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Sweatshops • A Necessary Evil

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Introduction

The world is globalizing. Globalization of lesser developed countries often comes paired with sweatshops and poor treatment of employees. Are sweatshops a necessary step for a country to become industrialized?

Sweatshops have been present in a countless amount of countries, even in the United States of America. Although America has developed out of this phase now and has set regulations to where sweatshops are unacceptable, they still underwent this process. China has been running sweatshops for years but now that poverty has decreased, is slowly pulling out of this type of labor. At the other end of the spectrum is Thailand. Companies are more recently turning to Thailand for cheap labor which has caused the development of these sweatshops. This article will address these three countries and where they have stood with sweatshops in the past and where they currently stand. Because it was not possible to visit these locations to gather first-hand research, this paper is based on other's professional research and observations.

To investigate this topic, a great number of sources from established authors and business journals were examined. All sources are reliable and show sources for their information. No interviews were conducted but opinions and information was gathered from online documents.

In our American culture, the idea of sweatshops seems unacceptable. We live in a culture where the employee comes first and the work comes

second. This is due to the past that America has had. There have been several anti-sweatshop movements by Americans who find sweatshops in other countries to be beneath them. "The anti-“sweatshop” complaints ignore a crucial fact: the people who agree to work in these factories live in countries plagued by abject poverty. For them, 60 cents an hour or a 12-hour work day—terms that seem terrible to an educated American—actually represent a step forward. These factories are an important economic opportunity for the people who work in them” (Trancinski, 2000). Often these anti-sweatshop thinkers neglect this aspect of sweatshops. Third world citizens are thankful for the jobs that they get at sweatshops. It gives them an avenue to get out of poverty. People who despise sweatshops only look at where their lives are today. They don't take in consideration where the United States was years ago, and how it had to develop to have the luxuries that are common today.

We have seen the affects of sweatshops all over the world, whether they be good or bad, they have assisted world development to where it is today. Sweatshops are a necessary evil to developing third world countries and to bring them out of poverty.

United States of America

The United States of America has become a standard to the nations. It is admired by the world as a place of economic expansion and capabilities. Approaching its eastern borders from various parts of the world, foreigners collectively recognize the prominent statue that rings liberty. Just seeing the word *America*

breeds within many a sense of patriotism and desire to become something you never thought possible. The Chinese refer to The United States as the “beautiful kingdom or nation.” But with all of its glory and advancement, few remember the hard and, often times, ridiculed past. What was it that made America what it is today?

Recently there has been a push in America to end the use of sweatshops. The establishment of various movement groups has put the heat on large multinational companies to pull out of foreign manufacturing. What if we were to make the bold and, somewhat, controversial statement that sweatshops are what built our nation, and that sweatshops are a necessary step for developing countries? Our argument is that hard work, long hours, and, in many cases, sweatshops are what made America. Laura Hopke, the author of *Sweatshops: The History of an American Idea*, stated, “The sweatshop is as American as apple pie” (2004, p.1). In support of this idea that sweatshops are a necessary evil I present a quote from Hugh Hindman which states, “we know of no major advanced nation that did not go through a stage of pervasive child labor on the path to advancement” (2002, p.4). Though that particular quote was referring to specifically child labor it reflects the same idea that sweatshops are necessary. He goes onto say, “no nation has developed an advanced industrialized sector without going through this ‘dirty’ phase of development” (2002, p.5). Let me give you an example of a sweatshop that was founded in America, and that led this great nation to economic prosperity.

During the turn of the century America became one of the hubs throughout the world for its innovation. The American people’s desire to expand their minds and invent the next greatest commodity ran rampant. During that time America became famous because of people like Thomas Edison, Orville and Wilbur Wright, William Harley and Arthur Davidson, and Henry Ford. Without Thomas Edison we would not live in the comfort of buildings running off

electricity. Without the Wright brothers the ease of travel by flight would still be only a dream. Without William Harley and Arthur Davidson the ever famous Harley Davidson Company would not be in existence. Without Henry Ford we wouldn’t have anything as easy as we do now. Not only did Henry Ford help pioneer the industry of automobiles, he found a way to mass produce them through his innovative method called the assembly line. This innovation didn’t only bring about cheaper cars, but rather changed the current way of living in the United States. According to Carol Davis, who wrote the article *Henry Ford the Man Who Changed America*, Henry Ford, “...allowed for a huge expansion of the middle class...The Model T fostered a movement from farms to urban manufacturing jobs, and ultimately into the suburbs” (2003). He goes onto say in the same article, “It also allowed for faster delivery of goods and services because doctors, mail carriers, and small business owners could afford these horseless carriages” (Davis, 2003). There is no doubt that the Ford Motor Company became the pride and joy of America. There is no doubt that the Ford Motor Company played one of the largest roles in building the American economy to what it is today. And there is no doubt that the working conditions found within the factory that made it all possible were nothing short of sweatshop standards.

A statement given in Peter Winnewisser’s book, *The Legendary Model A Ford: The Ultimate History of America’s Great Automobile*, will help us see what some of the working conditions were like in one of America’s most famous companies, the Ford Motor Company. In his book it says, “...working conditions at Ford for those who managed to keep their jobs during the Depression were not easy and certainly a long way from what they are today. Henry Ford’s philosophy toward the working man can be understood, at least in part, by reflecting on two statements from his book *My Life and Work*... ‘We make no attempt to coddle the people who work with us,’ and, ‘A great

business is really too big to be human” (2005, p.168). There have been many former employees of the Ford Motor Company that have expressed their disappointment with the working conditions found within the factory that changed America. You can clearly determine that Henry Ford, originally, did not want to take care of his employees and that the working conditions were very tough. However, even though the Ford assembly line was, in many definitions, a sweatshop, it played one of the largest roles in building up the United States to its current dominate economic status. So I pose the question again, are sweatshops a necessary evil for the advancement of an economy. According to past history in America it appears to at least play a major role.

China

In recent years, China has hosted many sweatshops and continues to do so today. American’s see tags that say, “Made in China,” and there is often a negative connotation to it. China has been known to be able to make the same product that the United States does but for a fraction of the cost. This is because of the low labor costs that companies have because they pay their employees so little. China had created a name for itself by being able to produce large quantities of products for a small price.

As we have found in other countries, sweatshops were a necessity to developing an industrialized country. In an excerpt from the *New York Times Magazine*, Kristof agrees by saying, “Partly because of these tens of thousands of sweatshops, China’s economy has become one of the hottest in the world” (Kristof, WuDunn, 2000). Sweatshops laid ground to where China is today.

China is in a development stage that is beginning to reject sweatshops. They have played their part but now companies can go to similar neighboring countries for a cheaper price. Poverty has decreased since sweatshops were implemented which has given the Chinese

people some hope in having higher paying jobs. Although many are still stuck in sweatshops, the future of China is promising. Sweatshops will most likely fade out of the Chinese culture because people are getting out of poverty and they are rising above sweatshops (Schuman, 2006).

Sweatshops were the stepping stone that helped many poor Chinese farmers get out of poverty and provide a new life for themselves. While there is still poverty in the more rural areas of China, sweatshops have brought industrialization to the Chinese economy. China is a good example to look at when it comes to how the life of sweatshops should work. They have come into the country to provide jobs while also providing companies with low cost products. After they have run their course and helped their employees earn money to bring them out of poverty, sweatshop should and are beginning to go out of “style”. People no longer desire to work at them and move onto bigger and better jobs.

Sweatshops definitely have their time and place. As China continues to prosper, sweatshops are no longer acceptable to their employees. For example, Foxconn, a manufacturer for iPhones, is having trouble with their low waged workers (Wong, 2010). There have been suicides throughout the workers because of the poor conditions. This is the image that many people who protest sweatshops see. Although this is something that needs to and is being addressed, it goes to show that sweatshops have almost completed their course in China. Workers are no longer thankful for the opportunity that they have to work for minimal pay. It is time that they move on to bigger and better jobs. Sweatshops have paved the way that the Chinese people can now expect to have a better job and not be okay with the poor conditions they are facing.

Thailand

In the past, Thailand has been known for its rice as well as other crops. The labor force has been

heavily focused on agriculture and been the source of income for most of the population. Farming had not proven to be a significant source of money so most of the population has been under the poverty line. In more recent years, Thailand has been industrializing. There are advantages and disadvantages that are packaged with industrialization. Since industrialization was a fairly new idea to Thailand, they had to go through all of the bad stages that other countries had to undergo, like sweatshops.

Like in most countries, Thailand's development is vastly different from region to region. The development ranges from industrialized cities like Bangkok to rural farming towns where poverty is high. The wealth distribution in Thailand is highly skewed. The lowest 60% of the population only receive about 30% of the nation's total income, while the top 10% of the population only receive 32% of it (*Thailand*, 2010). Not only is the nation's income distributed poorly, the population is rising rapidly and is the twentieth most populated country in the world. High poverty mixed with a high population causes citizens to act rashly when it comes to getting a job and an income.

Although parts of Thailand are beginning to be quite industrialized, that is not the case for all of Thailand. Most of the population is willing to undergo poor treatment and bad conditions just to hold a job in a factory. Many of these factories in Thailand would be considered sweat shops in the eyes of an American. When addressing sweatshops, many Thai people have the same views. One man speaking of his daughter and her job at a sweatshop factory said, "It's good pay. I hope she can keep that job. There's all this talk about factories closing now, and she said there are rumors that her factory might close. I hope that doesn't happen. I don't know what she would do then" (Kristof, WuDunn, 2000). Sweatshop workers in Thailand highly value their jobs. It is good pay that they would not be able to earn any other way. Working in these sweatshops enables these

workers to live a more leisurely life than they could even imagine.

Sweatshops are a more recent development in Thailand. Companies like Nike decide to move into countries that have low labor costs. These countries benefit from the economic boost that the companies bring. They provide jobs for citizens and they bring money from other sources into the country. Companies such as Nike, Tommy Hilfiger, and Gap have all invested in starting factories in Thailand. These are all large companies and try to provide a good environment with a limited amount of money. Because Thailand is still in the midst of sweatshops, it is hard to say that they have benefited Thailand on a long term scale. Even though this is the case, it is possible to say that with these factories, the amount of Thailand's population that is under the poverty line is decreasing.

Conclusion

Are sweatshops a necessary evil? After reviewing the various stages of economic growth of three different countries it makes a very strong case that they are. It is very much against what we as a people think should be the case. We all know the hardships that come from these kinds of work places and there are a lot of us that are doing all that we can to stop these awful work conditions. Some have even gone to the extreme of not buying any product from a company that utilizes a sweatshop to manufacture their products. But after reviewing these countries we should be concerned that we will hinder the advancement of these poorer countries by trying to abolish the very thing that will eventually build their nation's economic status. ■

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