornejo. She's in New York City, and she too came out of the rat race of the fashion industry and was just disgusted by what she saw and said "I don't want to work this way and we don't have to work this way. And I feel like I shouldn't perpetuate all what a lot of people call crimes in the industry." You know, paying workers not even a living wage and then briefing millions. When I went to Bangladesh, and the people were earning \$68 a month at the time, the owner of Zara was worth \$68 billion and Zara sources in Bangladesh. I'm like "Right, but why is he worth \$68 billion?" Because he pays those people \$68 a month to make the clothes, and he sells them for so much more. Even if they're cheap, he's still making such an enormous mark-up. He's worth \$68 billion. Something's obviously wrong here, right?

So Maria Cornejo said, "I don't want to be a part of this." And so she started her own company in downtown New York. She makes everything in New York City a short subway ride or long walk away up in the 30s, and she sells in America. She keeps it really simple. She has one shop in New York. She had one in LA, but I think COVID[-19] kind of did that one in as it did with many businesses. But she's just trucking along, doing everything. She's great. We love Maria Cornejo. Everything is made beautifully. She doesn't over-produce. And it's all made within a 20-minute radius of studio.

Ralph Nader: But then there's Sarah Bellos. Your clothes are the recipients of what's known as synthetic indigo, which is, shall we say, not very good for the environment or for you. Along comes Sarah Bellos, and she grows natural indigo. Why don't you describe this remarkable expanding business of hers?

Dana Thomas: It's fantastic. She does come through the fashion industry. She came through sort of banking and analysis and finance, and she was like, "I don't want to be doing this." And she moved from Washington, D.C. to Nashville, Tennessee and bought a little farm outside the city and started growing some indigo and a couple other things making natural dyes. She was doing it on a very small scale and then it's grown. And they're natural dyes, so it's natural indigo madder, which gives you a very beautiful sort of cranberry red. Osage, which gives you some beautiful yellows. Black walnut, which gives you some sort of mocha chocolates. Indigo was her primary thing because — until I said late 19th century we only had natural indigo. And South Carolina was actually the capital of natural indigo in the United States. And it's a really terrific crop because it puts — like soybeans. It's in the soybean. It's in the bean family. It's a legume -- so it puts nitrogen back in the soil, so you don't have to dump all those fertilizer in the soil. You just plant indigo and your fields are good to go again if you rotate around the indigo.

Meanwhile, all these farms in that region were planting tobacco, which sucks all the nitrogen out; and corn, which sucks all the nitrogen out. And so the soil was broken. And she said, "Let me come back and fix your soil by planting indigo. And then I'm going to start making natural

indigo dye.” And she did, and it's gone so well that she and Levi's have partnered together and they are rolling out now, this summer, natural indigo on an industrial level worldwide.

Ralph Nader: Turn on, listeners, to the reverse where synthetic indigo is used in Bangladesh factories, a lot of it dumped into the river, 20, 30 miles down children are drinking the water. Do you want to describe that?

Dana Thomas: Yes, they absolutely are. The factories that use synthetic indigo, many of these countries, they don't have the same standards that we have – health standards, labor standards, any kind of standards. There's no oversight, even if they did have them, and so there's just direct dumping in the rivers and lakes and kids are swimming in it. They're drinking the water. The rivers die because indigo, it's like inky — it's an inky blue, so it goes in the river and it just kills it because it becomes so opaque the sun can't come through. It's pretty rough.

The best thing about it though, better than the environment, better than the social cost, is that when you see a pair of blue jeans dyed with natural indigo, wow. They're just so beautiful like only nature can do. Nature just makes the most beautiful colors. Think about when you're outside — the colors of flowers, the rainbows, the sky. Natural indigo is like it's iridescent. When she walked in the room wearing those blue jeans with the natural indigo dye, I was looking at a woman wearing like sapphires. It was just iridescent and gorgeous rich cornflower blue. And it made synthetic indigo jeans - rightly so - look dull and flat.

Ralph Nader: Dana, aren't they growing cotton in different colors now?

Dana Thomas: Well, not just now. Ever since the dawn of time, since cotton has been domesticated, we've had colored cotton. But it went out of fashion during the industrial revolution, which is where I got the name of the book. It's called *Fashionopolis*, because the song goes back to the beginning of the industrial revolution in Manchester, which was known as Cottonopolis. And [it] was [called] Cottonopolis because it was where all the cotton was made. And the founders of Cottonopolis wanted white cotton, because they were printing it and dyeing it. But mostly printing it making beautiful chintzes and fabrics for people's homes and for clothes. And you couldn't do that, it was colored.

We have colored cotton since forever. But Incas were using colored cotton. There's a beautiful colored cotton from Hawaii. The Chinese were using colored cotton to make yellow jeans called nankeen pants. It's been around forever. White was just more easy to turn into other things than having the colored cotton already. Now, there are companies that are realizing that colored cotton is actually an advantage because you don't have to pay for dyeing and the colors are beautiful. The green is sort of a jade color. It's really pretty.

Ralph Nader: Well, with this book *Fashionopolis*, people will learn how to fight back, and it's called “circularity.” Circularity, we're going to talk about that. But first, tell us this fascinating story from Mongolia to England about cashmere. I never heard of this. And how it's affecting the decertification process in Mongolia. Why don't you tell us about that?

Dana Thomas: This is actually one of the great environmental disasters that nobody's really talking about, and I hope to talk more about it. Until a generation ago, until 20, 25 years ago, cashmere was a seriously luxury product. If you knew somebody who had a cashmere sweater and you really took care of it, they cost a lot of money. Do you remember how much a cashmere sweater costs? It was like a serious investment. But part of that was because the cashmere came from Mongolia and Mongolia was a, first, remote, and secondly, it was a communist and very strictly run government, so they really did manage from top down the cashmere industry and made sure that it wasn't over-produced and that there weren't too many goats and the land management was as it should be.

And then it went from a communist structure to a free market capital structure and at the same time the fashion brands were really going global. Everything is going global, and access to Mongolia was becoming easier. And there was the internet where you could do your orders in the middle of nowhere. And they started producing cheap cashmere sweaters at places like Uniqlo and H&M and Zara and Gap, and selling them for \$50, \$60 apiece. And they didn't last very long. They last what, three, four, five months; one winter, maybe two; and then you have to buy another one.

And to meet those demands, the cashmere industry started getting more goats and then more goats meant — goats, one of my favorite lines from when I was working there, goats are voracious creatures, “we eat everything.” And they pull off grass by the roots. So suddenly the cashmere industry was in such a demand that they quadrupled the number of goats in Mongolia on the same amount of land. And they were ripping up all the grass by the roots and desertification started setting in. It's becoming a desert. And I'm telling you, if the Himalayas become a desert, we're all doomed.

Ralph Nader: And this is projected to turn millions of acres in Mongolia into desert, is that what you're saying?

Dana Thomas: That's what's on the books. But happily there's some nonprofits fighting this and trying to get some regulation in place and trying to teach the herders to start doing land management and not just go for the money and trying to get the fast fashion brands to dial back on the amount of cashmere they're ordering, and trying to get the number of goats per acre regulated so that they don't overpopulate the land and then they don't rip up all the grass, and then there's just dirt, and then there's no rain, and then it's a disaster.

I'm telling you, if the Himalayas become a desert, all is lost because the ecosystem there is the most fragile of all, and it really does set the tone for everywhere else. I mean, the ripple effect will be enormous. So all because we just want to have softer sweaters on against our skin.

Ralph Nader: Well, let's get into the bright side of all this in your book from circularity—

Dana Thomas: Yes, because this sounds like a [indiscernible 35:13] but it's a book of hope.

Ralph Nader: Yeah, more than hope because it puts the hope in people's hands so they can turn hope - instead of pleading for it - they can turn it into reality. I've got to confess something. Over

30 years ago, I bought several suits from an opportunity store. The average price was \$10. They took me through four presidential campaigns, and I haven't had to buy a suit since. And they're still in good shape. Okay, that's part of circularity. Dana, tell us the different categories of circularity that puts the power in the hands of the people.

Dana Thomas: Well, first of all, we should never, ever throw away clothes into the trash bin. Just don't do it. If your jeans are worn out, like we used to do, you cut them off and they become shorts. And then you take the leftovers and you use them for patches. If your T-shirt's worn out, cut it up and use it for rags. Give it at least a second life if you can't — if you can give it a third or fourth life, even better. But don't just throw them in the trash like, oh, I spilled some wine on it. If you spilled wine on it, over dye it, like, make the whole thing colored — the color of your wine or your coffee or whatever it is. Repair things. Moths went through my sweaters during COVID[-19]. They feasted on it like it was Thanksgiving. And so I just got out a needle and thread, and I've sewed up the holes like that's just what we're going to do. And it sounds like I'm being extra thrifty, but I thought, “why would I throw something that otherwise is perfectly fine and I can mend it in a way that you can't see and it's perfectly fine again.”

Circularity is also things like when you buy something and you don't want to wear it anymore that you take it to a thrift shop, you put it on one of the platforms for resale. Even the brands now are taking things back for resale. Patagonia will take something from anywhere, but particularly if you bought it from Patagonia. But they'll take it from anywhere else, too, and repair it and resell it.

Ralph Nader: Tell us about the Patagonia trucks, two of them, that travel around the country.

Dana Thomas: Yeah, Patagonia trucks. They just drive around the country. And if you have something that needs repairing, it does not have to be a Patagonia product. But if you have some sort of gear that needs to be repaired, you take it to the truck, and they'll fix it for you, which is fantastic. Just because you didn't buy the Patagonia doesn't mean we shouldn't help you repair it and keep it going.

Or if you decided that your ski jacket is not suiting you anymore, you're tired of it, or you've outgrown it, then you can take it back to Patagonia, you get a credit to buy something new, and they will restore it or renovate it, and then put it back on the rack for somebody who wants to buy something at a cheaper price and doesn't need — necessarily want brand new, but it's in perfectly fine form, reconditioned.

Ralph Nader: Tell us about consignments stores and renting clothes.

Dana Thomas: And then renting. Well, renting is really interesting. There's a lot of criticism about renting in America because the biggest company is called Rent the Runway. They're in New Jersey, and they have the largest dry-cleaning facility in the world. And those are petroleum products. And so their environmental impact is pretty huge. But the idea of renting things for special occasions, there are plenty of local platforms, and especially here in Europe where we're smaller cities, we have — but there's local platforms where you can go and rent.

I mean, I've heard about brides renting their wedding dresses, which I think is kind of great because you're supposed to have something borrowed and you're only wearing it once, and chances are, the person who wore it the last time had a great time, too, so it's going to bring you some good energy, some good juju. You can rent for proms, you can rent for parties, you can rent for — I rented a beautiful gown to wear to the Cannes Film Festival. I was like, “Why should I go and buy \$3,000 dress? I'm only wearing it for one night. I'm going to be Cinderella.” And I rented it for 300. And then I returned it, and it looked great. And then I didn't have to worry about it again, and it's not sitting in my closet getting dusty. So renting is great if you can rent. Our boyfriends all rented their prom suits. Why aren't we renting our prom dresses?

Ralph Nader: But it's growing — according to your book - in the other direction, people who have a lot of clothes can go to an intermediary and rent the clothes out.

Dana Thomas: Yes. There are many platforms that are about to launch. I keep reading every day about platforms that are about to launch for peer to peer rent. They were — I want to rent something to you, or you want to rent something from me. But there's also reselling at places like The Real Real and Vestiaire and other collectives on platforms where you can just put it online. Take a picture and put it online and then sell it. If you've had a pair of shoes that you wore three times and you realize that — it's what the French call a faux achat, a fake purchase. That it was a bad — it wasn't really your thing after all. You thought it was impulse buying. And you can unload it and bring somebody else great joy. So why not?

Even on eBay or Etsy, you can clean out your closets, post, resell, and give the clothes a second life. The idea of circularity is this: we have lived in a linear way of consuming since the beginning of the industrial revolution: The birth of the product, the use of the product, the death of the product. Death of the product means it goes in the bin. Circularity is we have the birth of the product, the use of the product, the rebirth of the product, to use the product and around and around it goes.

And we have recycling where we do that with plastic. We do that with bottles. But with clothes, it's more about keeping the item in circulation that it's still being worn, it's still being used somehow. Or if it's, like, too worn out, if the sweater is too worn out, then you take the yarn and unweave it and knit something else. Or if it's an old T-shirt, you cut it up and use it in rags. I mean, that's even a bit of circularity. You find other uses for it or you pass it onto somebody else. I mean, when I was a kid, we had hand me downs, so that's basically circularity.

Ralph Nader: And what about consignment shops? Are they spreading at Main Street USA?

Dana Thomas: They are. They're online. And you can post your items online, you take a picture and post it and then you get 50% or a bit more of whatever they managed to sell it for and off it goes like on eBay.

Ralph Nader: Well, here's one for you, listeners, she has a section at the end of the book called, “Here's What You Can Do.” Launder your clothes less frequently. And can you tell our listeners what you mean by that? And what about using mechanical clothes dryers instead of the old sunshine clothesline in terms of not wearing down clothes?

Dana Thomas: Well, yes, absolutely. Well, first of all, you should always wash, if you can, wash your clothes on cold or warm. There's no reason to boil them. The hotter you cook them, the shorter the life they will have. And also the dyes wash out, the thread bakes and breaks, and you're just kind of killing them when you boil them. Think about them for a second like over-boiling your broccoli. And so if you wash them in cold, the color stay fresher and brighter, you're not cooking them to death. And then if you can sure put them out on the lines off the dryer, you're giving them even a longer life because you're not baking them a second time.

And you shouldn't wash your blue jeans as much as we do. The miners never wash their blue jeans. Chip Bergh, the CEO of Levi's says he never washes his blue jeans. And if he spills some guacamole on them, he just sort of gets a toothbrush and scrapes it off, which is okay. There might come a point where you feel like your jeans could walk out of the room themselves. They may have a little too much life going on in them, then you can put them in the washer, but don't put them and wash them at high levels. Wash them in cold water and wash on the short cycle. You're saving money, you're saving energy, you're saving water on your water bills, you're giving your clothes a longer life, and you're creating less run-off and less pollution. It's a win-win.

Ralph Nader: And you say pick up a knitting needle yourself. What do you mean by that?

Dana Thomas: Yeah, take up crafting again and start working — I mean, my great grandmother used to sit around with her lady friends and do beautiful embroidery work. And I have some of those pieces still in the drawer in the kitchen. We need to work with our hands. We spend so much time on computers and on devices, and working with our hands is in human nature. So my daughter at 21 has learned to knit, and she knitted a scarf for her grandmother. It's got a few holes in it, but it's charming.

So learn, pick up the needle and thread — and the beauty — while we don't have home-ec[onomics] classes in schools anymore, you can learn anything on YouTube. I mean, anything, am I right? Anything. So, you can learn how to sew and you can learn how to crochet on YouTube. You can learn how to knit on YouTube.

Ralph Nader: We're talking with Dana Thomas from Paris, France. She authored the new book *Fashionopolis Young Readers Edition*, but it's great for adults, too. Very clear, easy to read. *The Secrets Behind the Clothes We Wear*. I know what someone's thinking now, they just heard you about knitting. They're saying how can I knit and hold down to my cell phone at the same time?

Dana Thomas: That's it. That's it. Well, you know, maybe you need to put the cell phone down a little bit. It takes two hands to knit. That's to be sure.

Ralph Nader: I want to conclude by asking you to give a detailed description of the sweatshops in Los Angeles that you personally visited more than once, because Steve is from Los Angeles and he's going to do something about it.

Dana Thomas: Well, Steve, the good news is that wonderful governor that you did not recall, signed legislation to help put those sweatshops out of business last fall.

Steve Skrovan: All right, my work is done here.

Dana Thomas: With the government workers legislation. But I went to visit these sweatshops. They're in downtown LA. They're in plain sight. I mean, if you're walking down Los Angeles Street, you'll hear sewing machines and you go like, "Huh? What's going on there?" You go into the Bendix building, this beautiful old deco building from 1927-28, and you will be going to a — because it's where there are some dance studios and some art galleries, so you could be going to an art gallery opening and you walk past these rooms where you see people hunched over sewing machines and bad light with piles of clothes on the floor. And you go "What's that about?" It's a sweatshop.

And they are clandestine. They pay the workers \$2 an hour instead of the state minimum wage, which I think is just about up to \$15 an hour now, right? It's working its way up to that. They don't even pay the federal minimum wage of seven and a half dollars. And they're sub-contracting. And whenever the labor department swoops in and busts them for these places, the brands that get busted they say, "Oh we had no idea we da, da, da. They are contractor, sub contracted."

Now I can understand if you say that if you're producing in Bangladesh, and you've lost track of your supply chain. But if you are an LA-based company and you don't know where your clothes are being made, and your headquarters is just down the street, then you are not running your business very well. Am I right? So, I mean, come on. Come on. So the account for your state assembly just passed along, the governor signed it saying that if you get busted now in a factory in LA where they're paying their workers what they call "wage theft," you're paying them \$2 an hour instead of \$15, then the brand is responsible for the difference, that \$13 an hour difference and they have to pay the difference.

So, that means that they are going to be a little bit more diligent about where their clothes are being made, and they're not going to lose their supply chain, and hopefully they'll start hiring the workers at the state wage and give them the benefits that they deserve as opposed to the slave wages.

Ralph Nader: And the brand is another word for the chain retail stores or the individual retail clothing stores. [Overlapping 46:45]

Dana Thomas: Absolutely, like FOREVER 21, Ross [Dress] for Less, all those LA companies that — there've been reports — you just Google "fashion busts" and they'll pop up in the *LA Times* the names of the companies that were busted doing this. The Department of Labor under Obama particularly went after this a lot, and they've gotten a lot of trouble but they just kept fluffing it off. They can't fluff it off anymore.

Ralph Nader: Steve, what's your reaction here? This is where you live.

Steve Skrovan: Well, I'm glad to hear that I don't have to actually go in and bust these places myself now. Because Ralph would make me do that, and I'm here. You always get an assignment from Ralph. I have a different question. We have done a number of shows on the burgeoning or the re-burgeoning industry of industrial hemp.

Dana Thomas: Yes.

Steve Skrovan: What is the role of industrial hemp in all of this? Is it positive? Is it negative?

Dana Thomas: It's positive. It's very small. It's very small still. Even wool is very small. Wool makes up 1% of all the textiles made today. The biggest fabric we have is polyester, which is a petroleum-based fabric that was invented during the 1930s and the early '40s during the war at DuPont and in England as a replacement for silk, which during the war was being used for parachutes and for thread for wounds and so they needed silk for the war efforts. So it seemed like a great idea at the time, but it just never occurred to anyone that basically these clothes were made of plastic and the plastic never biodegrades, and that we had to drill and drill and drill in the earth to get more petroleum to make more polyesters. Sixty-six or 65% of all of our clothes today - two thirds - have some polyester in them. And that's just a disaster on so many different levels.

Ralph Nader: Dana, industrial hemp now it's legal in the United States.

Dana Thomas: Yes, it is.

Ralph Nader: Why isn't it expanding more rapidly?

Dana Thomas: Well, I think because there were so many laws banning it for a while, and because I think there is a bit of — well, because of the pressure of these companies, the oil companies, the petroleum companies, who want you to keep having polyester. I mean, I get emails from the supposedly watchdog groups saying wool is a terrible fabric, you should never use wool. And then I find out that the campaign is being led by their shell companies for the petroleum industry and the fast fashion industry wants to keep using polyester because it's so cheap and they make so much money. So there's a lot of lobbying, not against hemp, but just for the stuff that is cheap and toxic. Like always.

Ralph Nader: What's been the industry's response to your book?

Dana Thomas: Oh it's been great. It's been great. Except, oh, I mean maybe a couple of fast fashion companies aren't big fans of mine. Though I've been told that the head of Zara thinks it's great, and he thinks I'm great, so that's kind of nice. But if they aren't happy about it, it just means it's because I've told truths about them that they rather have kept quiet. If they got something to hide then they're not happy, right?

Ralph Nader: Have any teachers adopted this book, the *Young Readers Edition*?

Dana Thomas: Yes, and in fact, one school in England sent me a note. They made a board game out of it. It's really adorable when they had to do some sort of project and one kid came up with a board game like, "Oh, you've landed in a sweatshop factory, lose three turns." Really charming. I mean, sad but charming.

Ralph Nader: Hannah, do you have a comment?

Hannah Feldman: I love the board game idea. So in that similar vein, Ralph has been really vocal about the commercialization of childhood and kids' impressionable minds are targeted by marketing, and I'm curious about middle readers, like when you're in middle school, late elementary school, early high school, I remember that's when I first had disposable income. And that's also when I remember getting outraged. I remember learning about where the gelatin in my Gummy Bears came from. And how dare these grownups try to trick me into eating this thing that's disgusting. So I'm curious what re-issuing this book with middle readers in mind, were there any choices you made with that intention of trying to get that age cohort that get their attention?

Dana Thomas: Well, basically, the idea is that if they — it's really hard to break a habit of any sort, right? So if I wrote this book for — I wrote the adult version and it's for 35-year-olds who are like, "Yeah, but I really want to get a dress for Friday night. I can only afford H&M." So off they go, right? It's really hard to break a habit that's been the way you've lived for 10, 15, 20 years. But if you've never developed the habit, then maybe you'll never start.

So the idea with this book is to lay it out for kids so maybe they'll never step foot into those stores and start spending their money on - because those stores — fast fashion really does cater to the sort of 14 to 22-year-olds particularly - because it's in their babysitting income range or they're flipping burgers range. And the idea is for them to realize what the impact is of those purchases and make them really think about what they're buying when they buy these things.

And I'm really hoping that — I know we'll never get rid of fast fashion, like we could never get rid of fast food. But before a book like *The Omnivore's Dilemma* or *Fast Food Nation* came out, there was very — you had fast food or you had fancy food, and there was not a lot of in between. And now you have vegan fast food and McDonald's serves salad. So what did it bring you? Choice. You have Whole Foods, right? You have grocery stores that sell organic. But organic isn't just for the uber-rich.

I'm hoping that we can do the same with fashion where, okay, maybe there'll still be H&M, and Zara, and Gap, and Uniqlo, and all these other fast fashion brands selling you all these polyester clothes, but their market share will go down because there's competition coming up by companies that are in the same price range but selling you the same things with organic cotton with no polyester, with hemp, with wool instead of acetate, all these back to giving you choice. And if we have choice then we'll have less impact of the negative and more positive impact.

Steve Skrovan: Dana, before we go, tell us about your podcast.

Dana Thomas: Yes, I've just started a podcast called *The Green Dream with Dana Thomas*. And it's about all things sustainable. And when I say all things, the first episode would be children's book author Oliver Jeffers. The second one is with the film director, documentary film director, Eva Orner, about her movie, *Burning*, about the Australian fires. It's really about our arts, culture, fashion. We're going to have somebody on talking about electric vehicles and why they're so ugly. So, it's about just understanding how you can green up your life. And I hope you'll listen.

Ralph Nader: Don't forget the masochistic three-inch spiked heel while you're at it.

Dana Thomas: Yes, of course.

Steve Skrovan: I would recommend Ralph as a guest to tell you his secrets of buying four suits and holding on to them forever for three presidential campaigns. There may be some tips there.

Dana Thomas: With great pleasure.

Hannah Feldman: I can tell you the best thing that ever happened to me was breaking my foot. I've not worn a high heel since.

Dana Thomas: That's it.

Hannah Feldman: And I have an excuse.

Dana Thomas: That's it. Well, I hope you'll tune in to *The Green Dream*. It's on wherever you get your podcasts, *The Green Dream with Dana Thomas*.

Ralph Nader: On that note, we have been talking with Dana Thomas from Paris, France. The author of the brand-new book, *Fashionopolis: The Secrets Behind the Clothes We Wear*, published by Dial Books in New York, and available to parents and teachers everywhere. I can't imagine anybody in middle school and high school who would not be fascinated with having this book in their classroom. Thank you very much, Dana.

Dana Thomas: Thank you so much. Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure.

Steve Skrovan: We've been speaking with Dana Thomas. We will link to her book *Fashionopolis* and her podcast, *The Green Dream*, at ralphnaderradiohour.com. Now let's check in with our Corporate Crime Reporter, Russell Mokhiber.

Russell Mokhiber: From the National Press Building in Washington, D.C., this is your *Corporate Crime Reporter Morning Minute* for Friday, April 22, 2022. I'm Russell Mokhiber.

While millions of California families struggled financially in 2021, Pacific Gas and Electric's CEO made over \$50 million for leading the utility with a history of bad investments and punitive energy bills.

At the same time that CEO, Patricia Poppe, was raking in the money. Through direct compensation, the company triggered the second largest wildfire in California history, estimated to cost more than \$1 billion in damages, much of it from homes and entire communities, burned to the ground.

Most of Poppe's compensation came from \$41.2 million in stock awards, as well a bonus of \$6.6 million and an annual salary of \$1.3 million.

For the *Corporate Crime Reporter*, I'm Russell Mokhiber.

Steve Skrovan: Thank you, Russell. Welcome back to the Ralph Nader Radio Hour. I'm Steve Skrovan along with Hannah Feldman and Ralph. And that's our show.

I want to thank our guest again, Dana Thomas. For those of you listening on the radio, that's our show. For you podcast listeners, stay tuned for some bonus material we call "The Wrap Up". A transcript of the show will appear on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* website soon after the episode is posted.

Hannah Feldman: To order your copy of the pilot issue of the *Capitol Hill Citizen*, it's just \$5, go to capitolhillcitizen.com. The producers of the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* are Jimmy Lee Wirt and Matthew Marran. Our executive producer is Alan Minsky.

Steve Skrovan: Our theme music "Stand Up, Rise Up" was written and performed by Kemp Harris. Our proofreader is Elisabeth Solomon. Our associate producer is Hannah Feldman. Our social media manager is Steven Wendt. Join us next week on the Ralph Nader Radio Hour. Thank you, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Great advice on your clothing wardrobe. Thank you, Dana Thomas.