

**Folks:** This article concerns *class warfare* on a global scale. The champions of global *corporate* capitalism are always touting the miracles of capitalism in raising the standard of living of people around the world through what is known as *globalization*. Allow us to make unlimited amounts of money *without any rules or regulations* that can interfere with this goal, the representatives of these corporations and their allies say, and *everyone* will benefit. But is this really true? On a related point: The high standard of living most of us enjoy in the U.S. today comes at a price: the destruction of lives and the environment. (Note: although this article was written for a U.K. audience, it is just as applicable to a U.S. audience.)

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## **An ethical guide to your home: from mobile phones to sofas**

Are you sitting comfortably? Really? On a sofa that's helped destroy the rainforest? In jeans whose production causes silicosis? Find out what lies behind many of the items in modern homes

By Lucy Siegle

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### **1 Mobile phone**

It is a vision from hell. Deep in the Congolese jungle, in an illegal mine that is little more than a hole in the ground, men and young boys are standing on top of each other, scraping earth from the walls. At 45 degrees, it is unbearably hot. Danish film director Frank Poulsen describes being down these holes as "pretty testing". At points, the size of the space means he is unable to move forward and Chance, a 16-year-old who sometimes works in these conditions for up to a week at a time, takes over the filming.

This footage forms one of the most haunting sections of Poulsen's new documentary, *Blood In The Mobile*, an examination of the relationship between the minerals used to make mobile phones and the civil war that continues to rage in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Over the past 15 years, the conflict has cost the lives of more than 5 million people, and 300,000 women have been raped. Armed groups are financed through the sale of these minerals.

The gold rush began in the 1990s with coltan, a mineral that becomes tantalum. Its supreme heat resistance and reliability have allowed the miniaturisation of our gadgets. Essentially, tantalum allows a device to be hand-held. But in this particular hole in Bisie, North Kivu, they are scraping for cassiterite (tin ore), which now replaces lead in consumer electronics. It might equally have been cobalt for batteries, or the tungsten needed for a phone's vibrating function.

It is debatable whether war-torn Bisie is more dangerous above or below ground. The holes periodically collapse and the "miners", some of whom are children, die beneath the earth. They risk all of this for little or no financial benefit.

Once the minerals have changed hands for a few dirty notes (the miners are paid a fraction of the minerals' worth), they are usually flown to the city of Goma in eastern DRC, trucked to Uganda, then on to Mombasa in Kenya, where they are smelted together with minerals from other parts of the globe. In effect, they become untraceable.

The provider of Poulsen's phone is Nokia, the largest manufacturer of mobiles in the world and the self-proclaimed market leader in corporate social responsibility. By its own admission, for the past decade it has been aware of the link between the minerals it uses and the war in Congo, but it is still unable to sell a phone that is guaranteed to be free of conflict minerals. No mobile phone company can. Nokia claims that Congolese minerals are a tiny part of the picture. It says most of its supplies are from legal mines in southern Congo, and in Australia and Brazil, but that still does not rule out the use of Congolese minerals from illegal mines. The fact remains, our mobiles are tainted by raw earth minerals from the dirtiest supply chain possible.

**The alternative** Scientists are currently working on being able to fingerprint minerals used in mobiles, but at the moment there are no conflict mineral-free phones available. Keep yours for as long as possible and recycle it if you are getting a new one. Hassle MPs for greater transparency from manufacturers. Further information and template emails can be found at <http://bloodinthemobile.org>

### **2 Coffee**

You might be forgiven for thinking campaigns by major chains to prove how enlightened and farmer-friendly they are, bolstered by in-store pictures of smiling coffee growers holding sacks of beans, mean that the gross inequalities exposed in *Black Gold*, the 2006 documentary about the coffee industry, are a thing of the past. But there is much evidence to suggest the lot of most farmers has barely improved or even become worse. Climate problems are causing weather patterns to change, making it difficult to plan seasons.

Ian Agnew, who runs the *Black Gold* Foundation, which is trying to keep the coffee debate alive, is disappointed by the lack of improvement. "The producers still don't understand the markets," he says. "They don't understand how valuable is the cherry they've grown. They are being robbed. In Kenya prices hit a high but are already dropping. When farmers see that high, they spend more money producing the crop. But the prices paid to them are on a constant rollercoaster."

It is no longer a simple supply-and-demand equation, thanks to the entrance of speculators buying through the New York commodity markets. In effect, these speculators take advantage of quirks in the coffee chain to gamble with price and demand, driving up the price (the farmers don't see a piece of this) and distorting the market. To reform things truly, coffee needs to be producer-centric, but instead the producers end up at the bottom of the chain, well below speculators, coffee retailers and roasters.

"We need a deeper look at the supply chain," Agnew says. "The shorter it is, the more of the value goes to the producers." Five years ago, Black Gold stated that from a £2 cup of coffee, the producers would scrape around 2p. How does that figure compare today? "It's really about the same." [Note: A 100 pence = one pound = about one U.S. dollar and sixty cents.]

The alternative Fairtrade is a good way in. It's trying to get a better price for producers, but it can't revolutionise the entire system and some activists argue that it has now been hijacked by multinationals. Marc Francis, the director of Black Gold, points to Café Direct as a functioning cooperative model. It puts producers in charge of more of the supply chain and the profits. Illy, while not perfect, is a family company with strong links to coffee producers. Of the nationwide chains, Ethical Consumer Magazine puts AMT Coffee as its best buy.

### **3 Sofa**

The leather industry was certainly sitting a lot more comfortably before activists, notably Greenpeace, harnessed Nasa satellite imagery of the Brazilian Amazon biome. In recent years, half of the world's tropical forest loss has occurred in Brazil. Three-quarters of this forest clearing is believed to be driven by cattle ranching – Brazil has the world's largest commercial cattle herd. Satellite pictures of Brazilian cattle ranches were compared with maps with the legally agreed boundaries (by law it's supposed to be 20% grazing, 80% forest) and massive infringements were found. The results were compiled in a devastating report, *Slaughtering The Amazon*, which also revealed that the Brazilian government had shares in the beef and leather processing companies who were implicated in the deforestation.

A flurry of activism post-report centred on the top trainer manufacturers but there is also evidence that traces a proportion of those 35m-45m hides produced each year to the leather in furniture. These cheaper, imperfect hides are ideal for the "affordable" leather sofas offered by most furniture chains. The classic leather defence – the "Made in Italy" tag – is misleading. The clue is in the lack of Italian cattle ranches. Leather is almost always imported, then finished in Italy.

The alternative US NGO the National Wildlife Federation is working with ranchers in Brazil to raise higher quality cattle on less land. The goal is certified deforestation-free leather. Until then, it's a return to loose covers.

### **4 Cashmere jumper**

Despite its luxury sobriquet, "the diamond fibre", you can now buy a cashmere twinset on a trip to the supermarket. The lifting of trade barriers in 2004 allowed the UK market to be flooded with Chinese cashmere and helped seal the fate of the Scottish cashmere industry. At the last count, around 2,000 cashmere companies in China controlled 93% of the global market, producing cashmere at unprecedentedly low prices and high volume. This is exerting extraordinary pressure on the fragile ecosystem of the Alashan plains of Mongolia, in the Gobi desert, one of the few regions on earth with the right climatic conditions to produce cashmere goats. Between the 90s and the mid-2000s, the herd increased here from 2.4 million to 24 million. The slim vegetation and vulnerable landscape could maintain 2.4 million goats, but 24 million of them chopping up the ground, and the retinue of water-consuming industrial processes that followed, has contributed to huge desertification. Without grass and shrubs to hold the dunes in place, the deserts are growing by an estimated 400 square miles every year.

The alternative Go higher up the chain to producers who know their suppliers, such as Brora, Izzy Lane and Johnstons of Elgin. Purecollectioncashmere.com promotes ethical cashmere and gives a fair price to herdsmen committed to sustainable strategies.

### **5 Cotton curtains**

Uzbekistan is the second biggest cotton exporter in the world (behind the US), sending out 800,000 tonnes every year, mainly to Europe. Reports from the Environmental Justice Foundation confirm that the harvest that is about to end there has been picked courtesy of state-enforced child labour. Just as in previous years, children as young as 12 have been transported miles from home and, after long days in the field, meeting increasingly unrealistic cotton quotas, have been made to sleep in makeshift accommodation. There have also been reports of physical and sexual abuse. Only once the harvest is finished are they allowed home. Eyewitness accounts report that pregnant women have also been working. Around 40% of all cotton from Uzbekistan is made into clothes and products in Bangladesh, and a large percentage of the cheap cotton products in the UK comes via Bangladesh.

The alternative Finding ethical furnishings can be tricky. Try small pioneering retailers such as Green Fibres and Fairtrade cotton (Uzbek cotton is not certified by the Fairtrade Foundation). Many high-street retailers, including Walmart (Asda), Tesco, M&S, C&A, Matalan and Debenhams, have pledged to boycott Uzbek cotton while enforced child labour persists. For a list of retailer responses to the issue, go to [antislavery.org](http://antislavery.org) (note it is this issue only, not pesticides or water). Out of these, M&S would seem to have the most robust policy. You can also join [ejfoundation.org](http://ejfoundation.org)'s campaign for country-of-origin labels to be made mandatory on cotton products.

### **6 Laptops**

We tend to think state-of-the-art robots must do the intense, detailed work needed to make our laptops – work that can mean completing the same action every three seconds for hours on end. But why would you bother when human labour is so cheap? While the material and distribution costs are pinned down, the wages of the millions of Chinese workers on the global electronics assembly line are seen as the

elastic part of the supply chain where the contractor can make some margin. These workers have been dubbed technoserfs. They live and work in mammoth electronics factories (Foxconn, the giant that manufactures for Apple, houses 400,000 workers in dormitories at its Longhua plant), earning a basic wage that cannot sustain them (in part because they are charged for countless expenses including bedding and rent). A report by NGO China Labour Watch (CLW) assessed 10 major manufacturers producing for blue-chip giants, including Dell, Sony, Apple and HP, between October 2010 and May 2011, and found there were multiple violations of basic Chinese labour laws. Technoserfs were left standing for 10 consecutive hours, working at high intensity on assembly lines, and that doesn't include overtime, which many are forced to work. Conditions are degrading – in one instance, factory workers were permitted one 10-minute loo break in the middle of the day, which sparked a virtual stampede to just a few toilets, so that many didn't make it in time.

In the summer, a spate of suicides at Foxconn cast further light on the life of a technoserf. "Twelve hours of work = standard" and "One year and I'm dead" were found in the notebook of one young man who took his own life. Suicide nets were put up to catch any would-be victims, which is as far away from addressing the root cause as it's possible to get. While Apple attracts the lion's share of attention for outsourcing to Foxconn, CLW concludes that "the failings of Foxconn exist in the majority of electronics factories, and are representative of the policies and behavioural norms found throughout the electronics industry".

The alternative Part of the pressure put on workers has been traced to the way global brands dictate ferocious production schedules after whipping up consumer frenzy for new devices. Stop buying trend-driven electronics, keep using your old ones for as long as possible and buy secondhand if you need to upgrade. Cheap fast fashion is becoming less palatable as consumers are increasingly aware of how it is made; it's time we put the same thought into electronic purchases.

## **7 Denim**

The allure of sandblasted jeans is in the faded or worn patina. We do some odd things to jeans to get these different effects, including heat-blasting them in a denim solarium to get whiskers (stripes) around the crotch area. Labour Behind the Label (LBL) has looked into the horrific impact for those who apply this treatment. Workers blast the denim with natural sand containing silica, often operating within sealed cabinets. As a result, they inhale crystalline silica dust particles that cause serious damage to the respiratory passages and, in some cases (where the body is unable to expel the particles), silicosis (lung disease). Sandblasting of this type has been banned in other industries in the EU since 1966, and in the UK since the 50s. But in the garment industry it seems brands have been relatively happy to outsource production to less regulated zones, starting with Turkey. It was eventually banned there in 2009, but not before 47 former sandblasting operators were known to have died as a result of their work. There are 5,000 suspected cases of silicosis among former Turkish sandblasters, says LBL. Sandblasting moved to Syria, Bangladesh, Mexico, India and Indonesia following the ban in Turkey, but in recent months pressure from activists has meant it has gone further afield, to south-east Asia and Africa.

The alternative Go to [killerjeans.org](http://killerjeans.org) to see which UK high-street names have phased out sandblasting (Levi's is one of the big ones to have stopped) and sign up to LBL's campaign for a worldwide ban.

## **8 Flatscreen TV**

Many marine biologists will tell you that when they first heard companies intended to mine hydrothermal vents (geysers on the sea floor) for rare earth minerals, they thought it was a ridiculous plan and that, if it ever came to anything, it was decades away. Possibly they had underestimated our voracious appetite for these minerals and the geopolitics caused by China's grip on current supplies (97% of rare earths are from China). At least two, indium and gallium, are integral to flatscreen TV production. From time to time China exerts an illegal production block on rare earths, keeping them all for domestic use. This triggers an international panic. The last big one was in 2008 and plans to mine the ocean floor were hastily dusted off. Exploratory licences were granted for the largely unregulated waters off Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and the Solomon Islands. Conservationists and biologists called for a moratorium while proper impact studies were carried out; there's a suggestion that assessments made by mining companies keen to start extracting are on the flimsy side. In effect, the moratorium achieved was accidental – China opened its rare earth shop again. But in the past six months further sporadic Chinese production blocks have left electronics companies twitchy. Now they want their own supply chain and it looks as if seabed mining is back on the agenda. Japanese scientists have mapped hot spots of "wet wealth" on the Pacific floor. Now they just need to find ways of dredging it up. At stake is a unique ecosystem on the ocean bed. Biologists are only just beginning to explore it; who knows what will be lost if it is ploughed up and plundered for materials for transient consumer electronics?

The alternative Hang on to your flatscreen TV for as long as you can. If you buy new, buy for longevity. Scientists from French recycling company Rhodia are starting to recover rare earth minerals from flatscreen TVs and hope to have dedicated plants up and running by 2012. Meanwhile, remain alert to stories of seabed trashing and the revocation of moratoriums, particularly in the Pacific. Revisit the 2008 campaign to protect Pacific communities and seabed habitats at [oceansandcommunities.org](http://oceansandcommunities.org).

## **9 Toy packaging**

In an effort to match ecological abuses to specific brands, NGOs have begun analysing the packaging of children's toys. Greenpeace found Mattel (makers of Barbie), Lego, Disney and Hasbro were all using boxes containing mixed tropical hardwood fibres, identified as virgin wood pulp from Indonesian forests. This packaging was then connected to the Asia Pulp & Paper company (APP), which has been accused by Greenpeace of continuing to clear some of Sumatra's most ecologically significant forests, including those that are home to hundreds of Sumatran tigers. Two months of Greenpeace activists dressing as Barbie and Ken in a viral campaign against Mattel evidently did the trick. At the time of writing, Mattel has told its printers to stop contracting with APP and has pledged to increase the amount of recycled and sustainable fibre used in its packaging; Lego has told activists it is advising its suppliers to avoid APP; Hasbro has said it is working on a more sustainable packaging policy; Disney has still to respond to Greenpeace.

The alternative Main brand toys are consistently over-packaged. If this is the case (the toy takes up only 10% of the packaging), you can report the manufacturer and/or the importer to your local Trading Standards office. Holz toys are one of the most ethical brands currently available.

The common thread running through each of the above is that these ecological and social justice skeletons have often been lurking in the closet for quite some time. UK charity Cafod, for example, launched a Clean Up Your Computer campaign in 2004 to counteract sweated electronic goods. From coffee to phones, everyday products have been making fools of us for more than a decade. Why have we tolerated it?

Partly because, when it comes to fighting these supply chain inequalities, we have lost some of our mojo. "What the hell happened to the Make Trade Fair campaign?" asks Black Gold's Marc Francis. It was organised by Oxfam to promote fair trade among governments and multinationals. But the wheels seemed to come off when the NGOs leading the global debate on trade switched to campaigning on climate change. Francis believes we must focus on trading again. "It's vital to hold our elected representatives to account in the international trading environment, so fairer rules can be set. That drive is now lacking."

The void has been partly filled by political consumerism, buying into products and systems that seem to offer a brighter outlook, such as Fairtrade or organic. They are useful starting points, sending a message to brands, but they are corrective devices for specific problems in the supply chain; they will never be able to change the entire system. Besides, is it right that guilt should be shovelled on to the shoulders of consumers? "It's a very bad moment to decide what kind of society I want when I am standing in the supermarket with two screaming kids," says Blood In The Mobile's Frank Poulsen. "To really understand it all, we'd need to be experts in everything from rubber production to raw earth minerals. The reality is the political consumer is not going to save the world."

But even if we can't individually become supply-chain experts, it is vital that we reconnect with the backstory of products and acknowledge the resources, including human labour, that go into them. Many activists are pinning their hopes on the Dodd-Frank bill in the US, which was signed into law last July. This is exciting news – it's the first time a western economy has put mandatory transparency in law. It obliges large companies to reveal information on a public website about their supply chain. Electronics companies, for example, will have to admit if they know from where their minerals come.

Francis detects a new energy. "The trade issues of producers in the developing world are starting to feel more immediate to us here because of the economic crisis in the west. Our libraries are closing down, our hospitals are under threat. We can see inequality in our own economic model. It's no longer an us and them thing. It's a 'we' thing."

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