

Are Political Labels A Farce? The Case Of The (Non-) Radical Left



C.J. Polychroniou

Radical social change does not take place on its own, and surely not without viable solutions to the very problems confronting contemporary capitalist societies.

Political labels, more than any other time in the late modern history, which traditionally begins with the French Revolution of 1789, not only have lost their former relevance but have become a poor substitute for critical thinking. Think for instance of Trump and his ilk when they attack Democrats as “communists” and “radical left-wing socialists,” label [Black Lives Matter](#) as “Marxists,” and link the radical left in general with anarchism and looters, with people “[who want to tear down our statues, erase our history, indoctrinate our children or trample our freedoms.](#)”

What’s in a name? Let’s talk about the Radical Left by explaining why it is in fact not radical and why it’s failing to become relevant in today’s capitalist environment. Let’s talk specifically about Europe’s Radical Left since we actually have radical left political parties across Europe. The United States doesn’t even have a left-wing party, and what passes for radical left-wing economic agenda in the U.S. (thanks to the contributions of [Bernie Sanders](#) and [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#)) has been mainstream party agenda in Europe for several decades. In fact, rarely does one come across a far-right party in Europe that favors a free market economy. And many of them, such as Marine Le Pen’s National Rally party, favor

essentially “socialist” economic policies. Targeting a working-class vote, Le Pen’s far-right party promotes an anti-globalization economic agenda in which the “protection” of workers takes priority over economic “freedoms.” Setting prices, taxing the rich, giving out subsidies to collapsing sectors of the economy, and retirement at sixty are part of the “social populism” agenda of the National Rally party, which explains why it has attracted traditional left-wing voters.

The political and ideological profile of today’s European radical left parties and organizations has been largely shaped by the experience of the collapse of communism.

Those parties that did not remain committed to communism after the dissolution of the communist bloc and the integration of the former communist countries into the Western capitalist system shifted to a variety of different left-reformist political outlooks, ranging from an exclusive emphasis on “green politics” (ecological parties of the Red-Green type found mostly in Scandinavian countries) to the adoption of postmodern radicalism and the politics of multiculturalism built around a resistance project that emphasizes primarily non-class forms of oppression. In Greece, the Coalition of the Radical Left (Syriza) combined a blend of ideological perspectives, ranging from anarcho-communism and environmentalism to Maoism, Eurocommunism, and even social democracy.

Today’s radical left parties in Europe represent what we might call “left reformism.” None of them qualify as being “anti-system,” and most of them are “anti-neoliberal” rather than “anti-capitalist.”

There are two key factors that explain the shift toward “left reformism.” First, the collapse of “actually existing socialism” itself and the overall lack of ideological appeal that Soviet-style communism had on the majority of western European citizenry; and, second, the fundamental changes that have taken place inside capitalist societies since the end of World War II, not the least of which have been the growth of the middle class and the sharp decline of the industrial proletariat—even though we seem to be returning to a stage where the poor working class appears to be growing rapidly while the middle class is shrinking.

But there is a third factor, less frequently mentioned in explanations for the shift on the part of Europe’s radical left-wing parties to “left reformism,” which is none other than the realization that revolutions represent rare phenomena while the few revolutions that succeeded have taken place in the periphery of the global capital system.

Marx may have been right when he wrote in *The Communist Manifesto* that “the proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains,” but the Western proletariat, even before World War II, seems to have felt that it had much to lose by risking a socialist/communist revolution. Fully aware of the fact that economic deprivation and political oppression can drive people into rebellion, the capitalist classes and their political representatives sought to prevent this scenario from happening by increasing the standard of living for working-class people and by providing some type of social security for them, as well as certain types of freedoms and individual rights. Bismarck’s social welfare reforms in the 1880s were undertaken with the explicit aim of improving the position of German workers in order to keep socialism/communism and radicalism at bay. In the United States in the 1930s, the New Deal was intended by its planners to keep capitalism alive and stave off social unrest and rebellion.

The expansion of the social state in Europe after World War II was also undertaken with similar objectives in mind, although the ideological and repressive state apparatuses played an equally crucial role in the legitimization and reproduction of the capitalist social order. The U.S. intervened to suppress popular progressive forces and defend the interests of U.S. corporations not only in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, but also in western Europe, including countries like Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Belgium, Holland, and France. The CIA interfered even in British politics, and it is estimated that it spent hundreds of millions of dollars (more than \$65 million in Italy alone between 1945 and 1968) on various subversive operations against parties of the left, trade unions, and political activists in postwar Western Europe alone.

But let’s return to the politics of “left reformism.” In today’s global capitalist environment, “left reformism” implies by necessity a certain degree of inevitable ideological and political ambiguity as well as plenty of confusion around economic policy. Social classes are not divided into two highly rigid groups—rich and poor, or capitalists and workers—nor do ideological proclivities or political affiliations stem naturally from one’s given social class. Support for France’s National Rally party is increasingly derived from various social classes, but with a common outlook: They stand for traditional conservative values, including deep-seated nationalism, defense of the French welfare state and of national industry, and an overtly anti-immigration policy mixed with a strong dose of anti-EU sentiments.

If the multilayered structure of social class and social stratification and the non-

determined correspondence between ideology/politics and class present an inherent problem for the Radical Left, so does the ever-increasing global character of capitalism, including the entire project of the European Union.

In a truly globalized environment, and with global economic and financial elites literally dictating—either directly or indirectly via the enormous power they hold over economic resources—political processes and policies, the strategies to be pursued for the radical restructuring of the system's operations and ultimately for the political and economic transformation from capitalism to socialism entail far greater difficulties and substantially more significant risks than ever before. Indeed, as the current eurozone regime demonstrates, even fairly “capitalist-friendly” policies that seek to provide a less extreme balance between capital and labor, such as those inspired by Keynesianism, have become extremely difficult to implement. The balance of power has shifted so overwhelmingly to capital that perhaps nothing short of massive popular rebellions might work in order to change the system. That, however, just isn't in the cards in today's Europe for all the reasons mentioned above.

The ambiguity on the part of the Radical Left's project as to the task of “reforming” or “transforming” capitalism isn't of course merely because of the greater challenges that global capitalism poses to this undertaking but also because of a rather serious gap in the political economy spectrum.

To put the matter bluntly, while Marxist and leftist theoreticians have made huge progress toward our understanding of capitalism as a socioeconomic system, contributions to the literature on the political economy of alternative economic systems (i.e., socialism or some other variant of people-centered economics) remains a rather underdeveloped area of study, with our understanding of the economics of socialism (growth, efficiency, distribution and even the relationship of socialism to the regulation of social relations by markets) being scant at best. Little wonder then why there are so few—and far in between—fully fledged alternative visions or why the Radical Left has failed to become politically relevant on the European political scene since the collapse of communism.

Notions like cooperation, equality, and participatory and radical democracy (ideas which, shockingly enough, are rarely raised or explored by the intellectuals or the parties of the Radical Left in Europe) are in urgent need of discussion and elaboration if the hope is to make inroads on the project of envisioning and

working toward building a new social order with mass support.

Likewise, issues such as the fit between immigration and the domestic economy (an issue which, again, the Radical Left appears simply incapable or unwilling to address beyond vague humanistic proclamations, thereby allowing right-wing and far-right parties in Europe to gain popular support at its expense), the balance between environmental protection and growth, public employment schemes for tackling the massive problem of unemployment, and alternative forms of ownership and means of production need to be addressed and raised to the highest level of public awareness for the successful transformation of capitalism into a more humane and just social order.

Undoubtedly, this is a tall order. But radical social change does not take place on its own, and surely not without viable solutions to the very problems confronting contemporary capitalist societies. Indeed, in a way, what distinguishes the old communist left from the (non-)Radical Left of today is that “at least the Bolsheviks in Russia had a plan.”

Source: <https://www.commondreams.org/opinion/political-labels-radical-left>

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C.J. Polychroniou is a political economist/political scientist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in Europe and the United States. His latest books are *The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic and the Urgent Need for Social Change* (A collection of interviews with Noam Chomsky; Haymarket Books, 2021), and *Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists* (Verso, 2021).

Does Modern Science Already

Allow Us To Manage The Weather?



*John P. Ruehl - Source:
Independent Media
Institute*

*11-23-2023 ~ Weather manipulation is increasingly common around the world,
but the dangers of privatization and weaponization abound.*

As winter settles over New Delhi, cold air sinks, trapping pollution in the city. [Smoke from seasonal fires](#) stemming from farming practices in India's north further reduces the city's air quality, [which typically ranks the worst in the world](#). New Delhi's government has sought prior solutions to easing pollution, including traffic restrictions and air-filtration towers. But in 2023, it has [turned to the controversial practice](#) of cloudseeding to try and increase rainfall and improve air quality for the first time.

While the effectiveness of cloudseeding [remains a debate](#), that hasn't deterred more than 50 countries from [investing millions annually](#) in weather modification initiatives. Mexico recently stepped up its cloudseeding efforts to combat drought, having begun its first program [in 2020](#), while Indonesia has [used cloudseeding to try and fill up dams](#) and prevent flammable vegetation from drying in anticipation of this year's fire season.

The roots of weather manipulation trace [back to 1946](#), when U.S. scientists

Vincent J. Schaefer and Irving Langmuir dispersed dry ice particles into a cloud, which caused ice crystals and visible snowfall. Since then, the U.S. government has deployed cloudseeding programs, primarily in Western states like [Montana](#), [Wyoming](#), and Nevada, to try to [increase rain and snowfall](#).

This technology also caught the eye of the private sphere. Vail Ski Resort in Colorado has used Western Weather Consultants to deploy generators on mountaintops to induce snowfall [since 1975](#), with dozens more operating in the region. Since 1997, the West Texas Weather Modification Association has worked to increase rainfall [over southwestern Texas](#). The UK's Oliver's Travels meanwhile offers cloudseeding services to ensure clear weather for [weddings in France](#).

The principal use of this technology has been to enhance precipitation, but other uses have been explored. From 1962 to 1983, a U.S. government initiative called [Project Stormfury](#) tried to weaken tropical cyclones with no real success, while attempts through other programs to limit the effects of storm-to-ground lightning also [proved inadequate](#). However, Project Cold Wand saw more successful experimentation with fog dissipation techniques [in the early 1970s](#), while U.S. airlines have also used fog dissipation technology [for decades](#).

The Kremlin has also long experimented with this technology. Following the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the Soviet Union [used cloudseeding](#) to increase rain in the region to wash radioactive particles from the air and prevent them from reaching Moscow. Today, Russia employs this technology to clear skies for its annual [Victory Day Parade in Moscow](#), while [hail suppression technology](#) has also been used by Russia to protect crops and property.

Other governments have also dedicated significant resources to cloudseeding for decades. [Since 1951](#), France's Association to Suppress Atmospheric Plagues has grown to an [extensive nationwide program](#), while Thailand's Royal Rainmaking Project has been active [since 1969](#). In recent years, cloudseeding has grown [increasingly popular](#) in the water-stricken Middle East and parts of Africa. Morocco, Ethiopia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia all have national programs, while [several more](#) countries are considering it.

However, China has established itself as a leader in weather modification over the last two decades. China's "[weather army](#)" employs almost 50,000 people, thousands of rocket launchers and cannons, and dozens of planes, largely through

the [China Meteorological Association Weather Modification Center](#). In 2006, cloudseeding was used to clean sand off Beijing after a severe sandstorm. Two years later, cloudseeding was used to reduce pollution and pave the way for sunny weather before the 2008 Summer Olympics, practices that were repeated for the [2022 Winter Olympics](#) in Beijing.

China's cloudseeding is not just limited to its capital city, with [most Chinese cities](#) employing their own programs. Additionally, the Yangtze River basin, [currently in severe drought](#), saw 241 flights and 15,000 rocket launches between June and November 2022, alleged to have resulted in "[8.56 billion metric tons of additional rainfall](#)" according to Chinese government sources.

Most supporters estimate that successful cloudseeding can result in a [10 to 30 percent increase in precipitation](#), but doubts persist [over these figures](#). It also remains difficult to document increases in rainfall and accurately decide where precipitation will fall. In light of these limitations (as well as the questionable economic viability of weather modification), Israel halted its 50-year cloudseeding program [in 2021](#).

Since the inception of cloudseeding technology, however, there has been concern over its potential for weaponization. [In 1957](#), the president's advisory committee on weather control warned that weather manipulation could develop more destructive weapons than nuclear bombs.

During the Vietnam War, the U.S. government's cloudseeding Project Popeye [spent millions of dollars](#) between 1967 and 1972 to extend Vietnam's monsoon season in an attempt to flood the Ho Chi Minh Trail and [disrupt the North Vietnamese Army's supply lines](#). The Soviet Union is also suspected of using cloudseeding to increase rainfall in Afghanistan [during the Soviet-Afghan War](#) to similarly turn areas into mud and disrupt the movements of the Mujahideen.

But public concern over the weaponization of weather [prompted the signing](#) of the National Weather Modification Policy Act of 1976, and the U.S., along with other countries, signed the Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Technique (CONMED) [in 1977](#) that requires signatories refrain from militarizing weather modification.

Nonetheless, concern remains over how current technology and practices could ignite conflicts. Iranian officials accused Israel and the UAE of "working to make

Iranian clouds not rain” [in 2018](#), while China’s expansive plans for its cloudseeding operations have also [brought concern from India](#).

Alternate methods of weather manipulation are also underway. [In 1996](#), a U.S. Air Force report titled “Weather as a force multiplier: Owning the Weather in 2025” discussed how the advancement of surveillance technologies could see clouds made of smart particles deployed to generate “[intelligent fog](#).” There have also been projects designed to [trigger lightning within clouds](#), which could complicate operations for the United States’ heralded F-35 plane, which cannot fly [within 25 miles](#) of a thunderstorm.

Outside militarization initiatives, new weather modification projects are also on the horizon. Proposals to add nutrients to the ocean to encourage phytoplankton growth and increase carbon absorption, or [ocean fertilization](#), are increasingly discussed. [Sea](#) and [cloud](#) brightening projects to reflect sunlight and reduce global warming are also becoming mainstream ideas, despite [ongoing uncertainty](#) about their destructive potential or ineffective results.

As weather modification technology continues to develop, we should be wary of further privatization and militarization. Cloudseeding privatization, for instance, has become increasingly globalized. Based in Fargo, North Dakota, [Weather Modification, Inc.](#) provides cloudseeding services to India. Switzerland’s Meteo Systems has been active in the UAE [for over a decade](#).

With dozens of countries and companies now offering cloudseeding services, policymakers should design and enforce new regulations for weather modification. While agreements and institutions like CONMED and the World Meteorological Organization [Expert Team on Weather Modification](#) play important roles, the stage is now crowded with various actors vying for a larger role in applying the technology.

Global coordination should be seen as a necessary undertaking to avoid the potentially catastrophic effects of manipulating the weather. Before governments and companies embark on large-scale efforts to alter the weather, additional regulation in anticipation of future technologies can serve as a protective measure to avoid environmental crises and mitigate the [rise of conspiracy theories](#).

By John P. Ruehl

Author Bio: This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#).

John P. Ruehl is an Australian-American journalist living in Washington, D.C., and a world affairs correspondent for the [Independent Media Institute](#). He is a contributing editor to Strategic Policy and a contributor to several other foreign affairs publications. His book, [Budget Superpower: How Russia Challenges the West With an Economy Smaller Than Texas](#), was published in December 2022.

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Palm Oil In Common Household Products Is Destroying The World's 'Orangutan Capital'



*Laurel Sutherlin -
Photo: Rainforest
Action Network*

A nationally protected wildlife reserve in Indonesia is under attack by popular, big-name brands.

Picture a rhinoceros in the rainforest. Add a herd of elephants, families of orangutans swinging through the treetops, and tigers prowling the understory, and there is only one place in the world you could be.

Indonesia's [Leuser Ecosystem](#) is one of Earth's most ancient forest ecosystems, a

laboratory of life's potential where the alchemy of evolution has been allowed to experiment uninterrupted for millennia. And the results are astounding. Green upon green, vines hanging from towering old-growth trees, moss growing on ferns and bromeliads... you get the picture.

It is the kind of place one imagines primeval nature to be: wild, abundant, and impenetrable.

Tragically, [undercover field investigations in 2019 by my organization](#), Rainforest Action Network (RAN), exposed major global brands—including Procter and Gamble, Unilever, Nestlé, PepsiCo, Mondelēz, and Nissin Foods—sourcing illegal palm oil grown within the nationally protected Rawa Singkil Wildlife Reserve. In September 2022, we published the [Carbon Bomb Scandals report](#), showing that the same brands were still sourcing illegal palm oil from the reserve.

With [more than a century of proud conservation history](#) responsible for its continued existence, the province of Aceh where the Leuser resides is, against all odds, a sparkling ecological jewel standing in stark contrast to the devastated landscape surrounding it. Most of the rest of Sumatra—once known as Indonesia's "[Emerald of the Equator](#)"—and sadly, much of the rest of lowland rainforests across Indonesia, too, have been [exploited](#) and denuded by wave after wave of scorched-earth policy, industry, colonial extraction, and modern-day corrupt corporate greed. What has already been lost is incalculable, but in this unique ecosystem, there remains a rare opportunity to stop the cycle of destruction and protect a globally valuable treasure before it's too late.

The Leuser Ecosystem is considered the heart of Southeast Asia's rainforest region, which, alongside the Amazon in South America and the Congo Basin in Africa, is one of only three tropical forest regions on Earth.

The beating heart of the Leuser is the lowland forests and peat swamps of the Singkil-Bengkung region. This area is part of western Sumatra's last healthy peat swamp ecosystem. This lush jungle contains some of the world's [richest](#) levels of biological diversity.

The lowland peat forests of the Leuser Ecosystem deserve the highest levels of protection for multiple critical reasons. Dubbed the "[orangutan capital of the world](#)," this region has the highest population density of critically endangered Sumatran orangutans anywhere. This includes a unique, culturally distinct

[subpopulation](#) of a few thousand individuals in the Singkil-Bengkung region. These subpopulations demonstrate social structures and tool-using behaviors distinct from all other orangutan populations. These forests are also home to some of the healthiest remaining breeding populations of highly imperiled Sumatran elephants, rhinos, and tigers.

The health of the Leuser Ecosystem's Singkil-Bengkung landscape is internationally significant because its deep, [carbon-rich peatlands](#) are among Earth's most valuable and effective natural carbon sinks. Conversely, when drained, cleared, and burned for conversion to palm oil plantations, this soil type is transformed into a [carbon bomb](#) that emits catastrophic pollution levels into the atmosphere.

Hundreds of thousands of people rely on the area's rich natural resources as the basis of their livelihoods. Downstream villages are [already suffering](#) severe, sometimes deadly threats from devastating floods, landslides, and the loss of subsistence resources like fish and forest products as a direct result of the rapid rates of deforestation caused by palm oil. Communities also continue to suffer due to the loss of access to their customary [lands, which palm oil companies took](#) without their consent, and due to [failures of the government to take decisive action](#) to resolve conflicts and restore the rights of communities to their lands.

The Acehnese people have fought for over a century to protect the integrity of the Leuser Ecosystem's extraordinary forests, and the region has become internationally famous for its intact expanses of verdant trees and its stunning wealth of imperiled wildlife species. In the decade between 2009 and 2019, [more than 18,000 hectares of forests](#) within the Singkil-Bengkung region were cleared, leaving roughly [250,000 hectares](#) of rainforest. This area continues to [decrease yearly](#) due to deforestation and the drainage of peatlands.

In 2022, for example, the reserve [lost](#) 700 hectares of primary peat swamp forest (twice the area of New York's Central Park), revealed a [study](#) by forest loss monitoring platform, TheTreeMap; in the first half of 2023 alone, there was a loss of 372 hectares, according to an [analysis](#) by Aceh-based environmental NGO Forest, Nature, and Environment Aceh (HAKA). New canals being [built](#) indicate plans for further deforestation and illegal palm oil planting.

In 2019, we conducted a series of [undercover investigations](#) due to the alarming

destruction of peat forests within the lowland rainforests of the Leuser Ecosystem. The field research was conducted to determine if the forest clearance was being driven by major snack food brands, even though they had adopted policies years ago to end deforestation in their supply chains.

The [investigations](#) and the [2022 Carbon Bomb Scandals report](#) were definitive. Palm oil is being grown illegally inside the nationally protected Rawa Singkil Wildlife Reserve, and it is being sold to mills that provide the palm oil used to manufacture snack foods sold across the world by Procter and Gamble, Unilever, Nestlé, PepsiCo, Mondelez, and Nissin Foods.

These mills are located immediately next to areas of illegal encroachment within the Leuser Ecosystem, and they lack the necessary procedures to trace the location where the palm oil they sell is grown, an essential requirement for [complying](#) with the No Deforestation, No Peatlands, No Exploitation policies to which [all of these brands have publicly committed](#).

Progress has been made by some companies that have taken steps toward implementing their No Deforestation policies. Brands like [Unilever](#) and [Nestlé](#), for example, have begun the process of increasing supply chain transparency by publishing the mills they source from. A minority of corporations have achieved traceability to the plantation level (Unilever has outlined its strategies to [identify plantations](#) supplying its mills, for example), but most companies remain unable to offer certainty as to exactly where the palm oil they consume is grown.

[RAN's Keep Forests Standing 2023 Scorecard](#) evaluated and ranked a group of 10 influential global brands, each with public 'No Deforestation' policy commitments, and the evidence clearly shows that paper promises are not enough to keep the forests from falling.

The Leuser Ecosystem at large, particularly the Singkil-Bengkung region, still offers a rare and fleeting opportunity to get it right and avoid the devastating mistakes made throughout so much of Indonesia in the past. It remains possible here to prevent the destruction of habitat that drives iconic wildlife species toward extinction, to avert human suffering from inevitable [floods and landslides caused by deforestation](#), and to end the reckless [burning of carbon-filled peatlands](#) contributing to the climate crisis.

The [international attention](#) resulting from the release of our [2019 report](#) has

helped pressure [brands to respond and take further action](#). However, the high stakes and urgent threats to the Singkil-Bengkung demand more bold and decisive action to ensure the area receives permanent protection.

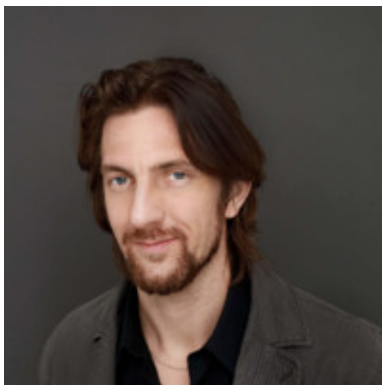
By Laurel Sutherlin

Author Bio: Laurel Sutherlin is the senior communications strategist for [Rainforest Action Network](#) and a contributor to the [Observatory](#). He is a lifelong environmental and human rights campaigner, naturalist, and outdoor educator with a passion for birds and wild places. Follow him on Twitter: [@laurelsutherlin](#).

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The New Grand Tour



*Jan Ritch-Frel – Photo:
Independent Media
institute*

Six million years of human evidence offers a powerful universal education to address humanity's most significant challenges and opportunities.

All of humanity can now take the Grand Tour: a travel circuit of global sites that

help us understand ourselves and our history, made increasingly clear thanks to recent advances in archaeology and the sciences. The stops on this tour include archeological sites key to understanding the stages of human history starting six million years ago and leading up to the dawn of the modern era. Other sites include museums and spaces that educate visitors about the biology of our existence, focusing on our primate roots within a diversity of ecosystems.

The point of this Grand Tour is to co-mingle an education on the phases of human history with a study of our biology and evolution that only recently became available due to advances in science and research. It fosters an understanding of the human story as a single global data set. As people become accustomed to relying on the wider breadth of evidence to understand themselves, we are all stronger. It becomes easier to authentically connect with each other when we have a true universalizing framework. This framework will open constructive pathways for finding happiness, reducing suffering, and adapting together for resilience and survival. Wherever you are in life, there is potential to find value in this evidence-based understanding of human tendencies.

It only became possible in the past decade to trace the outlines of the complete human story. Travelers will be surprised by the increasingly clear evidence that illustrates the diversity of [early hominin species](#), the pace at which they made complex and ingenious tools, and the emergence of ritual, religion, agriculture, and even our modern societies. Similarly, scientific discoveries we've made about brain development, hormones, and genomics will compel us to rethink the causes of criminal behavior and reimagine childhood development and education.

Taking the Grand Tour

Completing the Grand Tour may be easier for the one billion people who travel internationally each year than the seven billion others. But the good news is that the education embedded in the tour is available online through a study of the sites along the tour and related research. For many people, there are relevant pre-historical sites, museums, and research centers located within a few hundred miles to visit and more deeply enrich their educational experience.

You can say you've completed a Grand Tour when you have obtained a good general understanding of each study topic listed below and visited and/or studied at least two sites related to each of them.

The study topics are:

- Paleoanthropology and the human evolutionary story of the past six million years of evolution.
- Primatology and the behavior and lifestyles of wider mammal families.
- Transitions from hunter-gatherer lifestyles to village societies and the establishment of the first city-states.
- Behavioral biology and neuroscience to learn about the function of the human brain and its interactions with the processes that produce language and real-world functioning.
- Ecology and the study of regional wilderness areas to understand animals as part of the fabric of interdependencies in the larger ecosystem.

Some experts who have tracked the paradigm shifts across these topic areas have predicted that many of the newest discoveries will spill over into the wider societal spectrum. The rising public interest in human cultural and technological evolution, early societies, and the biological facets dictating human behaviors is visible on best-seller lists, popular podcasts, and highly-rated YouTube channels. [Educators believe](#) there is potential for the new, globally sourced breadth of knowledge we now have about our species' origins to become preeminent within the study of political and social sciences. This would edge out the near-monopoly that Europe has had on scholarly understandings of human history for the past 2,500 years.

Below is a sample list of Grand Tour locations for each of the geographical regions and/or topics of study listed at the bottom of this article. Over time, a map could grow to contain hundreds or thousands of sites that qualify as educational sources to populate the Grand Tour. Newer evidence, sites, and museum exhibits will often be easier to learn from as they are less weighed down by the historical attitudes of previous eras. The world has exceptional books and reference materials, tour guides, and teachers, real and online, to help people along their journey. And it is increasingly easier to ensure docents and guides educate people with the most up-to-date information about the sites they're helping to interpret.

The Old Grand Tour

There was a Grand Tour in a previous era. This famous journey through Italy and the classical world established particular pieces of ancient history as central to humankind. The ancient worlds of Rome, Greece, Egypt, and the kingdoms of Sumeria were understood as the borders of the ancient past. What came before these worlds was vaguely understood to have involved stone tools and ice ages.

For 300 years, if you were a young, privileged European man, the final stage of your education would include a visit to Italy to learn about the Renaissance and its roots in Rome, then to Greece and the wider Mediterranean. Young elites gained a worldview shared across nationalities living in high-income countries, shaped by the expert guides who accompanied them. It was sweeping in scope entrenched in a reductive understanding of the human past and a linear sense of history and the progress of humanity.

This “old” Grand Tour cemented a particular political and philosophical education that the world has largely inherited today. This education is often presented through colonial and imperial conquest, modeled and legitimized by the collapsed empires and city-states of the northern Mediterranean regions.

Even with its many blind spots, misconceptions, and lapses, the old Grand Tour did help to create a shared sense of history and culture where none had existed before by linking together disparate sites across the European continent. It provided a common—if faulty—framework for understanding the then-contemporary world.

And it should not come as a surprise for students of history that there was an even older Grand Tour before this one. Young privileged men of ancient Rome relied on a Grand Tour guided by a historian and geographer named Pausanias to learn about a selectively chosen, venerated history of Greece. Touring is a hugely popular educational format, from the Santiago de Compostella pilgrimage route for learning about medieval Europe to following the Great Wall of China to learn about the country’s wider dynastic history.

The New Grand Tour

The new Grand Tour proposes to revolutionize this outdated vision through visits to museums, archaeological sites, and research centers that explain the different facets of human biological and technological history. Together, these sketch a more accurate story of humanity. This Grand Tour takes us from the emergence of

our genus, “Homo,” to the beginnings of our hunter-gatherer past and the transition to early societal organizational schemes. Then, onwards, to the founding of the first city-states.

This education can reshape our core beliefs, attitudes, and approaches to daily life. It also provides sounder, more actionable answers to some of the most important questions we face today, such as:

- Does social complexity require social hierarchy?
- What social models are the most resilient and produce the least suffering?
 - What kind of resource consumption are we designed for?
 - What is a sustainable and healthy mix of work and leisure?
- How do we explain the prevalence of conditions like obesity, depression, anxiety, cancer, and heart disease—and what can we do about it?
- What are the kinds of child-rearing and educational environments that the human lineage evolved with and depended on?
 - Does the moral arc of the universe “bend toward justice”?
- How should we understand criminal culpability in a structurally unequal world?
 - What is addiction, and how can we treat it?
- What social relations tend to promote cooperation or conflict? What is the relationship between social arrangements and the tendency toward peace or war?

You don’t have to make [every stop on the Grand Tour](#). Get acquainted with and learn about at least a few items from each category below. Try to pick from two different regions of the Earth for each.

Human Origins

A series of recent archeological site findings have significantly updated our evidence and understanding of humanity’s origins. Some of the most significant discoveries include:

Koobi Fora / Lake Turkana — Kenya

A region of paleoanthropological sites in northern Kenya known as [Koobi Fora](#), near Lake Turkana, features well-preserved hominin fossils dating between 3.2 and 1.3 million years ago. This includes at least two species of *Australopithecus*, three species of the genus *Homo*, *Kenyanthropus platyops*, stone tools dating back to 2 million years ago, and a nearly complete skeleton of a male adolescent *H. ergaster* specimen about 1.5 million years old called "[Turkana Boy](#)."

Denisova Cave — Russia

Situated on the foothills of Siberia's Altai Mountains, [Denisova Cave](#) is the only site known to have been occupied by Homo Sapiens, Neanderthals, and Denisovans. The cave has yielded impressive jewelry and other [artifacts](#) and provided genomic evidence of the direct descendants of Neanderthal and Denisovan parents.

Luzon — Philippines

In 2018, researchers [discovered](#) a cache of butchered rhino bones and dozens of stone tools that pushed back the earliest evidence for human occupation of the Philippines's largest island from 100,000 years ago to a startling 700,000 years ago. Included in the discovery on Luzon was a unique human species that has been dubbed [Homo luzonensis](#). This raises questions about how our supposedly primitive ancestors crossed the Southeast Asian seas. The northern areas of the island, with their extensive [cave systems](#), illuminate the early movement of people to the Philippines—from Late Pleistocene to Early Holocene foragers to the spread of Neolithic farming and later metal-age cultures.

Central Narmada Valley — India

The Central Narmada Valley is a region in central India [featuring](#) extensive Early and Middle Pleistocene deposits, associated Palaeolithic fossils, and the only fossil evidence of a non-modern hominin species in the subcontinent. This makes it an especially vital region for understanding Acheulean stone tool technologies in the Paleolithic records of the Indian subcontinent.

Hunter Gatherer Transitions to Early Societies

Various recent archeological discoveries have expanded our knowledge about the societal transition from hunter-gatherer, to agrarian, to modern. Some of the most significant discoveries are below:

Transitions:

The following archaeological sites provide some key insights into important transitions made by early human societies:

Dolni Vestonice — Czech Republic

Dolni Vestonice is an Upper Paleolithic [archaeological site](#) in the [Czech Republic](#) and a particularly abundant source of prehistoric artifacts dating back 29,000 years. It is unique for its insight into Ice Age cultural practices in central Europe, with huts of mammoth bones, technologies like kilns, task specialization, burial practices, and art-making. Highlights include some of the earliest examples of symbolic representation, especially ceramic figures of humans and nonhuman animals, such as the famous “[Black Venus](#)” and an enigmatic grave known as the “[Triple Burial](#).”

Mal'ta Buret — Siberia

Mal'ta, about 62 miles northwest of [Irkutsk and Lake Baikal in Siberia](#) represents the vast, vital [Mal'ta-Buret](#) culture dating back around 24,000 years. The site comprises a series of subterranean houses made of mammoth bones and reindeer antlers, from which have been excavated expertly carved bone, ivory, and antler objects. These include famous female figurines, as well as sculptures depicting swans, geese, and ducks, and engravings of mammoths and snakes. The findings shed light on the cultural practices of ancient northern Eurasians who contributed to the peopling of the Americas and whose technologies spread from Europe to Africa.

Scaling Up:

A variety of historical sites full of archaeological evidence show the enormous scale and scope of ancient human societies, some of which are below:

Caral-Supe / Norte Chico — Andes

Caral-Supe is a [sacred ancient city](#) dating back some 5,000 years and is thought to represent the oldest city in the Americas, at the origin of Andean culture. The 150-acre complex of pyramids, plazas, and residential buildings shows clear evidence of ceremonial functions, revealing the existence of a well-established and powerful religious ideology and a consolidated hierarchical state system. Bone instruments, [quipus](#) (the knot system used in Andean civilizations to record information), and extensive trade goods have been unearthed from the complex.

Teleilat Ghassul / Ba'Ja — Jordan

At [Teleilat Ghassul](#), just north of Jordan's Dead Sea, a cluster of hills contains the remains of several villages dating back at least 6,000 years. They offer an unparalleled glimpse into the increasing social and economic complexity between the Neolithic and Bronze Ages. This encompasses the earliest production of olive oil, products such as fiber and dairy, and cult and religious practices.

South of the Dead Sea, shielded in the area's rugged sandstone formations, lies [Ba'Ja](#), a neolithic settlement of 9,000 years ago. The site features an ossuary with the bones of three adults and nine small children, with walls painted in a fresco technique showing abstract motifs and geometric figures, as well as the richly furnished tomb of a young girl whose magnificent [necklace](#) made of limestone and shell beads is on display at the nearby [Petra Museum](#). The museum also includes a significant collection of Neolithic artifacts.

[Şanlıurfa Province / Boncuklu Tarla / Çatalhöyük — Turkey](#)

[Şanlıurfa](#) Province, in [southeastern Turkey](#), contains multiple significant archeological sites. Three of these—Göbekli Tepe, Nevalı Çori, and Gürcütepe—have revolutionized our understanding of the Eurasian transitions from the Ice Age into domestication, agriculture, and a host of new technologies that lead to modernity.

[Boncuklu Tarla](#) contains remains from a settlement first occupied about 12,000 years ago. Houses and other dwellings have been unearthed alongside temples and other sacred buildings, accompanied by complex art forms and advanced artifacts. Together, these paint a picture of the settlement of northern Mesopotamia and the upper Tigris region. They reveal information about the cultures and religions of the people that lived there and the transition from nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyles to a sedentary agricultural lifestyle.

[Çatalhöyük](#) is the site of two ancient mounds, beneath which lie the remains of a complex, 9,000-year-old society with a population between 3,500-8,000 inhabitants. Layer-by-layer, excavation of the site has revealed evidence of continual transformation and radical changes in behavior, lifestyle, art, and ritual. The site is exceptional for its substantial size and longevity, distinctive housing layout, wall paintings, and reliefs. UNESCO [refers to it](#) as: "the most significant human settlement documenting early settled agricultural life of a Neolithic community."

Communities and Institutions:

Evidence has shown how early human societies contained advanced institutions, communities, and culture, some of which are highlighted below:

Monte Alban — Mexico

The [Monte Alban civic ceremonial center](#) of an ancient metropolis in Oaxaca, Mexico, was inhabited for 1,500 years by the Olmecs, Zapotecs, and Mixtecs. These people built terraces, dams, canals, pyramids, and artificial mounds carved into the surrounding mountains. They even constructed a ball game court, temples, tombs, and bas-reliefs with hieroglyphic inscriptions. This site offers unique insights into pre-Columbian society in Mesoamerica.

Ugarit — Lebanon

A vital seaport city on the Mediterranean coast of northern Syria and a key economic hub in the ancient Near East, [Ugarit](#) served as a trade center between Egypt and the major powers of Bronze Age Asia Minor and Mesopotamia. Key finds include the world's earliest recorded [treaty](#). Stratified mounds reveal the city's development from its origins around 8,000 years ago, its peak around 3,470 years ago, and its destruction around 3,200 years ago. The excavation of its Golden Age libraries revealed a hitherto unknown [cuneiform alphabetic script](#) and an entirely new mythological and religious literature (some of which shed new light on the Hebrew Bible). The library also revealed archives dealing with the city's political, social, economic, and cultural life.

Primatology

Expanding our understanding of our other primate relatives offers many clues and insights about humanity, and breakthrough research is happening in the following centers:

Gombe Stream Research Center — Tanzania

Founded in 1965 by Jane Goodall, the [Gombe Stream Research Center](#) is home to the longest-running field research on chimpanzees and remains a world-class research laboratory that uses the best available methods to advance innovative science, to support conservation, and to train Tanzanian scientists.

Camp Leakey, Tanjung Puting Reserve — Borneo

Camp Leakey is a center in the Tanjung Puting Reserve in Borneo where researchers study orangutan, proboscis monkey, gibbon, and leaf-eating monkey

behavior and ecology. It also houses research into orangutan sign language abilities and cognition.

Behavioral Biology and Neuroscience

It is often difficult to access scientific research centers or real-world site experiments in behavioral biology and neuroscience, so the most approachable research in these fields is available through scientific journals and authors such as Robert Sapolsky and [Frans de Waal](#).

A great place to start is by listening to Robert Sapolsky's famous [Behavioral Biology lecture series](#) at Stanford University. It takes time to learn how to read academic journal papers on biology or to work through the many exceptional books on human behavior. Brenna Hassett's book on the evolution of childhood, [Growing Up Human](#), is another excellent starting point.

Museums

There are hundreds of museums with exhibits relevant to the Grand Tour, some of which include:

Iziko South African Museum — Cape Town, South Africa

The [Iziko South Africa Museum](#) in Cape Town helps humanity reimagine the story of human evolution, centered on the diversity of humans today and how we came to be as we are. The museum pairs storytelling with fossils and artifacts from across the continent to paint a picture of how biology, technology, and culture influenced humanity's emergence.

Museum of Human Evolution — Burgos, Spain

[The Museum of Human Evolution](#) in Burgos, Spain, aims to offer a holistic vision of human presence on the Earth. It has one of the largest collections of early hominin fossils from many species, found at the nearby [Atapuerca archaeological sites](#) and elsewhere. It also showcases the scientific disciplines involved in fossil recovery and the scientific interpretations drawn from them.

Natural History Museum, Paleanthropology Collection — London, United Kingdom

The [palaeoanthropology collection](#) at London's Natural History Museum holds the United Kingdom's largest assemblage of fossilized hominid remains and a diverse collection of hominin tools, with over 3,000 specimens. The collection includes 17

of the 24 generally recognized hominin species in the form of original fossils and scientific replicas.

Museum of Us — San Diego, California

Exhibits at the [Museum of Us](#) in San Diego, California, offer multicultural perspectives to spark dialogue, self-reflection, and human connections centered on the shared human experience.

Comparing How The West And China Offer Loans To Developing Countries



*John P. Ruehl – Source:
Independent Media
Institute*

11-19-2023 ~ *Established Western economic institutions are facing a formidable challenge from Chinese newcomers, each side offering distinct and competitive lending strategies with far-reaching consequences for global infrastructure and*

development.

In October 2023, amid [celebrations commemorating the 10th anniversary](#) of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Beijing, Pakistan and Chinese leaders [signed a multibillion-dollar deal](#) for a railway project. As a pivotal component of China's efforts to promote economic integration and develop infrastructure abroad, Pakistan has received significant developmental assistance from Beijing through the \$62 billion [China-Pakistan Economic Corridor](#) (CPEC).

Nevertheless, Western nations and financial entities have also been strategically maneuvering in Asia, with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) approving a [\\$3 billion loan for Pakistan in July](#), "[saving it from defaulting on debt](#)." Other countries in the region are experiencing similar competition. Bangladesh, for instance, inaugurated the BRI-linked [Padma Bridge Rail Link](#) in October, and weeks later received a [\\$395 million loan](#) from the EU. That month, Sri Lanka [struck a debt deal with China](#), while the U.S. extended a \$553 million loan for port construction in Colombo in [early November](#).

As competition over infrastructure and investment has grown in recent years, [standoffs](#) between Western and Chinese lenders over debt restructuring and relief have intensified. Lenders [hesitate to offer relief packages](#), fearing that one creditor's concession might allow a debtor country to use that relief money to pay off others. These impasses underscore the challenges being faced by the decades-old Western-dominated financial system and lending initiatives.

The foundation of this system was laid at the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944. The meeting [established the IMF](#) to ensure stability of the international monetary system and offer policy advice and financial assistance to countries in economic crisis. It has since grown and comprises 190 member states, while its "sister organization," [the World Bank](#), was created simultaneously and has grown to include 189 member countries. The World Bank focuses more on long-term assistance through loans and grants, supporting infrastructure and poverty reduction in developing countries.

Efforts to democratize these institutions have been made, but both the [IMF](#) and [World Bank](#) still remain under significant Western influence. Western countries are [overrepresented on the IMF's board](#) and voting arrangements, while [all](#) the IMF's managing directors have been European. All the World Bank's presidents

except for Bulgarian national Kristalina Georgieva, who served as acting president [in 2019](#), have been U.S. citizens, and the voting shares of the bank have [not been rearranged since 2010](#). Both institutions are based in Washington, D.C.

In addition to the IMF and World Bank, other Western-dominated (or heavily influenced) multilateral development banks and institutions include the [Paris Club](#), the [European Investment Bank](#), the [Inter-American Development Bank](#), the [European Bank for Reconstruction and Development](#), and the [Asian Development Bank](#). Government initiatives like USAID, the U.S. Trade and Development Agency (USTDA), and the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation, as well as private banks, also play prominent roles in advancing Western economic interests.

China's [role in multilateral banks like the IMF and World Bank](#) has expanded as its economy has grown. But Beijing continues to [criticize](#) the current global debt governance system as "dominated by the 'Paris Club-IMF-World Bank' structure of the West," and has chosen to create its own path to expand its economic influence globally.

China's state capitalism offers a unique alternative to Western infrastructure and development initiatives for the first time in decades. Through its robust, globally integrated economy, [technological expertise](#), and extensive industrial power, Beijing can help fund and build projects on a scale that rivals the West in a way not even the Soviet Union could achieve. Furthermore, Chinese assistance does not require political and economic reforms typically attached to Western developmental initiatives.

China's approach has seen significant success. It has become the world's largest creditor [since 2017](#), and is lending more than the IMF, World Bank, and Paris Club combined, said Brent Neiman from the U.S. Department of the Treasury in September 2022. With [\\$1 trillion spent](#) and more than \$2 trillion [in contracts](#), China's BRI has transformed global trade routes and economic development and is even [garnering interest from the Taliban](#).

A [Center for Global Development 2020 study](#) estimated that Chinese loans generally have a 2 percent interest rate, in comparison to 1.54 percent for the World Bank's concessional loans, and the penalties for late repayments have increased [since 2018](#), according to AidData. Nonetheless, most BRI partner

countries [view China's project positively](#).

To implement its vision, Beijing has deployed a network of national financial organizations, including the China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC), China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), China Development Bank (CDB), the Export-Import Bank of China, China Construction Bank (CCB), Silk Road Fund, China Investment Corporation (CIC), China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), and the People's Bank of China.

Though China has largely focused on striking bilateral deals, it has developed some multilateral initiatives. The New Development Bank was created in 2015 and is headquartered in Shanghai. It is increasingly seen as a method to [encourage transactions in China's currency](#), the renminbi, between BRICS member states. Meanwhile, the Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund ([GDSSCF](#)) is being used for China's software-focused Global Development Initiative (GDI). But China's major multilateral project is the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which was established in 2016. Now [with 106 approved](#) members, the AIIB focuses [on lending to](#) investment projects, infrastructure, transport routes, energy, and information networks.

Other countries, including Western nations such as Germany, have [some influence in the AIIB](#). Nonetheless, the bank is dominated by China. It has an [effective veto over major decisions](#) and has been governed by China's former vice minister of the finance ministry, Jin Liqun, since its founding. China's dominance prompted the AIIB's Canadian communications chief, Bob Pickard, [to resign](#) in 2023.

A divided response by Western countries to China's initiatives has further undermined their traditional dominance. Many expressed interest in the AIIB as it was being formed, and Washington [failed to dissuade them from joining](#) the bank. The U.S. then attempted to counter the AIIB with the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which came into force in 2016. However, the U.S. left the organization in 2017 under former President Donald Trump, and the project was [repackaged into a smaller one](#).

China's newfound leverage has seen it confront the West around the world. In 1990, for example, Western countries accounted for [85 percent](#) of infrastructure

construction contracts in Africa. Yet from [2007-2020](#), Chinese entities provided \$23 billion in funding for infrastructure projects across sub-Saharan Africa, more than double lent by banks in the U.S., Germany, Japan, and France combined, according to a study by the Center for Global Development. [In 2020](#), Chinese entities were responsible for 31 percent of all infrastructure projects in Africa valued at more than \$50 million, up from 12 percent in 2013, while the West's contribution to the projects in Africa declined from 37 percent to 12 percent during the same period, [according](#) to the Economist.

Brazil and Mexico enjoy [significant investment from China](#), and Argentina officially joined the BRI [in 2022](#). [In August 2023](#), China highlighted its increasingly important role in Argentina's economy by providing a \$3 billion loan that allowed the South American country to avoid default. Even in [Eastern Europe and the Balkans](#), China has spent billions of dollars linking countries to the BRI.

Nevertheless, the U.S. and the collective West maintain considerable economic influence and have responded assertively. The U.S. passed the BUILD Act [in 2018](#) and the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) [in 2022](#) to increase investment and infrastructure development in developing countries, and the EU put forth its Global Gateway program [in 2021](#), "the bloc's new infrastructure partnership plan that's seen as an alternative to China's worldwide Belt and Road Initiative." Meanwhile, the World Bank's lending to sub-Saharan African nations soared from \$26 billion in 2019 to [\\$49 billion in 2023](#), while the World Bank and the ADB also [overtook Chinese entities](#) during the COVID-19 pandemic to become Southeast Asia's biggest sources of funding, said a report by the Lowy Institute.

The U.S. and the EU have also [expressed support](#) for developing a new transport corridor connecting India, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean Sea. Furthermore, the West has presented a united economic response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, including the [World Bank halting all its programs](#) in Russia. The AIIB's \$100 billion fund also still [pales in comparison](#) to the IMF's \$800 billion mobilization capacity.

Both the West's and China's economic lending and infrastructure practices, however, have faced criticism. Former Chief Economist at the World Bank, Joseph Stiglitz, [has stated](#) that the conditions placed on borrowing countries by the World Bank and IMF often cause significant pain for local populations and stifle

economic development in these nations. [UN Secretary-General](#) António Guterres stated in 2023 that the IMF and World Bank benefit richer countries at the expense of poorer ones, urging for change.

China's projects have [faced criticism](#) for predominantly employing Chinese companies and workers, as opposed to making local hires, resulting in protests and attacks against them. BRI deals are also criticized for being [opaque](#) in terms of financing and implementation, and countries struggling to repay loans have found themselves [giving up some autonomy to their export revenues](#). And while allegations of Chinese debt diplomacy are often exaggerated in Western media, [Chinese economic opportunism](#) has increased debt burdens and debt-for-equity swaps with BRI partners.

Pakistan's multifaceted economic challenges persist despite its engagement with Western and Chinese lending and infrastructure institutions. The country is grappling with neighboring Afghanistan's instability, its longstanding rivalry with India, the ongoing [effects](#) of the COVID-19 pandemic, devastating flooding [in 2022](#), [systemic corruption](#), and [soaring energy prices](#) caused by the conflict in Ukraine.

While these challenges remain complex, investment stands out as a potential remedy. Rather than engaging in blind competition, a more effective use of funds for all parties involved could be achieved by acknowledging and pursuing greater coordination between Western and Chinese economic interests in the country, such as increasing Pakistan's energy efficiency. [Amid their competition](#), the AIIB and World Bank signed a framework for cooperation in common areas of interest in 2017, and the AIIB has similar agreements with the [Asian Development Bank](#) and the [European Bank for Reconstruction and Development](#).

Despite the rise of [alternative markets](#), China stands as the sole challenger to the West's established lending and infrastructure development networks. This rivalry has already prompted slow reform in the decades-old financial system, offering support to emerging powers and impoverished nations. While more equitable economic statecraft may prove elusive, borrowing countries have an opportunity to leverage the best deals essential for their progress.

By John P. Ruehl

Author Bio: This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#).

John P. Ruehl is an Australian-American journalist living in Washington, D.C., and a world affairs correspondent for the [Independent Media Institute](#). He is a contributing editor to Strategic Policy and a contributor to several other foreign affairs publications. His book, [Budget Superpower: How Russia Challenges the West With an Economy Smaller Than Texas](#), was published in December 2022.

Source: Globetrotter

Fast Fashion Is Antithetical To Workers' Rights



Sonali Kolhatkar

Don't believe the fashion industry's stated commitment to support a living wage for Bangladesh's garment workers.

'Tis the season for holiday shopping, and as American consumers ready their spending dollars, few of us are likely to link our gift buying to the high cost of low prices on the other side of the planet. This is especially true for what has come to be known as "[fast fashion](#)," the clothing equivalent of a Big Mac: attractive, affordable, and throwaway. But the Bangladeshi women who toil as underpaid garment workers so we can wear disposable outfits, are making their voices heard loudly enough to reverberate across oceans and continents. [Mass protests](#)

for higher wages have roiled the nation, at least three workers have been killed, and there is no end in sight.

Bangladesh is the [world's second-largest exporter](#) of apparel in the world, after China. It is the South Asian nation's largest industry, employing more than four million workers, a majority of them women. The largest share of Bangladesh-made garments is bought and sold by United States retailers, which include [recognizable name brands](#) such as H&M, Zara, Calvin Klein, American Eagle, and Tommy Hilfiger.

Garment workers had been taking home a meager [pay of about \\$75 a month](#), and have demanded a nearly threefold increase to about \$205 a month. When the [Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association](#) (BGMEA) initially set new wages at \$90 a month, the mass protests began. When the BGMEA then responded by raising wages to \$112 a month, the protests actually intensified. According to [Al Jazeera](#), "more than 10,000 workers staged protests in factories and along highways to reject the panel's offer."

Headlines touted the offer as a [56 percent increase in wages](#), while Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, long hailed as a [liberal leader](#), patronizingly told workers to put up or shut up. She [said](#), "They have to work with whatever their salary is increased, they should continue their work." She roundly condemned workers' attacks on factories, saying she was worried that, "if these factories are closed, if production is disrupted, where will their jobs be? They have to understand that."

Hasina's government has unleashed security forces that have intimidated and attacked union organizers. Police recently [fatally shot a 23-year-old mother](#) and sewing machine operator named Anjuara Khatun after firing at protesters.

To understand why protests intensified after wages were dramatically increased, it's worth examining the context of garment workers' livelihoods. By one estimate, the [cost of living](#) for a single person in Bangladesh is about \$360 a month, not including rent. Garment workers' wages have not risen since 2019 and since that time inflation has hit Bangladesh just as it has hit most of the world.

Even the demand for \$205 a month will not allow most to make ends meet. The factories' offer of about half that number was insultingly low. Abiramy Sivaloganathan, the South Asia coordinator for the Asia Floor Wage Alliance,

[told Vogue](#), “[The] increase that unions are asking for is not even enough, technically speaking, [given] inflation and the crisis the country’s going through.”

On the surface, U.S. brands, who purchase their inventories from Bangladesh’s factories, appear to be on the right side of the fight. The American Apparel and Footwear Association (AAFA), an industry trade group, wrote a [joint letter](#) to Hasina’s administration urging her to “raise the minimum wage to a level that corresponds with a wage level and benefits that are sufficient to cover workers’ basic needs and some discretionary income and takes into account inflationary pressures.”

The AAFA even went as far as asking the government to avoid retaliating against unions and to respect “collective bargaining rights.” The U.S. State Department issued a [statement](#) saying, “We commend the members of the private sector who have endorsed union proposals for a reasonable wage increase.”

Further, global retailers are offering to eat into their profits by [increasing the price they pay factories](#) to help them offset increased wages. Currently, the cost of the labor to produce garments is a mere 10-13 percent of a product’s total manufacturing cost. The industry would have to increase that number by about 5-6 percent.

But are companies really committed to raising garment workers’ wages? A spokesperson for the [Clean Clothes Campaign](#), a rights group based in The Netherlands [said](#), “The living wage commitments of brands are nothing but empty promises as long as they refuse to explicitly support the workers’ demand for a bare minimum, let alone a living wage.”

A [survey](#) of about 1,000 factories in Bangladesh, published in early 2023, revealed that companies like Zara and H&M underpaid factories for garment purchases, making it harder for them to pay their workers. When the COVID-19 pandemic led to global shutdowns, large retailers canceled orders and delayed payments. One industry expert [told The Guardian](#), “Only when suppliers are able to plan ahead, with confidence that they will earn as expected, can they deliver good working conditions for their workers.” Rather than dip into their profits to compensate for the market slowdown in 2020, many global brands simply refused to keep their financial commitments to Bangladesh’s factories, leading to downward pressure on wages.

Given this context, fast fashion's stated support for a living wage increase and a commitment to swallow the resulting increased labor costs sound disingenuous.

It has been more than 10 years since the deadly collapse of [Bangladesh's Rana Plaza](#), the world's worst garment industry disaster. The eight-story compound of factories in Dhaka was filled with thousands of workers when it crumbled under the weight of government neglect and worker exploitation in April 2013. More than 1,100 workers, most of them women, were killed.

The Rana Plaza disaster was a turning point for Bangladesh's garment industry as workers were seen as dispensable pawns by governments and industries alike. In the wake of the disaster, North American brands [refused to join other global companies](#) in signing on to [the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh](#). Citing high costs, they chose instead to form their own alliance for inspecting factories, one that applied lower safety standards. It was a stark indicator of where these companies' priorities lay, one that frames their current lip service to higher wages for garment workers.

Fast fashion's outlook is rosy. The industry has been steadily growing and, thanks to the cooperation of government heads such as Sheikh Hasina—who has been fixated on "[growth](#)" at all costs—it is [expected to more than double its market size](#) over six years, growing from \$91 billion in 2021 to a projected \$185 billion by 2027. Meanwhile, the workers who fuel the profits behind that expansion are [facing starvation](#). This holiday season, perhaps the best gift we can give is a commitment to [force the industry to pay up](#).

By Sonali Kolhatkar

Author Bio: Sonali Kolhatkar is an award-winning multimedia journalist. She is the founder, host, and executive producer of "[Rising Up With Sonali](#)," a weekly television and radio show that airs on Free Speech TV and Pacifica stations. Her most recent book is [Rising Up: The Power of Narrative in Pursuing Racial Justice](#) (City Lights Books, 2023). She is a writing fellow for the [Economy for All](#) project at the Independent Media Institute and the racial justice and civil liberties editor at [Yes! Magazine](#). She serves as the co-director of the nonprofit solidarity organization the [Afghan Women's Mission](#) and is a co-author of [Bleeding Afghanistan](#). She also sits on the board of directors of [Justice Action Center](#), an immigrant rights organization.

Source: Independent Media Institute

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