

Second-Hand Clothes: Inequalities between the Global North and the Global South

Ropa de segunda mano: desigualdades entre el norte global y el sur global

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The literature on second-hand clothes links two sides of the same phenomenon. Overproduction and overconsumption of goods in the framework of an unequal global order, together with the active participation of various actors and social institutions in trade and consumption at the local level, explain the movement of second-hand clothes from countries in the North to countries in the South. Studies focused on the global aspect of the phenomenon are concerned with the impact of second-hand clothing trade on local textile industries (Frazer, 2008), and they assess whether such trade reproduces the marginalization of inhabitants in the poorest countries (Haggblade, 1990; Field, Barrett, Browne, & May, 1996) instead of favoring employment opportunities, consumption, or state income (Brooks, 2012). Other studies consider possible solutions (Mhango & Nhiem, 2005; Mackintosh, 2011).

Authors focusing on local institutions highlight the role of kinship and ethnic or migrant networks in the organization of local trade on the basis of social ties and trust relationships (Mhango & Nhiem, 2005; Bredeloup & Lombard, 2008; Brooks, 2012, among others). The codes and meanings underlying the organization of trade and consumption have also been studied (Field *et al.*, 1996; Hansen, 2000; Baden & Barber, 2005; Abimbola, 2012; Boticello, 2012; Norris, 2012). Finally, between the global and local contexts, the literature has discussed gender issues, cross-border trade and recycling (Milgram, 2012; Machado & Loureiro, 2015; Hernández & Loureiro, 2017; Sandoval-Hernández, 2018; Ryder & Morley, 2012; Tarlo, 2012).

Most of these papers highlight the global relevance of second-hand clothes trade in terms of volume (Brooks, 2015; Hansen, 2004, 2000). In Sub-Saharan African countries, second-hand clothes trade represents more than 50% of total clothing trade (Brooks, 2015, p. 15); therefore, researchers such as Haggblade (1990), Baden and Barber (2005) and Frazer (2008) have assessed the positive and negative consequences of this commercial activity in the region.

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In the case of Rwanda, Haggblade (1990) compared second-hand clothes trade with local clothing manufacturing and new clothes imports; the author found that second-hand clothes trade has a rather positive impact because it created jobs and produced income for the poorest inhabitants and for the state. For their part, Baden and Barber (2005) underscore the difficulties of determining whether second-hand clothes trade replaces or complements the local textile industry in developing countries; for these authors, the history, context, maturity of local textile industry, and the level of informal clothing production, in addition to the size of the new clothing market, are all factors to be considered in judging whether second-hand clothing has a negative or a positive impact.

However, the answer given by other authors to the debate on the positive or negative aspects of second-hand clothing trade has been more analytical. For example, Hansen (2004) studied the perception of second-hand clothes in different countries; the author found that, around the world, information in the media and opinions of trade ministers refer to problems of hygiene and public health (similar opinions are reported in studies by Hernández & Loureiro, 2017; Field *et al.*, 1996; and Baden & Barber, 2005), but the most widespread criticism refers to the negative effect of second-hand clothes on the local textile industry. However, when the textile industry has practically disappeared or collapsed in certain African countries, the main causes have been the policies that limited state intervention, increased privatization, and stimulated openness to international markets and European and Asian imports during the 1980s. In this framework of explanations and contexts, Hansen developed the idea of the *cultural construction of demand* to explain how traders and consumers of second-hand clothing, quite the opposite of helping to destroy local textile industries, open local doors to the global economy.

Hansen (2000) provides a detailed description of the “global commodity chain” of second-hand clothing, that is, the global organization for the collection, selection, and trade of the garments, including the role of charitable associations (such as Goodwill, the Salvation Army, or Oxfam) or business associations (recycling companies, brokers) in the distribution of the clothes from countries in the North to countries in the South and their commercialization in informal markets in poor countries. Thanks to Hansen, we know that the phenomenon of second-hand clothing is diverse and complex and that it is not limited to a North-South relationship.

According to Hansen (2000), in this trade, many men and women have found an alternative to state policies that increasingly restricted their material possibilities of reproduction. According to Hansen (2000), in Zambia, second-hand clothes represent a form of democratization and liberation because what matters at the time of selecting and buying is not the western origin of the clothes, but the fact that second-hand clothing has been, for a long time, part of the local dress. Second-hand clothing has become an icon of what it means to dress well. Thus, it is true that the export of second-hand clothing from the North and its import by the South reproduces an unequal global order, but Hansen’s proposal goes further and sees consumers in the South as more than passive recipients and

reflects on the meaning of clothing in the life of those who wear it. According to Hansen, the consumption of second-hand clothing is a matter of cultural economy, taste, meaning, judgment, preference, and style (Hansen, 2000).

Like Hansen (2000), Brooks (2012, 2015) also aims to demonstrate that the economy of second-hand clothing is global and is also interconnected. But Brooks (2012) is more critical when discussing the possibilities of the active participation of local actors in what he calls the global production network (GPN). Based on this concept, Brooks criticizes concepts such as the global value chain. According to Brooks, the work and production process involved in the creation of value, that is, in the transformation of raw materials (in this case, discarded second-hand clothing) into merchandise, should be taken into account. In this view, the idea of GPN links the production of these goods in the Global North with their consumption in the Global South and allows for the analysis of the networks between the charity associations and the companies involved in the production of second-hand clothing in the Global North, the type of work necessary to produce second-hand clothing, the role of diasporas and culture in the consolidation of geographical nodes, and how different socioeconomic contexts impact the geography of commerce and consumption in certain nodes.

However, based on a study on clothing trade in Mozambique, Brooks (2012) refers that, while second-hand clothing retailers are coordinated with the supply system, their ability to acquire an advantageous position in the capital accumulation process is very limited; therefore, despite their “coordination,” they are in fact “non-integrated.” Being a clothing merchant in Mozambique means having an uncertain source of income and a very marginal participation in the GPN. To demonstrate this, Brooks (2012) carries out a critical analysis of the structures of this trade and the living conditions of the merchants. He concludes that the structure is unstable because second-hand clothing trade is uncertain—it changes all the time and merchants have no control over what donors in the Global North provide as second-hand clothes, and the precariousness of the merchants is such that they are unable to save enough money or build social ties to influence the GPN.

On the other hand, Abimbola (2012) makes an interesting contribution to the analysis of the uncertainty that characterizes this trade based on the concept of information asymmetry, i.e., the fact that a party (the seller) in a commercial relationship has information that the other party (the buyer) could not have. A common practice among second-hand clothing intermediaries is to prohibit opening the bales before buying them. Brooks (2012) and Abimbola (2012) agree that uncertainty and information asymmetry is reduced if there are trust and cooperation between groups of traders or intermediaries, who are often members of migrant communities or ethnic groups.

Abimbola uses the example of the Igbo merchants from Nigeria, who have organized their business in Benin around the institution of apprenticeship, a guild-like training system based on kinship in which young traders are trained by older generations. This local

institution helps to decrease information asymmetry; for instance, apprentices are sent to warehouses in Great Britain to supervise how bales are made up, and the system favors the “standardization of goods,” an aspect also discussed and contributed to by Abimbola (2012).

By focusing on a local institution such as this apprenticeship system, Abimbola invites us to move from economic to anthropological references. The first ones are criticized by Lucy Norris (2010) because they focus mainly on production chains and the distribution of value in these chains, and therefore, they end up being forms of economization and marketization of cultural values. Norris bases her criticism on her ethnographic work on the exchange and recycling of textiles in India. For the author, the recycling of clothes, as it takes place in India, is an expression of changes in the relationship between people and textiles in a society where the latter have traditionally served to extend social relations.

The clothing recycling industry in India, which mainly consists in fraying or defibering clothes to transform them into new textiles (such as rugs, tapestries, or dresses), is a way to destroy the social relationships contained in clothing to produce new, ahistorical ones. The process is apparently necessary for a society where it is customary to give clothes to mark the various rituals of the life cycle, but also to stress the differences between castes. This process, incidentally, is also an expression of changes in consumption patterns in a society where, until recently, the accumulation of clothing was universally accepted.

Based on the theoretical currents of material culture, Norris (2012) confirms the relationship between objects and social categories that in turn allow objects to be classified (reusable, non-reusable, disposable, non-disposable), something also picked up by Boticello (2012) in her work on the category of “dirty” in the selection of second-hand clothes. According to Boticello (2012), a whole system of categories is generated from this category. To demonstrate this, she uses the intermediate space between second-hand clothing indistinguishable from garbage and its condition of merchandise for consumption. This intermediate space is the selection process.

According to Boticello (2012), employees of second-hand clothing sorting businesses use categories established by other actors (the second-hand clothing production system), but they also subvert such categories based on their experience, that is, on their own system of discernment, the one that best helps them judge the qualities of a garment and its category.

In this context, the clothing selection process is more complex than it seems, since it involves subjective and concrete negotiations between the worker, the administration of the warehouse where the clothing is classified, the demands of the clients, and the donations made: what is dirty or clean somewhere, is not necessarily dirty or clean somewhere else. The implications of these subjective and concrete classification categories become dramatic when we see that clothes in the worst conditions are sent to the poorest countries in the world, while the best quality clothes are sent to developing countries, as can be observed in

Europe and the United States, where used clothes are sent to regions where salaries are lower, such as Eastern Europe or the Mexican border (Gauthier, 2009; Sandoval, in press).

As can be appreciated in the present literature review, second-hand clothing has been addressed in the contexts of global inequalities, international trade (including smuggling), consumption, and culture. Unequivocally, second-hand clothing trade is a sign of economic and social inequality around the world.

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