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Kate Fletcher

To cite this article: Kate Fletcher (2022) Perspectives: earth rising, Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy, 18:1, 129-131, DOI: [10.1080/15487733.2022.2027675](https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2022.2027675)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15487733.2022.2027675>



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Published online: 09 Feb 2022.



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Kate Fletcher 

Centre for Sustainable Fashion, London College of Fashion, University of the Arts, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This Brief Report argues for approaching fashion sustainability as a whole systems issue and outlines some of the systems insights already uncovered. It also calls out the logic of economic growth as a key factor that limits the prospects for whole sector change. I propose an alternative logic – Earth Logic – which prioritizes Earth and all its species, including humans as a way to diversify and vivify fashion activity within planetary limits. The fashion territory cultivated by this changed logic is unfolding already today and will continue to do so, with roles for existing and entirely new actors, garments, and ways of organizing clothing, albeit configured differently with altered priorities.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 5 May 2021
Accepted 6 January 2022

KEYWORDS



Systems change; Earth Logic; growth logic

There are many ways to tell the story of refinement and revision of the global fashion system for sustainability. Some of these stories start by telling about the paths we travel as we act for social justice, while others recount routes that open up to us as we pursue environmental change, and others still tell us about diverse contexts and concepts. Indeed, the pages of this special issue contain a wide variety of these stories. The stories are both a cause for celebration and an indicator of rising interest in sustainability work. They are also a powerful signal of intent: *we are engaging in processes of fashion-sector change*. They also mark an increasingly sophisticated understanding of what this change involves:

- Some processes of change are easy and some are difficult, but we must commit to them all.
- Only some of what needs to happen aligns with conventional ideas including business practices, but we will keep working in these uncomfortable zones, even when it causes friction and challenges conventional ideas and priorities.
- Much of what needs to happen will not take place in the market.
- Some types of change will be quick to enact, while others will take generations, but we know that both types are our responsibility.
- The space in which we are working requires collaboration and entirely new forms of organization and governance.

- Sustainability change requires many ways of knowing.

When I did my PhD in the 1990s, I think I managed to read almost every academic paper in the field of fashion, textiles, and sustainability. I mention this experience not because reading everything is worthwhile in and of itself or because I am prolific at reading (I am not) but to try to convey something about how the field has grown. In 1995, it was physically possible to read all papers in the field because there were relatively few of them. Not so today; today it would be impossible. The fashion and sustainability complex is both large and busy and getting larger and busier. It is a hotbed of activity, an “industry” in itself, with a range and scale that is certainly impressive. It spans initiatives ranging from cross-brand projects, the goal of which is to raise standards across global supply chains, to the decentering of fashion-sustainability knowledge and practice away from Western perspectives; from innovative design concepts to new roles for the media; from an evolution in terminology to sustainability filters offered by popular online retailers to encourage buyers to shop differently. Today, in the fashion sector, sustainability is a familiar refrain. It has entered scholarly, industrial, and public consciousness and has resulted in an unprecedented acceptance of sustainability as a system of ideas. Not only that, but fashion is becoming viewed by other sectors, including food for instance, as a testbed of

CONTACT Kate Fletcher  k.t.fletcher@fashion.arts.ac.uk  Centre for Sustainable Fashion, London College of Fashion, University of the Arts, London, UK

Sustainable Redesign of the Global Fashion System: Exploring the Organizational, Technological, and Socio-cultural Dimensions of Transformation is supported by the Department of Design and FiP Research Lab of the Politecnico di Milano.

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sustainability transformation. Other sectors look on with interest as fashion – a cultural, ecological, and industrial process – experiments. These sectors pay special attention to whether fashion can address its profoundly problematic relationship with excess, rapid product obsolescence, and consumption.

Yet even from within the excitement of this current wave of sustainability-focused activity, there is evidence of the worrying state of the larger “ocean.” Data suggest that despite decades of scientific inquiry and countless rounds of industry initiatives, academic research, and design intelligence, the cumulative environmental impact of the fashion and textiles sector is *increasing* (Lehmann et al. 2019). At this same moment, we are in a climate emergency, with environmental scientists declaring that there is less than a decade to avert catastrophic climate change and to embrace a necessary shift in knowledge and behavior (IPCC 2018). We are also on the cusp of a sixth mass extinction of life on Earth with levels of biodiversity loss reported of around 50% in 50 years (SCBD 2020). Further, we are still in the grips of a global pandemic which has revealed society as desperately unequal and us humans as profoundly interdependent beings, dependent on each other for both transmission of disease and for health.

This current moment is perhaps the right one to pause (although not for too long as rapid action is needed!) to understand why we are where we are and then to make change. The reasons why levels of environmental impact across the fashion and textile sector as a whole have shown no net reduction are relatively straightforward, although they are uncomfortable for many of those who are invested, for many different purposes, in the status quo. The primary reason is due to the underlying purpose of the fashion and textile sector being set to economic growth. With such a precondition, continuous expansion becomes a structural requirement of the sector along with concomitant resource drawdown, waste, and pollution effects. The “better” the sector performs, the worse these problems become. Any attempts to mitigate the negative effects of this growth logic are constantly hampered by the expanding size of the sector itself. It is the gross impact of the collective system that is the indicator that matters, as it is the collective effect that causes total ecological harm.

So where next? The short answer is a changed system purpose, one that puts Earth, and all its species, including humans, first. Mathilda Tham and I put forward one such vision in *Earth Logic: Fashion Action Research Plan* (Fletcher and Tham 2019), but there are others – and indeed this plurality matters.

If we follow the logic of Earth first, fashion becomes a way to drive regeneration of ecosystems and human health, to transform the places in which we live. In it there are legion opportunities for fashion activity including, but not limited to, industry. Indeed, going forward “industry” will occupy a less dominant role in our textile and clothing lives and livelihoods. We will instead work with communities of makers, producers, wearers, reusers, within and across households with entirely new configurations. New roles will emerge, new opportunities for the media, for citizens, for skilled craftsmen and women, for teenagers, for progressives, for those who appreciate tradition and material qualities.

Earth Logic mobilizes the practice of systems thinking in which the work of transformation is incumbent on seeing the entirety of the fashion sector as a system – and then intervening to affect whole system change. Systems thinkers such as Donella Meadows (2017 [1997]) highlight how the places where efforts are most often focused are typically the places where the smallest benefits can be gained, underscoring instead the need to direct attention at high level systems questions such as the rules and the goals of the fashion system. This makes sustainability initiatives in fashion as much a political challenge, involving structural choices and governance, as it is a technical challenge, focusing on fibers, supply chains, and consumer behavior.

Inevitably within Earth Logic there are hard choices, and these cannot be avoided. Ecological systems both enable fashion activity and also limit it, firmly drawing a line around the scale of activity that is possible within planetary boundaries. The implications on the fashion system of *less*, that is of materials-demand reduction, are profound for ecological health and livelihoods. A recent study by Cambridge University investigating carbon neutrality for the UK suggested that absolute zero carbon emissions by 2050 would only be possible by reducing demand for all goods by 40% while simultaneously redirecting production and consumption to low-carbon alternatives (Allwood et al. 2019). Such a challenge is not for the faint hearted, nor for those without imagination. As Frederic Jameson memorably stated, “It is now easier for us to imagine the end of the world than an alternative to capitalism” (see Boehnert 2018, 24). Yet many alternatives already exist in the fashion context and these are being enacted in a wide range of communities already today. They often work within a frame of localism where place adaptation, mixed with regional distinctiveness and more direct influence over the decisions that affect a community’s life, create a system with changed priorities including for

how we dress and the way to decide how much is enough.

The window for action on climate change underscores the fact that time is short and that every action counts. Time then for us to move at pace into the broad, inclusive, creative, richly fertile ground opened up when we recognize that to drive long-lasting, life-giving change we must scrutinize fashion-system priorities. Time to employ a new logic, the logic of Earth.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ORCID

Kate Fletcher  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7882-5366>

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