

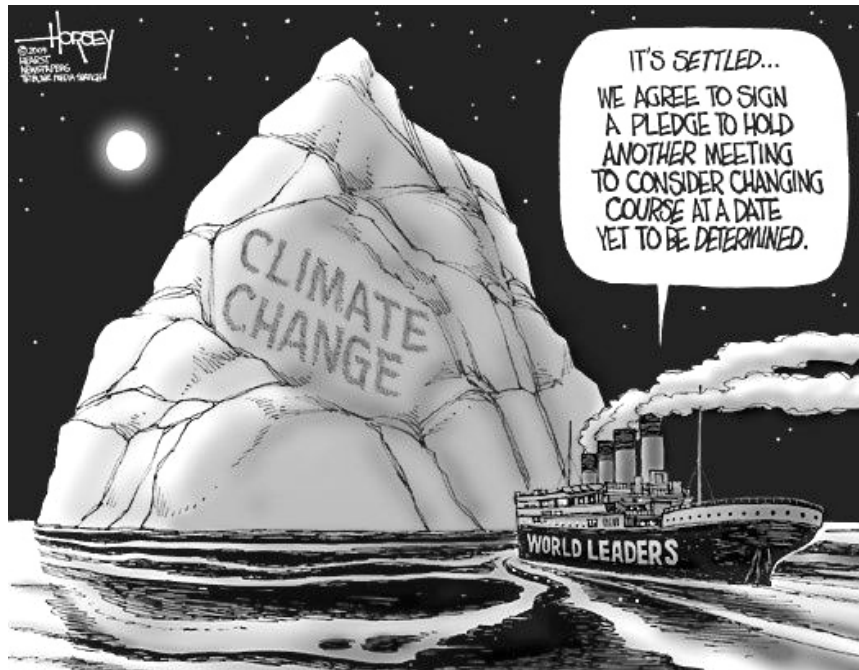
# The Center Does Not Hold

I don't have much difficulty understanding radicals. Radicals make sense to me. I understand the reasoning that looks at the gross environmental destruction wrought by civilization and recognizes the need for radical, not incremental change in how we live and do business on Planet Earth. I comprehend the mindset that sees the level of institutionalized violence, injustice and inequity in our society and advocates radical, not incremental change in our political institutions. I even see where people are coming from when they talk about the moral decay they see in our society and I understand why they also say we need radical, not incremental change in our social institutions. Whether you want a new Islamic Caliphate, a white Christian nation, parliamentary socialism, kibbutz style communism, native tribal sovereignty, an African-American homeland, or complete anarchy, I understand people who recognize the need for radical change.

I may not agree with you about what you think is right, or with what you think is good for me or for the rest of us, but I don't think you are stupid for wanting to try something else, whatever it is, and I agree with your assessment that we are doing it wrong. Just for anyone who doubts this, let me remind you that COP24, the global climate summit in Poland came and went without producing a meaningful commitment to reign-in carbon emissions, proving once again, for only the 24<sup>th</sup> time, that world governments are totally incapable and/or unwilling to address the critical issues of our time, intelligently. However, just a few weeks before, the G20 met in Argentina, and the same world governments agreed to embrace radical and unpopular new technologies with real long-term risks, like GMOs, universal cyber-surveillance and Chinese style "social capitalism" systems for global population control.

I understand the need for radical change. What I don't understand, is how people look at the Orwellian dystopia our society has become, carefully observe the Anthropocene Extinction Event unfolding in real time all around us and witness the dysfunction in our government that consistently fails to address the needs of its citizens, while it exterminates millions of people all over the world for interfering with its hegemony. Who looks at that and thinks "Hmm, maybe a tweak here or there, but otherwise, Full Steam Ahead!"? That I don't understand.

I understand that people like their familiar rut, especially if it's a comfortable one, and if you are comfortable, I understand not really giving a fuck about things until they bite you on the ass. I also understand that people feel invested in the system. They bet their lives on this system years ago, before things started biting them on the ass, and before they knew how bankrupt the system really was. Now they don't feel like they can afford to walk away from that investment. I also understand denial, the inability to face unpleasant facts, and I understand people who feel helpless and



depressed about the whole situation too. All of that makes sense to me, considering our predicament.

Everyone else has abandoned the political center. When we talk about this phenomena, we call it "polarization" or "tribalism," and lately we blame this mass exodus from the political mainstream on "radicalizing rhetoric" from "extremists." In reality, however, we abandoned mainstream politics and political ideology because of its proven bankruptcy. The people who pay attention, think for themselves, and make their own decisions, have abandoned the center. They don't agree with each other about what comes next, but they've had enough of what we've got now. All that's left of the center are the stranded assets, the comfortable ruts, the depression and the denial, and that doesn't inspire anyone.

You can't inspire people with dead ideas. The wreckage of our culture is piled too deep, and the contradictions in our ideology are far too glaring. We can't help but see the failure of the

system. We can't help but see the injustice of the system. We can't help but see the violence of the system, and we can no longer even pretend that the system works for us.

We have abandoned the center because we know better. We know that more of the same is not good enough. We don't agree on where to go from here, but we don't like the road we're on, and navigating carefully down the center of it just doesn't cut it anymore. We abandon the ideology that has united us for over two centuries only because it has lost its integrity. The system is corrupt and the evidence of our own lives makes it impossible to believe in it any longer.

People don't abandon ship and jump into lifeboats unless they are pretty sure the ship is sinking. Calling it "polarization" or "tribalism" amounts to nothing but denial and scapegoating. Instead of facing the obvious and overwhelming evidence of the failure of our technological culture, or addressing the challenges of our time, we blame "radicals" and their "polarizing rhetoric" for telling the truth about our predicament and offering their particular alternative vision for the future.

The ship we call "civilization" is sinking, measurably, undeniably, and inexorably. A lot of us will go down with the ship, but if anyone survives, they will be in lifeboats, built by radicals, and built from "polarizing rhetoric" held together with strong personal bonds, a unifying struggle, and a shared vision.

It really doesn't matter much, anymore, who takes the helm of this sinking ship. What matters now is who is in your lifeboat, and does it float.

**John Hardin**  
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## Clothing, Consumption & Climate

Fashion brands, I'm talking to you: Enough is enough. Stop making me think it is normal to shop all the time, not just when I need something. You make flimsy dresses in cheap factories, and I snap them up. You drop new items every day, then send me emails—freakily customized to my tastes—telling me I must buy them *right now*, or they will sell out. And I believe you. To make room for new outfits, I schedule regular trips to Goodwill to donate the old ones, which will likely end up in a landfill anyway. (In California alone, Goodwill spends \$7 million on dumping clothes.)

For the past three decades, fashion brands have perfected the art of manufacturing cheap clothing by relying on poorly paid labor in developing countries, inventing inexpensive plastic-based materials, and increasing the speed of production. And because most brands project what customers will want to buy six to nine months in advance, designers rarely get their predictions right. There are always some looks that nobody wants to buy. When brands churn out thousands of new looks every season, the problem of unsold inventory just scales up. *The New York Times* reports that a power plant in Vasteras, the Swedish town where H&M launched, relies partly on burning products that the company cannot sell as a fuel source.

Churning out so many clothes has enormous environmental costs that aren't immediately obvious to consumers. But it is becoming increasingly clear that the fashion industry is contributing to the rapid destruction of our planet. A United Nations report says that we're on track to increase the world's temperature by 2.7 degrees by 2040, which will flood our coastlines, intensify droughts, and lead to food shortages. Activists, world leaders, and the public at large are just beginning to reckon with the way the fashion industry is accelerating the pace of climate change.

Brands have a responsibility to produce less, and consumers have a responsibility to consume less. A smattering of startups are already trying to move toward this model, which involves rethinking the fundamentals of the fashion industry, from the way that clothes are designed to how they are priced, and convincing consumers that buying less can be just as satisfying as buying more.

One thing is clear: The fashion industry is helping to propel climate change. And it's got to stop.

## The clothes that nobody wants

Consider H&M's great bonfire of 2018. The fast-fashion giant had \$4.3 billion worth of inventory that was unsellable. *Bloomberg* reported that the company had acquired this enormous pile of clothes after months of markdowns, but the clothes just weren't selling.

Each piece of unsold inventory requires raw materials and human labor to make, plus transportation to ship it around the world, which produces emissions. Every piece that ends up being burned produces greenhouse gases, too. Incinerating clothes releases 2,988 pounds of carbon dioxide per megawatt hour, which is even more than burning coal (2,249 pounds per megawatt hour) and natural gas (1,135 pounds per megawatt hour).

H&M released a statement saying that the clothing had been burned either because it was mold-infested or contained high amounts of lead. "At a last resort, we consider external buyers of our overstock," the company added. But the scale of the incineration illustrates the staggering amount of clothing it produces every year. Companies across the fashion industry struggle with overproduction and unsellable inventory. Many brands will try to move their excess inventory by marking down prices, shoving them into the hands of customers for next to nothing. In a call with investors last May, Gap Inc.'s CFO said that the company had resorted to heavy discounting to clear unwanted clothing from stores, or to use her language, the company had made "strategic decisions to clear inventory through sell-off."

These deep discounts aren't much better than incineration. They shift unwanted inventory from a company's warehouse to the customer's closet. This encourages buyers to see those garments as valueless and disposable. It's no shocker when that item—which nobody wanted to buy at full-price—ends up in the trash, or at Goodwill, where it will likely end up in a landfill or an incinerator a few months down the line.

## 100 billion clothes a year for just 7 billion humans

Over the past few years, I've reported on brands making changes to mitigate their environmental damage. Adidas is eliminating virgin plastic from its supply chain. Levi's is

reducing water waste. Nike is moving to 100% renewable energy. I don't want to dismiss these efforts: They're all small steps in the right direction. But the real, underlying issue here is that brands are producing way too many clothes—and they're convincing customers that it's normal to buy way more than they need.

In 2015, the fashion industry churned out 100 billion articles of clothing, doubling production from 2000, far outpacing global population growth. In that same period, we've stopped treating our clothes as durable, long-term purchases. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation has found that clothing utilization, or how often we wear our clothes, has dropped by 36% over the past decade and a half, and many of us wear clothes only 7 to 10 times before it ends up in a landfill. Studies show that we only really wear 20% of our overflowing closets.

For the past few years, we've pointed the finger at fast-fashion brands like H&M, Zara, and Forever21, saying that they are responsible for this culture of overconsumption. But that's not entirely fair. The vast majority of brands in the \$1.3 billion fashion industry—whether that's Louis Vuitton or Levi's—measure growth in terms of increasing production every year. This means not just convincing new customers to buy products, but selling more and more to your *existing* customers. Right now, apparel companies make 53 million tons of clothes into the world annually. If the industry keeps up its exponential pace of growth, it is expected to reach 160 million tons by 2050.

I'm not exaggerating when I say that making so many clothes is destroying the planet. Decades of discarded clothes are literally clogging up our oceans and landfills. In the United States alone, we send 21 billion pounds of textiles into landfills every single year, and since most modern clothing contains some plastic-based fibers, they will never decompose. And speaking of plastic pollution, synthetic fabrics that get swept into the oceans live there forever, choking animals that mistake them for food. The fashion industry currently relies on 98 million tons of oil to make synthetic fibers; it contributes 20% to the world's water pollution thanks to toxic dyes; and it generates 1.2 billion tons of greenhouse gases.

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