

Labour in second-hand

Second-hand Challenges Workshop Series



Illustration by Efa Blosser-Mason

Violet Broadhead, University of Bristol
Alida Payson, Cardiff University

Rhiannon Craft, Cardiff University
Maya Wassell Smith, Cardiff University

Labour in Second-hand – Workshop Report 3

Second-hand Challenges Workshop Series

Workshop 3 — 29th April 2022

The second-hand challenges workshop series brought together researchers and practitioners working in second-hand to problem-solve together around key challenges in the second-hand economy: waste and reuse, repair, labour, and community welfare.

1. Introduction – Why this challenge?

As we explore throughout this series, the second-hand economy performs a number of crucial roles, including facilitating the reuse, repair, and recycling of a great range and quantity of goods, and creating opportunities for community cohesion and solidarity. The second-hand economy also takes work. Second-hand labour takes many different forms, spanning centuries, countries, and sectoral boundaries. Whether sorting and disposing of wastes; reselling goods online, in a charity or thrift shop or at a market; repairing and repurposing; managing consumption work and divestment in the home; building relationships; or sorting out accounts – all these vital second-hand processes take skilled, sometimes risky, often poorly paid or unpaid labour.

Despite recent evaluations of second-hand markets in the tens of billions of dollars (Smith, 2022), second-hand labour goes largely unrecognised, and second-hand workers around the world face a complex range of issues that need attention. On this basis, the third workshop in our series explores both unique and shared characteristics and challenges of a range of different forms of second-hand labour, and considers how we might better value and support the workers of the second-hand economy moving forward.

2. Defining the challenge - Programme of speakers

- **Dr Cheryl Roberts**, Royal College of Art

Cheryl explores the practical consumption work taking place in the jumble sales and street markets of London's east end in the 20th Century, and how it might inform the future fashion industry. Her presentation described how buyers negotiated the olfactory, haptic, kinetic qualities of this complex shopping experience, employing 'material knowledge and material literacy' to select items (e.g. timeless cuts, garments of good enough quality to withstand alteration) and adapt them.

<https://www.rca.ac.uk/more/staff/cheryl-roberts/>

Second-hand Challenges Workshops

- **Dr Julie Botticello**, University of East London

Julie's talk focussed on workers in the for-profit rag trade, whose labour rekindles the value of unwanted/waste clothing to be either recycled or exported for reuse. The work of sorting and grading is shown to require tactile engagement with the garments to determine textile composition, and detailed knowledge of end markets. This is 'dirty work', such that the people, their knowledge and skills are not well-valued.

<https://www.uel.ac.uk/about-uel/staff/julie-botticello>

- **Dr Michael Palm**, UNC-Chapel Hill

Michael presented the findings of his work with Dr Tamara Kneese on the online sale of second-hand vinyl records. Online platforms have revived the vinyl market, and reconfigured the labour involved; 'listing labor' entails extensive descriptions and documentation; fragile goods require elaborate packaging to be posted safely; and sellers must manage affect as well as merchandise, as bad reviews can be extremely costly.

<https://comm.unc.edu/people/department-faculty/michael-palm/>

- **Brenda Mondragón Toledo**, University College Cork, and **Diana Morales**, Benemérita Universidad Autónoma

As both researchers and participants, Brenda and Diana explore the use of Instagram to sell second-hand clothing by young women in Puebla-Tlaxcala, Mexico. Illegally imported second-hand clothing is purchased from markets (tianguis), washed, repaired, upcycled, then styled and photographed. The talk presented a number of risks are associated with this informal economy: sellers often face classist and misogynistic stigmatisation, and goods and cash are typically exchanged in person, raising significant security concerns.

<https://blogs.cardiff.ac.uk/secondhandcultures/second-hand-bazaars-in-mexico-interview/>

- **Dr Jen Ayres**, second-hand trader and independent scholar

Jen spoke based on her personal experience of the vintage clothing and jewellery trade, and her research on 'Big Thrift' and the pressures and hazards of 'the work of shopping'. Small-scale second-hand traders choose autonomy and creativity over dead-end jobs, but in return shoulder risks and responsibilities alone. In contrast, non-profit organisations generate huge profits through the gentrification of second-hand exchange.

<https://nyu.academia.edu/JenniferLynnAyres>

Second-hand Challenges Workshops

- **Alex Osborne and Megan Thomas**, Disability Wales

Megan discussed the rights of disabled people and the support that is available to them while seeking work or in work. Disabled people face significant barriers to accessing both paid and voluntary work, including lack of implementation of reasonable adjustments (despite legal requirement to do so under the Equality Act 2020) and hostile responses to adjustment requests. While volunteering can be a flexible and rewarding form of work, some people mistakenly believe it will jeopardise benefit payments.

<https://www.disabilitywales.org/>

- **Nathaniel Kidd**, Acorns Children's Hospice

Nathaniel's talk highlighted how indispensable the volunteer workforce is to the charity retail sector; volunteers at Acorn Children's Hospice provide labour which would equate to £2 million per year at minimum wage. Nathaniel described the organisational culture the hospice implements to recruit and retain volunteers, establishing strong links to the community and devolving responsibility and agency to volunteers as much as possible.

<https://www.acorns.org.uk/>

3. Themes in the discussion

- **(Embodied) skills and knowledge**
 - Sorting, purchasing, and selling used goods requires embodied engagement with things and materials, and often practical skills of repair and alteration.
 - Sorting, purchasing, and selling used goods requires knowledge of objects, brands, design, markets, aesthetics...
 - Different kinds of objects require different skills and knowledges.
 - The growth of online platforms creates new kinds of second-hand labour which require new skills.
 - Michael Palm highlights recent tendency towards the consolidation of skills into individual workers, so that independent merchants must have competencies in sourcing, styling, selling, social media, graphic design...
 - Jen Ayres highlights the importance of embodied research methods in academic work, to understand the toll labour takes on bodies.
- **Service relations**
 - The work of the second-hand economy involves service and affective labour.
 - Online platforms bring expectations of constant availability.

Second-hand Challenges Workshops

- Julie Botticello, rag workers must 'uphold the brand of the bale', a bad bale of clothing can damage the reputation of a salvage company.
- **Precarity/risk/inequality**
 - Many turn to (informal) second-hand work when they face barriers in the formal/mainstream economy, or opportunities are limited/inadequate. While there are benefits – flexibility, autonomy, creativity - workers in the second-hand economy often have little safety net/support.
 - Working in the second-hand economy can be 'dirty' work, dangerous, demeaning, demanding. This kind of work is typically poorly paid.
 - Second-hand activities can be intertwined with illegal ones.
 - Some second-hand activities are stigmatised. Class, race, and gender are all implicated within this.
 - Algorithms reflect (racial, gendered, disability-based, appearance based) biases, so that opportunities in the online second-hand economy are unevenly distributed.
- **Value creation/extraction**
 - As in the production of the first cycle, systems and employers seek to extract maximum value from materials and people.
 - Second-hand work, particularly of vintage or culturally valued goods, can rely on the 'personal brand' (particularly via social media). Perceived passion and authenticity add value – and can be exploited.
 - 'Charity' is a powerful discourse. As the legitimation for profit-making activities in the charity retail/thrift store sector, it can justify/obscure exploitative labour arrangements.

4. Ideas responding to the challenge... How might we make second-hand work more equitable and responsive to the needs and rights of different workers?

- **Systemic/structural changes to facilitate fairer and more meaningful work (paid and unpaid)**
 - More affordable housing.
 - Fewer bullshit jobs (Graeber 2018).
 - Universal basic income.
 - Four-day week.
Value labour more (Raise the price of goods. Regulate thrift stores as living wage employers. Charity retailers to invest in staff to support volunteers).
 - Trade liberalisation that is for the benefit of everyone, including developing countries.
 - Limit the fees that sales platforms can charge.

Second-hand Challenges Workshops

- **Promoting sustainable production and consumption**
 - Regulation to promote sustainable production, for example, end single-use goods, minimise use of materials that don't degrade or recycle easily, like synthetic and blended fabrics, vinyl records.
 - Normalise and revalue second-hand goods over new ones. For example, record companies to buy up second-hand copies to re-release with new sleeves etc, rather than making new pressings.
 - Direct action against manufacturers who create waste.
 - Extended Producer Responsibility schemes.
 - Investment in waste management infrastructure, including giving people more outlets for end-of-life goods.
 - Collaboration between second-hand outlets and waste centres.
 - Right to Repair legislation.

- **Solidarity, community, networks**
 - Events, conferences, for second-hand workers to connect (including different kinds of second-hand e.g. vintage, charity shops, for solidarity across boundaries). Recording and archiving of these events.
 - Online forums for organizing, sharing best practice, useful information.
 - Unions.
 - Amplifying examples of empowered workers.
 - More community spaces for second-hand work.
 - Raise the voices of marginalised second-hand workers, for example, in low- and middle-income countries.

- **Skills and knowledge**
 - Community workshops for repair and upcycling skills.
 - Education around product lifecycles, waste, second-hand activities, slower living.
 - Setting personal goals, e.g. around mending, learning skills.

References:

Graeber, D. 2018. *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. Penguin: London

Smith, P. 2022. *Secondhand apparel market value worldwide from 2021 to 2026* [Infographic] Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/826162/apparel-resale-market-value-worldwide/> [Accessed 07.02.2023]