The Circular Reckoning

Fast Fashion, Sustainability Law, and the Next Fiber · 2020–Present

> **Content note:** This chapter includes accounts of people killed, injured, or held captive. Preview these stories before class: The Shein Reckoning; Rana Plaza.

GUIDING QUESTION

Who should pay the true cost of fast fashion: brands, consumers, governments, or the workers who already do?

Teacher notes

Objectives: students will be able to

- Place the chapter's key events, from 2021 to 2026, in order and explain why each mattered.
- Analyze 2 primary sources for context, audience, purpose, and point of view.
- Use the chapter's vocabulary accurately: Fast fashion, Circular economy, Extended producer responsibility, Joint liability, Wage theft.
- Write an evidence-based argument that answers the guiding question.

AP U.S. History
Period 9 (1980–present)

Standards

D2.His.1.9-12	Explain how events were shaped by their time and place and by broader historical contexts.
D2.His.4.9-12	Analyze the factors that shaped people's perspectives in different eras.
D2.His.10.9-12	Identify the limitations of different kinds of historical evidence.
D2.His.16.9-12	Integrate evidence from multiple sources into a reasoned argument about the past.
RH.9-10.1 / RH.11-12.1	Cite specific textual evidence from primary and secondary sources.
RH.9-10.4 / RH.11-12.4	Determine the meaning of words and phrases as used in historical texts.
RH.9-10.6 / RH.11-12.6	Compare and evaluate authors' points of view on the same events.
WHST.9-10.1 / WHST.11-12.1	Write arguments focused on discipline-specific content.

Pacing

Day 1 (50 minutes)

5 min · Before you read: guiding question and predictions
15 min · Reading and timeline
25 min · Primary source workshop (2 sources)
5 min · Exit ticket

Day 2 (50 minutes)

5 min · Key terms matching
20 min · Corroboration and discussion questions
25 min · Claim, evidence, reasoning paragraph

Teaching hard history

• Never use role-play or simulations of slavery, violence, or other atrocities. Ask students to analyze the testimony and documented choices of real people instead.

• Pair the voices of the people who did the work (enslaved people, children, strikers, immigrants) with the voices of those who profited, and ask whose records survived and why.

• Primary sources are reproduced word for word, including period language and dialect transcribed by interviewers. Before reading, discuss who recorded each source and for whom. Do not ask students to perform dialect aloud.

• Tell students before they see images of injured, captive, or dead people, and give them a way to step back.

• Distinguish what the sources show from what they cannot prove. Several stories in this exhibit correct popular myths; name the myth, then the evidence.

Guidance follows Learning for Justice, "Teaching Hard History: American Slavery" (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2018).

Answer key: key terms

Fast fashion: B · Circular economy: A · Extended producer responsibility: D · Joint liability: E · Wage theft: C

PART 1

Before you read

1. Read the guiding question. Write down what you already know, or think you know, about it.
2. Predict one way your answer might change after reading the sources.

PART 2

Read

The third decade of the twenty-first century has forced the industry to confront its full bill: microplastic pollution, documented labor abuses in ultra-fast fashion, and growing consumer and regulatory pressure against disposable clothing. The textile economy is being contested in legislatures, courts, and laboratories.

The post-pandemic era has crystallized a reckoning two decades in the making. Ultra-fast-fashion platforms such as Shein, adding thousands of new styles to their sites each day, have drawn investigations into working hours, product safety, and copying, and have prompted legislative responses in Europe and

the United States. The European Union adopted a strategy in 2022 for sustainable and circular textiles by 2030. In New York, a proposed Fashion Act that would require large brands to map and disclose their supply chains has been introduced in every session since 2022 but had not passed as of 2026. Resale platforms have grown rapidly, and industry forecasts project further gains. Biomaterials companies are experimenting with materials grown from mycelium and fermented proteins—though several high-profile ventures have stalled. The next chapter of the four-century American textile story is being written in real time.



A textile-recycling bin beside ordinary waste containers. Most discarded clothing worldwide is still landfilled or incinerated. Daniel Capilla, "Textile Recycling Container and Waste Containers," Málaga, Spain (2022). Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

PART 3

Timeline

Students write one sentence on why each event mattered.

2021

The Shein Investigation

In November, the Swiss NGO Public Eye reports seventy-five-hour work weeks, no contracts, and missing emergency exits at workshops supplying Shein.

2022

The New York Fashion Act Introduced

In January, legislation is introduced in Albany to require large fashion companies to map at least half of their supply chains and set environmental targets; it is reintroduced in later sessions without passage.

2022

EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles

On March 30, the European Commission adopts a strategy setting a 2030 vision of durable, repairable, recyclable textiles, to be pursued through binding measures such as ecodesign rules.

2023

Mylo Paused

Bolt Threads halts production of Mylo, its mycelium-based leather alternative backed by Stella McCartney, Adidas, Kering, and others, after failing to secure funding.

2026

Shein Lists in Hong Kong
After abandoning earlier listing plans in New York and London, Shein completes a Hong Kong IPO on September 1 at a valuation far below its 2022 private-market peak.

PART 4

Key terms

Fast fashion (answer B)
A business model that rapidly copies trends and produces large amounts of cheap clothing meant to be worn briefly.

Circular economy (answer A)
An economic system designed to keep materials in use through repair, reuse, and recycling instead of throwing them away.

Extended producer responsibility (answer D)
Laws requiring manufacturers to pay for collecting, recycling, or disposing of their products after customers are done with them.

Joint liability (answer E)
A legal rule that makes a brand share responsibility for violations committed by the contractors it hires.

Wage theft (answer C)
When employers fail to pay workers wages they are legally owed, for example by paying below minimum wage or skipping overtime.

PART 5

Primary source workshop

These excerpts are quoted word for word, including the spelling and language of their time.

DOCUMENT A

Employment Injury Insurance in Bangladesh (statement)

International Labour Organization, January 29, 2024

> On 24 April 2013, the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Dhaka, Bangladesh, which housed five garment factories, killed at least 1,132 people and injured more than 2,500. ... These disasters, among the worst industrial accidents on record, awoke the world to the poor working conditions faced by workers in the ready-made garment sector in Bangladesh.

Context: The UN's labor agency reflects on the factory disasters that exposed the human cost of cheap clothing made for Western brands. After Rana Plaza, brands and unions signed the legally binding Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety.

Source: Employment injury insurance in Bangladesh: Bridging social security cases. International Labour Organization. 2024-. https://www.ilo.org/resource/statement/employment-injury-insurance-bangladesh-bridging-social-security-cases

Historical context
What was happening when and where this was created?

Intended audience
Who was meant to read, hear, or see it?

Purpose
Why was it created? What did its creator want to happen?

Point of view
Whose perspective does it show, and whose is missing?

DOCUMENT B

Senate Bill 62: Garment Worker Protection Act

California State Legislature, September 27, 2021

> Adding to this problem is the peculiar way in which garment workers are paid—by the piece. Not only does utilizing the piece rate enable, and even justify, subminimum wage, but it also creates unsafe working conditions, as garment workers are forced to constantly work as quickly as possible to complete as many items as possible in a workday. ... To ensure that employees are paid for all hours worked, an employee engaged in the performance of garment manufacturing shall not be paid by the piece or unit, or by the piece rate.

Context: California, home to the largest garment manufacturing workforce in the United States, banned piece-rate pay in garment work and made brands jointly liable for wage theft by contractors. It was the first U.S. law of its kind.

Source: SB-62 Employment: garment manufacturing (2021–2022). California Legislative Information. 2021-. https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220SB62

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Corroborate
Compare "Employment Injury Insurance in Bangladesh (statement)" (International Labour Organization, January 29, 2024) with "Senate Bill 62: Garment Worker Protection Act" (California State Legislature, September 27, 2021). Where do they agree, where do they differ, and what might explain the differences?

PART 6

Discuss

1. According to the ILO, what happened at Rana Plaza and the Tazreen factory?
2. California's legislature argues that piece rates are dangerous as well as unfair. What reasoning does SB 62 give for that claim?
3. Compare SB 62's ban on piece rates with Clara Lemlich's 1909 complaints and Sarah Bagley's 1845 testimony. What has changed for garment workers, and what has not?
4. New laws in several states make brands pay for collecting and recycling used textiles. Is it fairer to regulate brands, tax consumers, or rely on voluntary resale and recycling programs? Argue.

PART 7

Write: claim, evidence, reasoning

Answer the guiding question in one paragraph, using the documents and the reading.

Claim	Answers the guiding question directly in one or two sentences.
Evidence	Cites at least two primary sources by name and at least one fact from the reading.
Reasoning	Explains how each piece of evidence supports the claim.
Sourcing	Notes at least one limitation of a source: who made it, when, and why.

PART 8

Exit ticket

1. In one sentence, how would you answer the guiding question now?
2. What piece of evidence would most change your mind?

Keep exploring

TRAGEDY

The Shein Reckoning

Inside the platform that adds thousands of new styles a day.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/shein-reckoning

IMPACT

The New York Fashion Act

A major U.S. attempt to legislate apparel supply chains—still unpassed.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/ny-fashion-act

INNOVATION

Mycelium, Brewed Protein, and the Next Fiber

Early attempts at cloth grown in trays and tanks rather than fields.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/biomaterials-future

TRAGEDY

Rana Plaza

The 2013 factory collapse in Bangladesh that exposed the hidden supply chains of American brands.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/rana-plaza-collapse

LABOR

From El Monte to SB 62

Slavery in a Los Angeles suburb in 1995, and California's 2021 law making brands answer for their sweatshops.

https://www.threadingamerica.com/topics/el-monte-and-sb-62

SOURCES AND CREDITS

EU Strategy for Sustainable and Circular Textiles (COM(2022) 141). European Commission (EUR-Lex). 2022-. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX%3A52022DC0141

75-hour weeks for Shein: Public Eye looks behind the Chinese online fashion giant's glitzy front. Public Eye. 2021. https://www.publiceye.ch/en/media-corner/press-releases/detail/75-hour-weeks-for-shein-public-eye-looks-behind-the-chinese-online-fas

Fashion Sustainability and Social Accountability Act (A4631B, 2025–2026 session). New York State Senate-. https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2025/A4631/amendment/B

Image: Daniel Capilla, "Textile Recycling Container and Waste Containers," Málaga, Spain (2022). Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Threading America, presented by Anatar. Read the full chapter at https://www.threadingamerica.com/chapters/circular-reckoning. This edition was generated on November 9, 2026.