

The Secondhand
Clothing Trade in Europe
and Beyond: Stages
of Development and
Enterprise in a Changing
Material World,
c. 1600–1850

Abstract

Between 1600 and 1850 Europe was reshaped economically, culturally, and materially—the secondhand clothing trade was a vital factor in these events. Cloth and clothing represented among the most important and costly purchases for generations, lying at the heart of household budgeting, intersecting routinely with markets. The secondhand trade was a unique micro-enterprise vehicle, as well as a growing commerce for entrepreneurs. It stimulated retailing and featured in international trade. Throughout these centuries, the scale of secondhand commerce, circulating in and beyond Europe, expanded enormously as economies were reshaped by industrial expansion and extra-European trade. During the past decades scholars have lifted the study of the secondhand trade from its previous obscurity, recognizing its organic connection to cultures and commerce. I now propose three stages in the evolution of the secondhand clothing trade, shaped by the underlying transformations of northwest Europe, suggesting the ways in which the patterns of economic and social change affected this sector over time. The three stages are: (1) transition from scarcity, (2) growing abundance, and (3) industrial plenty. By defining these tripartite divisions we can better understand the evolution of the secondhand clothing trade, its features, and relative significance.

Keywords: recycling, secondhand trade, micro-enterprise, European commerce, industrial growth

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The Secondhand Clothing Trade in Europe and Beyond: Stages of Development and Enterprise in a Changing Material World, c. 1600–1850

Introduction

During the years from 1600 to 1850 Europe was reshaped economically, culturally, and materially—the secondhand clothing trade was a vital factor in these events. Cloth and clothing represented among the most important and costly purchases for generations of families. The life cycle of these materials involved complex negotiations of use and exchange after the original acquisition by the first buyer in this cycle. Many fabrics, like common wool frieze or costly silk brocade, possessed a durability that made intergenerational use a routine feature of material life. The circulation of used textile goods lay at the heart of household budgeting, intersecting routinely with markets. It represented a unique micro-enterprise vehicle, as well as a growing commerce for entrepreneurs. It stimulated retailing and featured increasingly in international trade. Throughout these centuries, the scale of secondhand commerce, circulating in and beyond Europe, expanded enormously as economies were reshaped by industrial expansion and extra-European trade. Over

the past generation scholars have produced a wealth of new research on the secondhand clothing trade, lifting this topic from obscurity, recognizing its organic connection to cultures and commerce (i.e. Fontaine 2008; Ginsburg 1980; Lemire 1988, 1990, 1991, 1997; Roche 1994; Allerston 1999; Hansen 1999, 2000; Palmer and Clark 2005).

In years past I deciphered features of this topic: the roles of cloth and clothing as alternate currencies, the scale and structure of the secondhand trade, its modes of operation, its particular gender and ethnic practices and overall significance (see Lemire 1988, 1991, 2005). A fuller picture has emerged of the historical scope and duration of this phenomenon (Fontaine 2008; Stobart and Van Damme 2010). Thus, it is now critical to define the distinct contexts in which this trade flourished over the *longue durée*. Dramatic transformations took place during the two and a half centuries under review including the expansion of national and international commerce, growth in population, urbanization, and the birth of industrialization. The

secondhand trade evolved within this milieu. I identify three broad, intersecting stages contiguous with these wider developments, prior to the full force of modernization (which in northwestern Europe coincided with the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries). The attributes of the secondhand trade varied significantly over time, even as some aspects persisted. The three stages I propose reflect the underlying transformations. These stages are *not* suggested as a simple template, applicable to a fixed timetable in all locales. Indeed, recent research in Scandinavia indicates a less vibrant material environment compared to England or the Netherlands, plus a wide dependence on secondhand goods by many classes until after the 1850s (Murhem *et al.* 2010; Wottle 2010). Region, class, and culture shaped the access to and use of commodities, as Belén Moreno shows for eighteenth-century rural Catalan Spain (Moreno 2010). Even with these caveats it is clear that broad patterns of economic and social change affected the secondhand sector in Europe, over these centuries. The three stages are: (1) *transition from scarcity*, (2) *growing abundance*, and (3) *industrial plenty*. By defining these tripartite divisions we can better understand the evolution of the secondhand clothing trade, its features, and relative significance over time.

Transition from Scarcity

In the early modern era, investments in apparel and household furnishings figured prominently in household budgets, the purchases dictated

by life cycle milestones such as the preparation for a birth, an adolescent's apprenticeship, or the establishment of a new household (Spufford 2000). Major events occasioned fabric investments that varied according to the rank and regional cultures of the buyers. Beds and their furnishings in particular represented a significant expense and, given their cost, these items were routinely repaired, recycled, and bequeathed across generations, entering the marketplace as necessity dictated (Edwards and Ponsonby 2007: 111; Riello 2010: 49–51). Irregular purchases of smaller accessories also punctuated the seasons: hosiery, aprons, handkerchiefs, or headwear (Spufford 1984; Fontaine 1996).

Arjun Appadurai explores the complex meanings embedded in commodity, noting that: "its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature" (1986: 13). Fabrics were at the heart of commodity exchange and at the heart of social representation. Thus, a multifaceted value persisted throughout an item's lifespan, with different cultural and commercial esteem assigned with patching, turning, remaking, and mending. And, as Appadurai notes, the potential of exchange remained an unspoken option underpinning the estimation of cloth. Within the household, items passed from masters and mistresses to servants, from aunts to nieces, from sisters and brothers to younger siblings in a routine rotation that was a staple of life. Garments were repaired and remade, circulating as perquisites, truck wages, gifts or bequests, or

were sold as required. For families, as well as individuals, investment in cloth and clothing served as a type of savings that could be manipulated through the extensive secondhand networks, including pawnbrokers. In their aggregate, the social lives of clothing animated markets, served families, and manifested culture. The household management of cloth goods included routine commercial interactions as housewives, servants, and journeymen released the value of their goods through secondhand circuits thereby sustaining themselves, families, or businesses.

Many retailers accepted used goods in exchange for new and specialist old clothes dealers thrived, meeting the needs of markets throughout Europe and beyond. Pawnbrokers served a more specific function as they provided cash loans on the security of a deposited item; failure to repay and reclaim the pledge resulted in it being channeled into the wider flow of used goods. The wealthy elites brought jewels, plate, and other valuable symbols of status to pawn, along with clothing. But the majority of transactions with common pawnbrokers involved plebeian clientele, who carried pedestrian property to their local broker—cloth and clothing comprised the vast majority of their pledges. This economic pattern remained in place for centuries. For example, fabric goods made up from 60 percent to more than 80 percent of all pawned items in England from the 1600s to the 1830s (Lemire 2005: 92–6). The widespread dependence on pawning or the

secondhand trade as budgeting strategies were important features of what Laurence Fontaine terms an “*ancien régime* economy” (Fontaine 2008: 2). These routines fit rather imperfectly within economic models described by some theorists, being more innovative and dynamic than the simple exchange of cash for goods, shaped also by social claims of dependence, deference, and reciprocity (Muldrew 1993, 1998). Fernand Braudel crafted a masterful analysis of the rise of capitalism. However, he was convinced that payments in kind or the use of “alternate currencies” were, in his words, “Outside the market economy” (Braudel 1985: 468). Like many historians, he was informed by the theories of classical economists who had too little to say about barter or the secondhand trade. As a result, many historians focused on the growth of financial institutions and instruments and Braudel concluded that alternate forms of economic activity were antithetical to development. However, I would argue that these complex mechanisms were integral to the market and necessary to a burgeoning market economy. Enterprise was enlivened, and families survived or thrived because of, not despite, these hybrid practices.

Western Europe, from the 1500s through the 1600s, was characterized by relative scarcity, where care was essential in the management of all resources. Respect for materials and their potential was a commonplace of life and the trade in used items was a testament to their value. Indeed, it is important to recognize that even at this

stage the secondhand trade had international as well as regional dimensions. Old hats, boots, shoes, and slippers, for example, crossed from English to French markets before 1600, an acknowledgment that this commerce could bring “great gain to the merchant that bringeth them over” (Woodward 1985: 179). For generations, all social classes engaged in bartering, buying, or pawning. Banking was in its infancy at the start of the period under review, offering few aids to small everyday transactions until the 1800s. Likewise, the scarcity of small coins was a perennial headache, with complaints recorded from Italy to the British Isles. Few ordinary people had access to sufficient small coins to conduct their daily affairs (Ago 2008: 44; Spufford 1988: 329–8). This helps explain the widespread reliance on “alternate currencies,” commodities or tokens that could serve as a currency substitute for essential, routine dealings (Lemire 2005). Textiles and apparel were universally owned, with a value widely understood and thus were easily converted into cash or goods. Textile knowledge was also widespread among housewives, domestic and textile workers, as well as retailers. The use of alternate currencies was especially important for the working poor, small traders or craftspersons, although any man with a coat or woman with a handkerchief could employ this strategy as needed (Ago 2008; Lemire 2005: 82–97). Thus, the young English cleric Ralph Josselin sold most of his clothes in the 1630s to finance a cross-country trip in search of work

as a schoolteacher (Macfarlane 1970: 17). The use of alternate currencies remained a distinctive feature throughout this early stage, persisting in some regions and among some communities through the nineteenth century.

There were few official protests about the secondhand trade, except where dealers channeled stolen goods. For the most part, authorities recognized that necessity drove this traffic. Waste was not an option. Profligacy was deplored in public discourse, since morality demanded a careful husbanding of resources. At the same time, dependence on the market was growing, particularly for city dwellers, although also for rural folk. This dependence carried risks, as price fluctuation could buffet the unwary or hurt those with too little paid work. Learning to live with the market was a challenge for all levels of society in various ways. Overall, the majority of commoners faced irregular employment, with seasonal fluctuations in work and wages that brought routine challenges. Wages could be long delayed and family livelihoods only improved where paid work was available for women and children. In many parts of northwest Europe developments in agriculture and increased employment from new enterprises grew from the 1500s through the next centuries, particularly within the textile and clothing trades (Coleman 1973; De Vries 2008: 82–115; Thirsk 1978; Van Zanden 2009: 101–41). The expansion of domestic manufacturing (or proto-industrialization) affected growing numbers of suburban and rural workers and, most importantly,

employed more women and children.

In this era only the elites had considerable personal and moveable goods; while, as Lorna Weatherill notes, merchants, professionals, and even gentry households contained property and wardrobes in the 1600s that would appear sparse to later generations (1988: 6). Thus, what was brought to a pawnbroker, bartered with a retailer, or sold into the secondhand market represented a relatively greater proportion of items owned by an individual man or woman than would be the case centuries later. All social classes faced everyday needs and so frequented secondhand dealers or pawnbrokers, or took the opportunity to sell or buy clothing in public auctions that were commonplace in cities like Venice. For example, Vincenzo Querini carried his rich black and red velvet clothes to a Venetian public auction in 1511, hoping to recoup some of their cost (Allerston 1999: 376–7). Similarly, in 1593 in England, Lord Vaux pawned his parliamentary robes to meet his financial needs (Lemire 2005: 102). Cities concentrated and intensified commercial activities of all sorts, for all residents. Not surprisingly, the growth of urban populations saw a parallel surge in old clothes dealers, mingling the materials of various social classes. In London, about 1600, John Stow described the district of Houndsditch as full of “brokers, sellers of old apparel, and such like”; Thieving Lane in London’s Westminster neighborhood was likewise thick with secondhand dealers (Stow 1987[1603]: 117; Korda 1996: 191).

Nuremberg’s *keuflinnen* were women who worked as estate appraisers, assessing value, and selling used clothing and household wares from their market stalls. *Keuflinnen* also acted as pawnbrokers without explicit authorization, as the demand was great and about thirty-eight such women worked as secondhand dealers in 1570s Nuremberg (Rublack 2010: 233; Wiesner 1981: 8–9). In addition, many continental communities benefited from pawnshops run by religious orders offering the poor access to credit through pawns, at reasonable rates of interest (De Roover 1948: 113–21; Menning 1992). Charitable pawnshops were not a feature of British society, however, where only private entrepreneurs flourished. The suburbs of London, south of the River Thames, left interesting traces of this activity. Philip Henslowe was an Elizabethan theatrical entrepreneur with a sideline as a pawnbroker. Tradesman and their wives were prominent among his customers: a woman who sold raisins, butchers’ wives, a midwife’s daughter, several sea captains, a tailor’s wife, along with a handful of more prominent Londoners (Foakes 2002: xxvi–vii). His records do not suggest an absolute scarcity, far from it. But neither Henslowe’s business, nor others from the 1600s, matches the magnitude of trade or diversity of goods found in this sector in the 1700s.

By the late 1600s Europe’s manufacturing capacity was on the rise particularly in the linen and worsted industries (Coleman 1973: 11; Collins and Ollerenshaw 2003; Harte 1997; Harte and Ponting 1973).

At the same time, European trading companies imported greater cargoes of fabrics from Asia. In 1684, for example, one million pieces (or bolts) of cloth from India arrived in London (Chaudhuri 1978: 96–7, 282). More of Europe and the Atlantic world now enjoyed a heightened access to cloth of many types (see Roche 1994: 151–83; Hood 2003: 15–29; Lemire 2011; Riello and Parthasarathi 2009). By the 1680s, the tastes and expectations of the men and women of northwest Europe were in flux, with a wider array of goods, new and used, owned by a heterogeneous population. Joan Thirsk recounts the myriad small industries that flourished in primarily rural areas in England through the 1600s and into the 1700s (Thirsk 1978). These projects generated work, wages, and affordable commodities, processes replicated elsewhere in Europe. The sale of used wares grew in tandem with the sale of new and the value and meanings of these goods evolved as material life was enriched. Scarcity gradually receded before a rising abundance.

We now have a much clearer picture of the changing ownership of goods among various social classes in northwest Europe, as this altered over time. Historians now concur that, as Mark Overton *et al.* write: “gradual but important changes in consumption patterns occurred between 1550 and 1750” (Overton *et al.* 2004: 7). The secondhand trade helped facilitate an ever-wider circulation of goods and a more demotic consumption, leading to the next stage in the secondhand clothing trade. The ramifications affected peoples

of virtually all classes, across a widening geographic reach.

Growing Abundance

What features characterized the secondhand clothing trade during the era of growing abundance? First, from 1660 to 1800, the economies of northwest Europe grew and the goods owned, used, and employed in successive generations increased in number and diversity, especially textiles. Accessories proliferated and wardrobes expanded, incorporating both new and old elements in the mélange of garments. This enabled more socially complex iterations of fashion and greater comfort among a broadening range of peoples, as relative scarcity gave way to growing plenty (Crowley 1999, 2001). Second, Europe’s population grew from about 125 million in 1700 to 200 million in 1800 (Bacci 2000: 6), with larger cities and enhanced commodity flows. In combination, they stimulated all aspects of retailing. The exchange of new for old was a reliable stand-by. Danielle van den Heuvel describes the “lively” trade in used clothing in the Netherlands from the sixteenth century onward, noting the increased numbers of old clothes sellers in Dutch cities, particularly after 1650. The city of Leiden illustrates this trend with permits issued to twelve men and women for this trade in 1650, growing to fifty-nine licensed old clothes dealers by 1680 (Van den Heuvel 2007: 208). This sector often blended the sale of old and new merchandise, a strategy that was instrumental in encouraging laboring and middle-class shoppers.

Aspirations inspired greater consumption over the 1700s, most particularly with respect to clothing—this commodity brought the most evident social returns, particularly when worn in urban locales where appearance could effect advancement. England is recognized as being among the most advanced consumer environments during this period; but the effects extended generally throughout northwest Europe, as Daniel Roche relates with respect to France.

Between the end of the 17th century and the 18th century, there was an increase in expenditure in all urban social categories and for all forms of consumption relating to clothes: 233 per cent in nominal expenditure for the nobility and the gentry, 215 per cent for wage-earners... This increase was far higher than can be observed in respect to other articles of everyday use, and it provoked important consequences in the practices of seasonal and daily renewal. (Roche 1998: 222)

The rhythm of consumer purchases accelerated as plebeian wardrobes grew in size and diversity. Roche describes the effects on ordinary Parisians: “Every social category was caught up in the acceleration of the rate of change and replacement, made possible by the accumulation of basic items, whilst the greater range of garments made possible seasonal variations. An enhanced tactile and ocular sensibility went with the choice of less coarse textiles and the vogues for lighter

fabrics” (Roche 1998: 147). The Netherlands and southern England followed a similar trend along a somewhat earlier timeline. Throughout the long eighteenth century, the secondhand trade was instrumental in extending the consumer impetus. It enabled enhanced choice, at lower cost, and was an essential feature of retail expansion. For example, tailors in many parts of Britain took old suits in part payment for new and announced this option in advertisements (Sanderson 1997: 39). A high-end London tailor explained that: “At Eleven Guineas per Year, returning the Old Clothes, you may be furnished with two Suits of Superfine Cloth, and one of Durey or Sagathy” (*Daily Post* 1733). Tailors knew they could easily sell used garments. China sellers were similarly schooled in the routine barter of new teapots for used apparel. They began their rounds with heavily laden boxes of pottery, ending the day with full boxes of used garments. In 1714, Addison and Steele satirized this phenomenon, writing: “I have known an old petticoat metamorphosed into a Punch-Bowl and a Pair of Breeches into a Tea-Pot” (Addison and Steele 1887[1714]: 44). These examples illustrate how integral the secondhand clothing trade was to eighteenth-century retailing (*Journals of the House of Commons* 1745), part of what Jan De Vries terms “a spatial thickening of retailing networks” (De Vries 2008: 169).

Hannah Tatum was a player in this network and her business illustrates the ways in which retail specialties combined. Hannah

worked from a central London location off Fleet Street, dealing not only in china and old clothes, but also in brassware. Her trade card announced that she “also buys and sells (for ready Money) all Sorts of old Cloaths; and changes all Sorts of fine China for left-off Cloaths” (Lemire 2005: 83). She advertised repeatedly in London newspapers in the 1740s and also served provincial dealers, promising that: “Country Chaps may be furnish’d with Cloaths at reasonable Rates” (*London Evening Post* 1740). Her business profile illustrates the creative synergy of trades (retail and wholesale) that combined with the sale of cast-off clothing. Insurance contracts provide additional insights into various hybrid trades. I recorded over two and a half thousand insurance contracts from the Sun Fire Insurance Company and the Royal Exchange Insurance Company, for the years 1753–63 and 1777–96, for the occupations of pawnbrokers, clothes dealers, and salesmen/women (the term “salesman/saleswoman” described dealers in used and/or new clothes in this period). The occupations detail a widespread retail heterogeneity, including carpenter and pawnbroker; pawnbroker, grocer, and dealer in clothes; bricklayer and pawnbroker; dealer in old clothes and staymaker; dealer in malt, flour, and old clothes; clockmaker, watchmaker, and dealer in clothes; and laundress and dealer in clothes. Eighteenth-century retailing is now recognized for its rising sophistication, improved shop presentation and advertising at the upper ends of the trade, and for the niches cultivated

by retailers (Coquery 2004; Cox 2000; Walsh 1995). Some shopkeepers consciously cultivated secondhand markets. Most had to accept used goods as at least part of their trade. At the same time, well below the status of insured retailers, there was a complex of micro-enterprises, many of which were headed by women.

Women's extensive involvement in the old clothes trade is another of its singular features and women's activities almost certainly grew over this period. Female involvement in various sectors is of particular importance in explaining wider social transformations in this period. Pat Hudson and Maxine Berg are among the historians who note the prevalence of women and child workers in Britain's most important new trades in the 1700s (Berg 1994: 136–59; Berg and Hudson 1992). Berg observes that: "higher proportions of women than men were occupied in the new progressive manufacturing sectors ... heavily concentrated in the labor-intensive activities" (Berg 1994: 138). The most dynamic sectors produced consumer goods. Berg also notes that: "all women and children who could find any work did so" (1994: 158). The labor of women and children was essential to the expansion underway in manufacturing in northwest Europe, to what Jan De Vries terms "an industrious revolution" (1993, 2008). Necessity was not the sole spur driving women's employment. De Vries points to the widespread desire for material improvements among the working classes. This desire, he argues, encouraged more women and children to choose paid work

over leisure wherever possible, thereby gaining both necessary and desirable commodities.

Women's agency in this endeavor was critical. De Vries observes that: "The industrious revolution had as its social pendant female earning power" (De Vries 2008: 179). There is abundant data on the rising employment of women and children in manufacturing. Historians of retailing note women's presence as shopkeepers and shop assistants. But equally noteworthy were the legions of plebeian women active in micro-retailing, grasping opportunities as fortune allowed. Their numbers cannot be calculated but their growing presence cannot be denied. Their more respectable sisters served in the growing array of shops lining Europe's streets, dispensing advice on fashion and carving out business niches (Deceulaer 2008; Jones 2004; Van Damme 2010: 34). Danielle Van den Heuvel uncovered the clear preponderance of licensed female old clothes dealers in the northern Netherlands, for the late 1600s and their numbers grew; however, by the mid-1700s they equaled (but no longer surpassed) the number of men in this trade in three northern cities. Van den Heuvel observes that women's involvement in the secondhand clothing trade was much higher when guild control was absent (2007: 209–11). In Britain, guilds did not direct this trade and the guild system was weaker than on the continent; however, that means that no records survive to calculate women's official participation. But qualitative evidence confirms women's routine petty enterprises in this sector, often in defiance of

city regulation, as their practices contravened notional structures of commerce and legal statutes in many cities. An author in 1681 denounced “the Women in London, in Exeter, and in Manchester, who do not only Profer Commodities at the Shops and Ware houses, but also at Inns to Countrey Chapmen [pedlars]” (Lemire 1997: 99). Untold thousands of anonymous women added vitality to consumer markets through such exertions.

Municipal authorities routinely castigated such women, as well as minority street traders, passing through streets and lanes, termed an “encreasing Nuisance” (Lemire 1997: 103). Their businesses were undoubtedly messy and less refined than those confined to shop walls. But they served a growing plebeian clientele: selling used goods, accepting items in trade, or acting as informal pawnbrokers. This entrepreneurial contingent represents yet another area where women flourished, assisting in the circulation of growing material abundance. Some worked from their front rooms; others sold door-to-door, or from a street stall. Elizabeth Latham lived in such a stall in South Street, London, where she and her mother mended and sold old stockings (Lemire 1997: 116). Petty dealers channeled surplus stock to larger shopkeepers; some happily accepted stolen goods and others followed the letter of the law. In total, they moved tons of goods through neighborhood networks and into the hands of eager customers, their textiles skills adding to the wider societal changes underway (Lemire 1997: 95–120). The pace and dimensions

of this commerce changed once again with the advent of industrialization.

Industrial Plenty

Industrialization began in Britain and the changes were deep and profound, reverberating through the secondhand trade regionally and internationally. In the first instance, just prior to 1800, mechanized spinning launched industrialization in the cotton trade. British mills dominated production in 1800 and maintained this dominance in 1850. Industrialization swept parts of continental Europe and America; however, Britain’s textile industries remained preeminent at least until 1850 (Farnie 2003: 724, 727). Textiles of every weight and quality poured out of Britain’s factories. This inexorably reshaped the secondhand market for clothing.

Innovations brought new social practice, including within everyday finance. At first this affected primarily the middle class; but ultimately the effects were felt more widely. Cash wages became the norm and savings were stored in new savings institutions. Payments in kind or truck declined among the working class, goods that previously flowed into secondhand markets (Lemire 2005: 82–109). The structures of Western society assumed very different forms both with the industrialization of production and the new financial culture. Thus, even as the secondhand clothing trade grew dramatically as a consequence of greater factory output, the nature of the secondhand trade changed. Most notably, respectable middle-class families no longer routinely

pawned their coats when needing a loan—they turned instead to a loan society or bank (Lemire 2005). Nor did middle-class customers normally frequent old clothes shops. Recycling of materials would be contained within respectable family networks. Some “old” items did acquire a new cachet in this period, as antiquarian culture developed and a taste for the antique took hold among the wealthy (Van Damme 2010). But old armoires and tapestries circulated in very different realms than did old waistcoats and petticoats. The purchase of used garments became a largely working-class practice, disdained by most middle-class clients who found old clothes shops too noisome for their tastes (Lemire 2005: 102–5).

However, even as some shied away from this commerce, other aspects remained in place. Tailors continued to accept worn suits as part payment for newly ordered garments (*Southampton Town and County Herald* 1832). In these circumstances, the shopper employed his used garments to decrease his costs—his trade-ins joined the rising tide of secondhand wares. While the growing ranks of working poor continued to see their wardrobes as a material safeguard and wives regularly carried bundles of clothes to pawnbrokers for essential loans; both sexes frequented secondhand markets of necessity. England’s population of 8.6 million in 1800 doubled to 16.6 million by 1850 and populations also doubled through most of Europe in that period, although at a slightly slower pace. Europe’s population topped 288 million by 1850 (Bacci 2000: 7–12).

The working poor depended on pawnbrokers and old clothes sellers. Such was the demand for old clothes that officials struggled to contain the numbers of itinerant sellers roaming the streets and byways, overwhelming the regulatory capacities of officialdom, at least in Britain (*Report from the Select Committee 1822*: 94–5).

The expanding secondhand trade allowed the working poor to dress better. One dealer testified in 1851 that: “But for them a very poor industrious widow, say, with only 2d. or 3d. to spare, couldn’t get a pair of shoes for her child... There’s a sort of decency, too, in wearing shoes” (Mayhew 1967[1851], Vol. II: 40). To be ragged and barefoot was a stigma all but the destitute avoided if possible—secondhand clothing was preferable to that evidence of distress. Many among the working poor achieved their notions of decency through previously owned trousers or a refurbished waistcoat. Some also constructed distinct styles, in keeping with neighborhood fashions. Indeed, for G. R. Porter the upgrading of laborers’ clothing confirmed the progress of British society and he noted the improvements over his lifetime: “obvious to every one who passes through the streets; so great, indeed, is the change in this respect, that it is but rarely we meet any one that is not in at least decent apparel” (Porter 1851: 452). The cultures of dress differed markedly between middle ranked and working-class communities. Many in the latter expended great energies to ensure more than simple “decency,” now a basic expectation. Young men looked

for old black satin waistcoats with a particular sheen or hats of a distinctive cut to make a figure in their social milieu. So plentiful were the choices and so voluminous the wares, that working men and women could piece together a look beyond mere bodily covering, sometimes with a notable élan, as they negotiated social norms and individual desires. Victorian London included many young working men with “the desire to both acknowledge and reject mainstream fashionable dictates and foster a ‘louder’ appearance” (Beward 1999: 207). A later contemporary described them as “sporty youth with a penchant for repeated changes of loud apparel” (*London Journal* October 23, 1909: 619). Secondhand markets enabled these plebeian displays.

The rising tide of cast-off clothes spread ever-wider and commercial networks expanded internationally. British North American ports received regular supplies of used apparel (*New Brunswick Courier* 1832, 1832, 1834). Traders resident in Glasgow routinely shipped old clothes to Belfast, for distribution in that city and beyond, while wholesale dealers from Ireland visiting Glasgow bought cargoes of used clothing to send to America as well as their home ports (*The Belfast News-Letter* 1832; *Poor Law Inquiry (Scotland)* 1844: 323). Throughout Europe, provincial dealers sourced supplies from large cities where population density and commercial networks amassed goods in these entrepôt. Britain began the 1800s with a clear industrial advantage, spilling its growing surplus of clothes out into the world’s markets, a process joined by others

in Europe and America. Textile prices declined over the early 1800s (some dramatically) and some low-cost, basic fabrics appeared in greater quantities in this new textile environment (Crouzet 2001: 100-21; Daunton 1995: 193, 196). However, new materials alone did not answer all needs.

Specialist retail networks proliferated, directing clothes in various states of renovation to customers needing or desiring additions to their wardrobes. So voluminous was the London trade that in 1843 Mr Isaac set up an Old Clothes Exchange in London's Houndsditch. Out on the streets, armies of hucksters called their trade, soliciting items at kitchen doors, and carried their takings to the Exchange in the late afternoon, to be sorted and later purchased by larger merchants, some with specific requirements (Charpy 2008: 133; Mayhew 1967[1851], Vol. I: 368). Wholesale international commerce was an important attribute of the nineteenth-century trade, with bales of garments assembled by merchants including "Every kind of old attire, from the highest to the lowest" (Mayhew 1967[1851], Vol. II: 27). One advertisement in a British periodical trumpeted the offer of "NEW CLOTHES FOR OLD." Such was the capacity of this business that its owner needed 5,000 old suits weekly to meet overseas demand, including military and naval uniforms (*The Age* 1833: 393). London welcomed dealers from provincial England, Ireland, Scotland, the Netherlands, and Belgium and visiting traders dickered for the best bargains. Tastes differed (Mayhew 1967[1851],

Vol. II, 33). As with all other commodities, secondhand dealers learned the specialist needs of their customers, near or far.

Shipments of used clothing inevitably transformed the textile economies of receiving nations. Local textile producers had to adjust to the steady flow of used goods into their regions, in addition to the deluge of new factory-made products—this conundrum affected many areas of the world in the decades to come, as industrial nations redirected cargoes of old clothes (Hansen 2000). The low price of these commodities enabled a deep market penetration across the globe; while, at the same time, recipient communities assigned shifting meanings to the clothing itself. Manuel Charpy identifies the dynamic growth in exports from France, including old uniforms sent to Brazil and the present-day Dominican Republic, mnemonics of materialized discipline to former colonial territories. Total exports of used garments from France reached 50 tons in 1834, 500 tons in 1848, and 1260 tons in 1854 (Charpy 2008: 134-5), official figures that Charpy suspects represent but a portion of the traffic. Karen Tranberg Hansen assesses the particular significance of these shipments to colonial or former colonial regions. "The cultural and political struggles that are played out on the body surface imply a continuing tension in the meeting between local practices and ideas and Western forms. I suggest that this tension contributes importantly to the vitality and dynamism of the 'new' cultural forms whose combination of elements is always in process" (2000: 6).

Among used British goods, black was prized in European markets. The growing cadre of clerks required black garments as a sign of their profession and turned to secondhand markets to fill a need they could not otherwise meet. One old clothes dealer described these customers as men who "works with their heads ... and not their hands" (Mayhew 1967[1851], Vol. II: 41). Coats that were re-dyed, re-pressed and "doctored" gave a respectable appearance to clerks as well as "waiters, small tradesmen and curates" (*Chambers Journal* 1874: 370). In France, too, there was a lively market for "the best" of old British wool garments, with the lining stripped so they could be categorized as "rags" for customs officials. Trade to Poland and Russia also flourished, providing fabric for cheap black caps, a headwear universally worn by the working poor. Such caps were stitched locally out of bales of old black wool waistcoats and jackets shipped from Britain. In contrast, the Netherlands showed a taste for old red wool uniforms. These were remade into red undergarments—the color was preferred as a prophylactic against cold or illness. A journalist noted another destination for old British uniforms: "The vast majority of the scarlet coats of our officers that are little worn find their way to the great annual fair at Leipzig," where a further redeployment took place to Russia (*Chambers Journal* 1874: 370; *Leeds Mercury* 1864). Regional commerce often had quite distinct characteristics. Thus, the peripatetic nature of St Petersburg's population supported the "vast extent of the rag fair" in

that city (*Commercial Tariffs* 1843: 388). Niche markets as well as more generalized demand animated this expanding heterogeneous commerce.

Nineteenth-century production methods, matched with nineteenth-century commercial networks, enveloped more of the world's needy peoples in used apparel. The transmission of worn garments in charitable ventures likewise took on new dimensions. Clothing had long been a medium of charity, often person-to-person as with the gift of an old coat. However, over the 1800s, such was the magnitude of common wardrobes that worn garments were now widely solicited, collected, and redistributed in a routine charitable dynamic. The heightened connection between charity and the secondhand clothing trade was another of the distinct developments in the era of industrial plenty. The crisis of the Irish famine (c. 1846–52) occasioned repeated calls for contributions—“any articles of old clothing or bedding, or anything that can be converted into the same ... for the poor starving Irish” (*The Bristol Mercury* 1847). In a precursor famine in 1831, Baptists throughout England were challenged to collect “two or three thousand suits [of old clothes], for the children and parents are naked as well as famishing” (*The Baptist Magazine* 1831: 440). Used garments were similarly sought for more usual charities such as the Liverpool Night Asylum, the Aberdeen Industrial School or the Hull Ragged and Industrial School; for the latter it was claimed that such donations would “materially

contribute to the success of this noble institution” (*Liverpool Mercury etc* 1847; *The Essex Standard* 1848; *Hull Packet and East Riding Times* 1849).

Cast-off garments became a new charitable currency in the 1800s, a medium linking households, religious institutions, colonial projects, and international trade. This alliance siphoned off tons of clothes from innumerable households and directed these towards worthy endeavors, local and international. Here, too, the value of the donations was assured as a result of vigorous, transnational markets for secondhand wares. Missionaries joined the ranks of those re-channeling surplus apparel and readers of *The Children's Missionary Magazine* were encouraged to “remember that old clothes ... will be gladly received for the use of the Missionaries” (1853: 104). The Church of the United Brethren missionaries organized delivery of chests of old clothes for their local native congregants in Southern Africa from the early 1800s, sent out from London (“Extracts of the Diary...” n.d.: 221, 296). Karen Tranberg Hansen observes that in the present day: “Charitable organizations are the largest single source of the garments that fuel the international trade in secondhand clothing” (Hansen 2004: 3). This intersection of charitable donations and for-profit international trade, traces its roots to the nineteenth-century industrial age. Indeed, the dramatic growth of the old clothes trade produced a contiguous increase in the circulation of Western garb in colonial settings across the

globe, carried by settlers, traders, colonial officials, and missionaries. This became a broadly Western enterprise, extending to the farthest reaches of the world. One of the final acts of a missionary couple deployed to the Falkland Islands, in the South Atlantic, was the dispersal of “new and old clothes, with other useful things, for the Indians” (*South American Missionary Magazine* 1871: 24). Religious conversion required these disciples to embrace a new clothing system as a sign of interior transformation, although the new adherents often reinterpreted elements of dress in distinctive ways (Ross 2008: 83–102). The problematic of bodily covering now became part of wider political negotiations as old and new Western-style garments poured into colonial settlements and missionary outposts. This, in turn, produced a rich variety of contested fashion systems, consumer dynamics, and disciplinary regimes, as the process of adoption, adaptation, and innovation in dress proceeded across the world (Hansen 2000; Martin 1994; Maynard 2002; Ross 2008; White 2003).

By 1850, centuries of contact had taken place between imperial projectors, their adjuncts, and indigenous peoples across the globe, with sometime-dramatic effects on clothing cultures (see Earle 2007; Fisher 2009; Ross 2008; White 2003, 2011; Willmott 2001). Initial contact was followed by intensified routine interactions as merchants, settlers, missionaries, and administrators relocated to colonial territories. The secondhand trade figured as one element in the

broader forces shaping material interactions. Tracey Randle describes the importance of auctions of secondhand wares in the 1700s Cape Colony. Through these events even freed black slaves might acquire clothing they desired (Randle 2010). The scale and frequency of exchanges increased with the growing industrial and commercial capacities of European powers. The extraordinary nineteenth-century dimensions of a trade once founded on scarcity are illustrated in the ease with which English missionaries, returning to Cape Town in 1843, arranged to bring with them fifty tons of “old clothes” gleaned from the vast British market (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 237). Comaroff and Comaroff observe that: “Cultural revolutions, not least those set in train by European colonization, usually root themselves on modest terrain, in simple acts of fabrication, use, exchange” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 220). The “terrain” of “fabrication, use, exchange” is very far from “modest” and constitutes the dynamic social life of commodities from their inception through their multifaceted, value-laden circuit, until such time as the very materiality of the item abrades to tenuous threads. Thus, the era of industrial plenty produced a secondhand clothing trade replete with remarkable features, unprecedented in scale, polyvalent in form, arising from, but distinct from previous eras in important ways.

Conclusion

At every stage of its development the secondhand clothing trade enabled consumption. The traffic in used cloth and clothing was

never identical to commerce in new goods. Simply put, its logic was more complex and, often, so too were its mechanisms of exchange, integrating social or cultural features often absent from routine cash transactions. The meanings associated with secondhand commerce likewise evolved within the broader transit of societal change (Milgram 2005; Milhaupt 2005; Norris 2005). Charting the broad contextual features of the secondhand clothing trade is critical to understanding its functions and gaining keener insights into the societies under review.

I will conclude with a summary of each phase of this unique enterprise. During the transition from scarcity, the circulation of secondhand wares was a catalyst, augmenting economic activity through its use as an alternate currency. This trade enabled a more flexible management of resources for all social ranks and it also facilitated enterprise, most particularly in urban locales. In the second stage of growing abundance, this trade constituted a vital adjunct to retail expansion, encouraging the diffusion of new consumables like ceramics, with routine exchanges of old clothes for new china cups. It was likewise a vehicle for female micro-enterprise, representing another facet of women’s contributions to the industrious revolution. This traffic expanded consumer choice, facilitating the growth of specialist and general secondhand enterprises. Demotic fashions flourish more vibrantly as a result and commercial energy was enhanced. In the third stage of

industrial plenty, industrialization itself reshaped the scale and scope of secondhand commerce. Mountains of worn, factory-made garments flooded world markets, producing substantial elaborations within extra-European clothing cultures and augmenting global capitalist networks. Consumer choice grew as a result, while clothing became a more contested commodity. Simultaneously, in the West, the trade in used textiles and clothes became a more class-specific enterprise. Middle-class families deserted old clothes markets, balking at the thought of garments with unknown provenance. Despite these Victorian qualms, the trade in used textiles and clothing enabled a broader market engagement for a wider cross-section of the population than would have been possible from new goods alone. Raggedness declined among the working poor and plebeian styles assumed more variable forms. Old clothes gained international prominence as a charitable currency, part of the material arsenal of colonial projects, with profound ramifications for colonial populations. Throughout, women figured centrally in the trajectory of this trade. Their involvement as household managers, local dealers, shopkeepers, customers, and missionaries was central to this history. In its aggregate, the secondhand clothing trade represented a major cultural force. It also featured as a vital element in European economic development, sustaining retail trades (large and small) over centuries, options impossible without this complex of transactions.

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