



Lesson 8:

Should I Join the Sweatshop Boycott?

Author: Stephen H. Day

In this lesson, students study primary sources to learn about the choices of young women who are considering working in garment factories.

Description of the lesson

In this lesson, students study several sources that investigate the effects of garment factory labor in developing countries. Students study a news report, several letters home from factory workers, and a graph of living standards in different regions over time. As a performance assessment, students write an email to a friend explaining why they will or will not be joining a boycott of t-shirts made without higher labor standards.

Economics

Factory jobs in developing countries are often dirty, dangerous, repetitive, and low-paid, by developed countries' standards. Factory owners can probably do better for their employees by paying them more or having better working conditions. But these factory jobs also increase productivity, living standards, and options for future employment in the developing country. Studying textile factories over time and place teaches us about the tradeoffs of our business and labor practices. It also teaches us about the lives and decisions of the people - usually young women - who work in the factories of developing countries.

Ethics

The issue of labor standards raises questions about the ethical responsibilities of consumers: are we responsible to be knowledgeable about the way the goods we buy were produced? Do garment factories provide a minimum basic standard of treatment that all humans deserve? Are those living in rich countries in a position to judge the choices of those living in developing countries? Do future opportunities make up for current poor working conditions? This lesson will have students examining the answers to these ethical questions through an economic lens.

Objectives:

After completing this lesson students will be able to:

- analyze changes in living standards in different regions over time.
- create and support an argument for or against a sweatshop boycott using primary and secondary sources.

Standards

[Voluntary National Content Standards in Economics](#)¹

- Standard 13: Income
 - Income for most people is determined by the market value of the productive resources they sell. What workers earn primarily depends on the market value of what they produce.
- Standard 15: Economic Growth
 - Investment in factories, machinery, new technology, and in the health, education, and training of people stimulates economic growth and can raise future standards of living.

Concepts

Economic growth

Economic Development

Boycott

Time Required

60 minutes

Materials Needed

- Slide presentation: Should I Join the Sweatshop Boycott?
- The Industrial Revolution video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLhNP0qp38Q>
- Hans Rosling's 200 Countries, 200 Years, 4 Minutes:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbkSRLYSojo>
- Internet access with audio-visual capabilities for playing an online video.
- Copies of Activity 8.1: Should I Join the Sweatshop Boycott?, one per student
- Copies of Activity 8.2: *Planet Money Makes a T-shirt* Video Questions, one per student
- Copies of Activity 8.3: Letters Home, one per student
- Copies of Activity 8.4: How Have Peoples' Incomes Changed Over Time?
- Pencil and paper, one per student

¹ Voluntary National Content Standards in Economics: <https://www.councilforeconed.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/voluntary-national-content-standards-2010.pdf>

Preparation

The teacher can choose how to format each activity in this inquiry-based lesson: students can do the work in groups of 3-4, or as a guided discussion by the teacher, or individually using the activities as worksheets. The lesson will be shorter if the teacher chooses to do a greater part of it as guided discussion.

All sources for this lesson are available on the slide presentation and as handouts.

Procedure

1. Ask students if they know what the industrial revolution was. **Answers may vary but include: it was the rapid increase in the use of machines to make goods, beginning in England around 1800. Tell the students that today they will be studying the effect of industrialization on workers. If students need a refresher on the Industrial Revolution, show this [Simply History video \(4 min\)](#)², which is embedded in Slide 2:**
2. Show Slide #3. Say “In this lesson, you will make an important informed decision. A friend has messaged you with a flier from a student group called the Alliance for Labor.” Choose a student to read the call to boycott from Activity 8.1: Should I Join the Sweatshop Boycott?
3. As students view the slide, Hand out Activity 8.1: Should I Join the Sweatshop Boycott? This will be the guiding task for the entire lesson, and it doubles as the lesson’s final assessment. Tell students: “You must reply to your friend using the instructions on the handout”.
4. Display slide 4, which displays the vocabulary. Make sure students understand the vocabulary terms below: “sweatshop,” “boycott,” “working conditions,” and “labor activist.”
 - a. Sweatshop: a negative term for factory work in developing countries, where the job is presumably low-paid, dangerous, unhealthy, or otherwise has bad working conditions.
 - b. Boycott: refusing to buy something for a moral or other non-market reason, usually to get the boycotted company to change policy.
 - c. Working conditions: how well workers are treated at a job.
 - d. Labor activist: someone who works to get companies to improve working conditions, sometimes in a confrontational way (such as a boycott).
5. After covering the general vocabulary, display slide 5 which contains economics vocabulary and make sure students understand all of these terms:
 - a. Economic growth: an increase in the output of goods and services. It’s what causes nations to become wealthier.
 - b. Income: money received from work or investments.

² Simple History The Industrial Revolution (18-19th Century)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLhNP0qp38Q>

- c. Industrialization: the widespread development of industries in a region due to improvements in technology.
 - d. GDP per capita: how much income the average person makes in a year.

6. Tell the students that in order to think through the essential question of “Should I join the sweatshop boycott?,” the class will study three supporting questions from three different sources. These are all listed on slide 6 (“Supporting Questions”):
 - a. “What is one thing that factory owners and labor activists agree on?” The students will find the answer to this in *Activity 8.2: Planet Money Makes a T-shirt Video Questions*.
 - b. “What reasons do young women give for working in factories?” The students will find the answer to this in *Activity 8.2: Planet Money Makes a T-shirt Video Questions* and *Activity 8.3: Letters Home*.
 - c. “At what stage of economic development are the factory workers that were interviewed in the Planet Money video?” The students will find the answer for this on the graph in *Activity 8.4: How Have Peoples’ Incomes Changed Over Time?*

7. Hand out Activity 1.2: *Planet Money Makes a T-shirt Video Questions*. Show the video [People](#)³ from the “Planet Money Makes a T-Shirt” series, which is embedded in Slide 7 (6:22 min).

8. As they watch the video, have students complete Activity 8.2: *Planet Money Makes a T-shirt Video Questions*. Review the answers in the format chosen by the teacher (in groups, as class discussion, or individually). This should take 10 minutes or less.
Emphasize to students that the information they just learned may inform their reply to the boycott flier!

9. Hand out Activity 8.3: Letters Home. Say: “Next you will read some letters and interviews from young women who worked in factories in different places and at different times. It’s important that we learn from the voices of those who are actually doing factory work in countries experiencing industrialization for the first time – including the 19th-century United States. You will be studying their choices, and the **opportunity cost** of their choices, which means their next best choice. What would they be doing if they were not working in these conditions?”

10. Tell students to complete Activity 8.3: Letters Home in the manner you choose (i.e. in groups, as class discussion, or individually). The students may also use the interviews with the women in the Planet Money video as sources. This should take about 15 minutes. You can use slides 8 - 13 to display the various letters from factory workers if you choose.

11. Go over the answers from Activity 8.3: Letters Home. Remind students to consider how the information they just learned may inform their reply to the boycott flier.

³ NPR Planet Money Makes a T-shirt, People: <https://apps.npr.org/tshirt/#/people>

12. On slide 14, show "[Hans Rosling's 200 Countries, 200 Years, 4 Minutes](#)"⁴ (4 min) to introduce students to the importance of industrialization on human well-being.
13. Hand out Activity 8.4: How Have Peoples' Incomes Changed Over Time? Display slide 15, which contains the necessary information for the activity. Say: "the thing we need to investigate before we answer the boycott question is to study the economies of the factory workers. In this handout, you see how GDP per capita has changed over time. **GDP per capita** means how much income the average person makes in a year. The graph shows how peoples' income in each region of the world has changed over time as countries have industrialized. Study the graph and answer the questions that follow." This should take about 15 minutes.
14. Use the Activity 8.4: How Have Peoples' Incomes Changed Over Time? Answer Key to go over the answers with the students. Remind students to consider how the information they just learned may inform their reply to the boycott flier.

Closure

15. Tell the students that now they should be ready to answer the question Should I Join the Sweatshop Boycott. Show slide 16 (the same slide as #3) ("Join the Sweatshop Boycott!"). Show slide 17: Ask students what the benefits of factory work are. **Answers may vary but include: benefits include an increase in standards of living, from living on just a few dollars a day to pay that is several times higher (as seen in the income graph). This increase in standard of living can include better education, housing, clothing, and food, as well as newfound freedom to make life choices (as seen in the letters home).**
Next, ask students what the costs of factory work are. **Answers may vary but may include: costs include change in family relations and society (as seen in the letters home), and the work being dangerous and not what workers expected (as seen in the Ethiopian study).**
Say that you hope that studying how a T-shirt is made has helped them learn about the world, the people in it, how the things that we consume are made, and made them think more deeply about how these things are connected.

Assessment

16. Return to the scenario from Activity 8.1: Should I Join the Sweatshop Boycott? This is the overarching performance assessment in this lesson, in which students write an email to the hypothetical friend who has invited them to the boycott. When the students have completed the lesson, they should now answer the questions posed in Activity 8.1: Should I Join the Sweatshop Boycott?

⁴ Hans Rosling's 200 Countries, 200 Years, 4 Minutes
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbkSRLYSojo>

Some sample assessment items:

1. What is usually the opportunity cost for young women when they first get jobs at sweatshops in very poor countries?
 - a. **Farming**
 - b. Delivering food
 - c. Going to school
 - d. Working in restaurants

2. In 1820, how could the GDP per capita of Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and South-East Asia be described?
 - a. Each region had a high GDP per capita
 - b. Europe had many times more GDP per capita
 - c. **Similar, with Europe's GDP per capita slightly higher**
 - d. Latin American had the highest GDP per capita, but it was trending down

3. Which of the following statements best summarizes the reasons young women gave for working in factories?
 - a. The desire to create garments so that consumers could have better clothes
 - b. **More freedom and better living conditions**
 - c. Beliefs about politics and society
 - d. Beliefs about economic growth

Extension

1. Read the complete article that is excerpted in Activity 8.3: Letters Home (continued): New York Times Editorial - "Everything We Knew About Sweatshops Was Wrong," April 27, 2017. How does the research in this article complicate the issue of whether garment factories are beneficial to a country?

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/27/opinion/do-sweatshops-lift-workers-out-of-poverty.html?smid=nytcore-ipad-share&smprod=nytcore-ipad&_r=1

2. For more advanced students add in a discussion of competition in the labor market. Explain that in many countries where sweatshops exist there is a **monopsony** in the labor market, meaning that there is only one (or very few) buyer of labor. Have students brainstorm how a monopsony might affect the treatment that people in sweatshops face. Add in a discussion of what would happen as there is more competition in the labor market and more firms that want to hire workers to produce goods and services. How does that affect the pay, conditions, and other economic impacts for that country?

3. In Activity 8.1: Should I Join the Sweatshop Boycott?, students model responsibility in researching several sources to learn about an issue before they communicate their opinion online. To extend the investigation of online communication, have students write a hypothetical social media post about this topic that is based on only one small bit of information from one of the sources in the lesson. Students should answer this question: “how could using just one narrow bit of information distort your view of this issue?” Accept (and even encourage) students to write social media posts that caricature the irresponsible communication that sometimes surrounds online debates about current events.

References

Blattman, C., and Dercon, S. (2017, April 27). Everything we knew about sweatshops was wrong, New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/27/opinion/do-sweatshops-lift-workers-out-of-poverty.html?smid=nytcore-ipad-share&smprod=nytcore-ipad&r=1>

Our World in Data (2020). *GDP per capita, 1820 - 2018*. <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/gdp-per-capita-maddison-2020>.

Planet Money (n.d.). *Planet Money makes a t-shirt* [Video series]. <https://apps.npr.org/tshirt/#/title>

Rivoli, P. (2014). *The travels of a t-shirt in the global economy: An economist examines the markets, power, and politics of world trade*. John Wiley & Sons.

Activity 8.1: Should I Join the Sweatshop Boycott?

Scenario: You are yourself. A friend sends the message below inviting you to join a boycott of certain brands of clothing. Your job is to write an email reply to your friend. Your reply must contain the following:

1. Your choice about whether to participate in the boycott or not.
2. At least two reasons supporting your decision.
3. At least two facts supporting each reason.
4. At least one other thing you want to learn about this issue.
5. A conclusion summarizing your decision and making a suggestion for what to do.

The message:



Join the
~~**Sweatshop**~~ **Boycott!**

Sweatshops are factories that use low-wage foreign labor. They include inhumane working conditions, low pay, exploitative practices, harsh discipline, and don't allow unions.

This. Must. Stop.

- Refuse to buy these brands that use sweatshops
- Talk to local store owners and managers and demand they stop using these brands until labor conditions improve
- Come to the protest on May 1!

The Alliance for Labor does not boycott entire stores, and does not want to close factories. Those policies hurt workers more than they help them. Our boycott is designed to empower workers NOW.

Activity 8.2. *Planet Money Makes a T-Shirt* Video Questions

1. Why is each person in the video working in garment factories?
2. How are the countries the factory workers live in different?
3. What is one thing that factory owners and labor activists agree about?
4. What is one thing that the factory owners and the labor activists disagree about?

Source: Planet Money (n.d.) *Planet Money makes a t-shirt* [Video series].
<https://apps.npr.org/tshirt/#/title>

Activity 8.2. Planet Money Makes a T-Shirt Video Questions ANSWER KEY

1. Why is each person in the video working in garment factories?

Answers: *To pay the debt for a sister's wedding; to get enough income to get a small business started; to get slightly better options in life.*

2. How are the countries the factory workers live in different?

Answers: *Bangladesh is much poorer than Colombia. Jasmine from Bangladesh has fewer options and a lower standard of living than Doris from Colombia.*

3. What is one thing that factory owners and labor activists agree about?

Answer: *The worst thing that could happen would be for the factories to leave Bangladesh.*

4. What is one thing that the factory owners and the labor activists disagree about?

Answer: *What more needs to be done to improve the lives of workers.*

Source: Planet Money (n.d.) *Planet Money makes a t-shirt* [Video series].

<https://apps.npr.org/tshirt/#/title>

Activity 8.3: Letters Home

Quotations from “*The Travels of a T-Shirt in the Global Economy*” by *Pietra Rivoli*. Answer the questions using the sources on the next page.

Anonymous New England mill worker, 1840s.

“I will speak to you of my acquaintances in the family here. One, who sits at my right side at table, is in the factory because she hates her mother-in-law. The one next to her has a wealthy father but like many of our country farmers, he is very penurious...The next has a “well-off” mother, but she is a very pious woman, and will not buy her daughter as many pretty gowns and collars and ribbons...as she likes...The next is here because her parents and family are wicked infidels, and she cannot be allowed to enjoy the privileges of religion at home. The next is here because she must labor somewhere, and she has been ill-treated in so many families that she has a horror of domestic service. The next has left home because her lover, who has gone on a whaling voyage, wishes to be married when he returns, and she would like more money than her father will give her. The next is here because her home is in a lonely country village and she cannot bear to remain where it is so dull. The next is here because her parents are poor, and she wishes to acquire the means to educate herself. The next is here because her ‘beau’ came, and she did not trust him among so many pretty girls.”

Bertha Black, North Carolina mill worker, 1899

“We all went to work in the Amazon Cotton Mill and we all worked there all our lives. We were all anxious to go to work because, I don’t know, we didn’t like the farming. It was so hot from sunup to sundown. No, that was not for me. Mill work was better. It had to be. Once we went to work in the mill after we moved here from the farm, we had more clothes and more kinds of food than we did when we was a-farmin’. And we had a better house. So yes, when we came to the mill life was easier.”

Rivoli, P. (2014). *The travels of a t-shirt in the global economy: An economist examines the markets, power, and politics of world trade*. John Wiley & Sons.

Activity 8.3: Letters Home (continued)

Liang Ying, China mill worker, late 1900s (after 1980)

“[Life on the farm] was really hard work. Every morning, from 4am to 7am you have to cut through the bark of 400 rubber trees in total darkness. It has to be done before daybreak, otherwise the sunshine will evaporate the rubber juice. If you were me, what would you prefer, the factory or the farm?”

Economists studying mill workers in Ethiopia, 2017

“To our surprise, most people who got an industrial job soon changed their minds. A majority quit within the first months. They ended up doing what those who had not gotten the job offers did – going back to the family farm, taking a construction job or selling goods at the market.

Contrary to expert opinion (and ours), quitting was a wise decision for most. The alternatives were not so bad after all: People who worked in agriculture or market selling earned about as much money as they could have at the factory, often with fewer hours and better conditions. We were amazed. By the end of the year only a third of the people who had landed an industrial job were still employed in the industrial sector at all...”

“Serious injuries and disabilities were nearly double among those who took the factory jobs, rising to 7 percent from about 4 percent. This risk rose with every month they stayed. The people we interviewed told us about exposure to chemical fumes and repetitive stress injuries.”

Blattman, C., and Dercon, S. (2017, April 27). Everything we knew about sweatshops was wrong, New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/27/opinion/do-sweatshops-lift-workers-out-of-poverty.html?smid=nytcore-ipad-share&smprod=nytcore-ipad&r=1>

Activity 8.3: Letters Home (continued)

1. What are some of the reasons these women gave for working in textile factories?
2. What were some costs and benefits they faced by taking up mill work?
3. What was the opportunity cost of factory work for the young women who wrote the letters? [i.e. what would their next best choice have been?]
4. What clues do the dates of these quotations give us about the economic conditions of the regions these women lived in?
5. How might textile mill work change the societies the workers live in?

Rivoli, P. (2014). *The travels of a t-shirt in the global economy: An economist examines the markets, power, and politics of world trade*. John Wiley & Sons.

Activity 8.3: Letters Home ANSWER KEY

1. What are some of the reasons these women gave for working in textile factories?
Answers: *Escape life on a boring farm; escape being mistreated in domestic service jobs; improve clothing, housing, and education; save for marriage; religious freedom; easier work conditions; and not trusting her boyfriend to be around other girls.*
2. What were some costs and benefits they faced by taking up mill work?
Answers: *Costs may include: leave family and community; do difficult and dangerous factory (mill) work. Benefits may include: more freedom, money, and life options.*
3. What was the opportunity cost of factory work for the young women who wrote the letters? [i.e. what would their next best choice have been?]
Answers: *The opportunity cost is initially subsistence farming work. The letters we studied showed workers finding better living conditions and more freedom and opportunity. On the other hand, economists who studied Ethiopian factory workers found that factory workers sometimes didn't find life to be better at factories, and quickly found better options. When these workers find new jobs, the factory work becomes the opportunity cost.*
4. What clues do the dates of these quotations give us about the economic conditions of the regions these women lived in?
Answers: *Some countries experience industrialization and economic growth earlier than others.*
5. How might textile mill work change the societies the workers live in?
Answers: *Increasing women in the labor force broadens the opportunities for women beyond early marriage and farm work.*

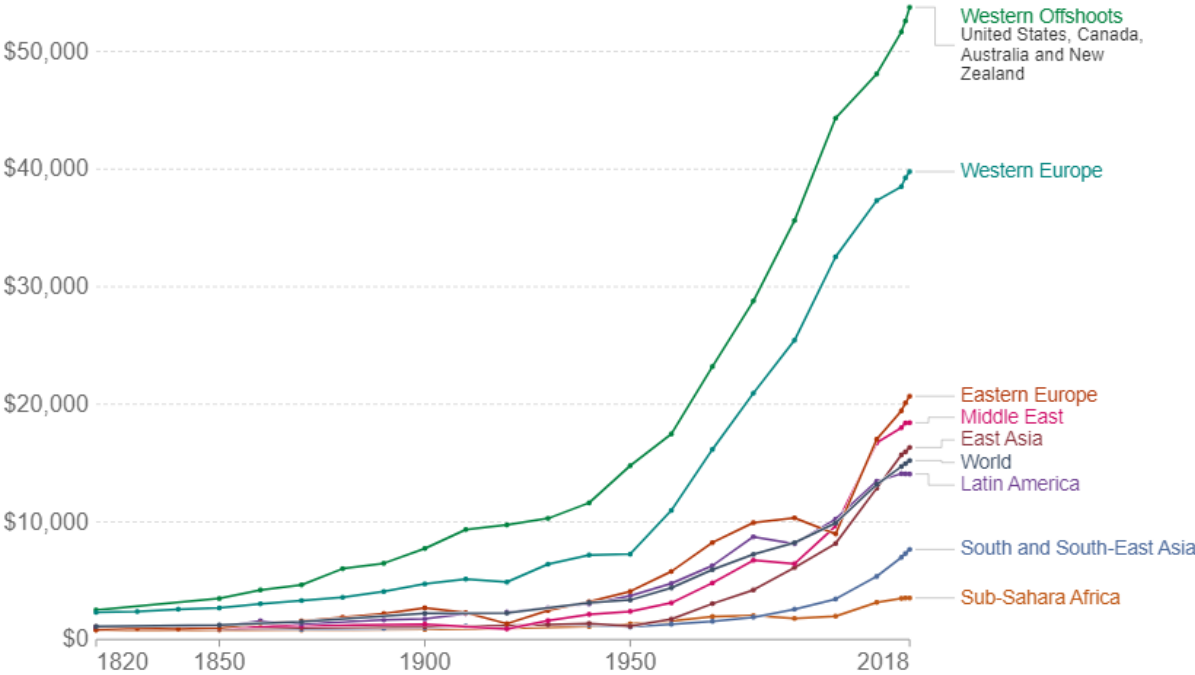
Rivoli, P. (2014). *The travels of a t-shirt in the global economy: An economist examines the markets, power, and politics of world trade*. John Wiley & Sons.

Activity 8.4: How have peoples' incomes changed over time?

Examine the graph and answer the questions about it on the next page. "GDP per capita" measures how much money the average person earns in a year.

GDP per capita, 1820 to 2018

GDP per capita adjusted for price changes over time (inflation) and price differences between countries – it is measured in international-\$ in 2011 prices.



Source: Maddison Project Database 2020 (Bolt and van Zanden, 2020)

OurWorldInData.org/economic-growth • CC BY

Source: Our World in Data, 2020. <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/gdp-per-capita-maddison-2020>

Activity 8.4: How have peoples' incomes changed over time? (cont.)

Answer the following questions about the graph in Activity 8.4.

Fact: The Y axis on this graph shows GDP per capita. This is how much income each person in the country earns on average.

Fact: Bangladesh, which was in the Planet Money video, is in South-East Asia.

1. What do the different lines show?
2. Describe the GDP per capita of people in Western Europe compared to people in South-East Asia in the year 1820.
3. Describe the GDP per capita of people in Western Europe compared to people in South-East Asia in the year 2018.
4. Describe the GDP per capita of people in South-East Asia changes from 1820 to 2018.
5. How might this graph explain why the Letters Home from young women working at factories occur at such different dates in different countries? (1840s, 1899, late 1900s, 2017.)
6. At what stage of development are the economies of the factory workers that were interviewed in the Planet Money video? (Jasmine from Bangladesh? Doris from Colombia?)

Activity 8.4: How have peoples' incomes changed over time? ANSWER KEY

1. What do the different lines show?
People's income in different regions of the world as these regions experience economic growth due to industrialization. They show average incomes, meaning that they each represent the average person in each region. Individual people might fall above or below the line of their given region.
2. Describe the GDP per capita of people in Western Europe compared to people in South-East Asia in the year 1820.
They are similar. Europe's is a little bit higher.
3. Describe the GDP per capita of people in Western Europe compared to people in South-East Asia in the year 2018.
Europe's is much higher, though both have grown.
4. Describe the GDP per capita of people in South-East Asia changes from 1820 to 2018.
It has grown, approaching \$10,000 a year. If it is to continue to grow, then it will represent better opportunities for people who worked in factories.
5. How might this graph explain why the Letters Home from young women working at factories occur at such different dates in different countries (1840s, 1899, late 1900s, 2017)?
Economic growth (due to industrialization) takes place at different times. Factory work is a part of this. Workers, especially young women, have strikingly similar experiences with factory work no matter the time or place.
6. At what stage of development are the economies of the factory workers that were interviewed in the Planet Money video?
Jasmine from Bangladesh experiences an economy that would just be rising up in South-East Asia, since she is one of the workers that is just one step away from working on a traditional farm. Doris from Colombia experiences a "much more advanced economy" (according to the video) that is probably close to the top of the Latin America line.

Source: Our World in Data, 2020. <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/gdp-per-capita-maddison-2020>

Assessment 8

1. What is usually the opportunity cost for young women when they first get jobs at sweatshops in very poor countries?
 - a. Farming
 - b. Delivering food
 - c. Going to school
 - d. Working in restaurants

2. In 1820, how could the GDP per capita of Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and South-East Asia be described?
 - a. Each region had a high GDP per capita
 - b. Europe had many times more GDP per capita
 - c. Similar, with Europe's GDP per capita slightly higher
 - d. Latin American had the highest GDP per capita, but it was trending down

3. Which of the following statements best summarizes the reasons young women gave for working in factories?
 - a. The desire to create garments so that consumers could have better clothes
 - b. More freedom and better living conditions
 - c. Beliefs about politics and society
 - d. Beliefs about economic growth