

## Old Ideas: Values in Second Hand Markets

Solutions to the economic and environmental challenges the world is currently facing often introduce novel ideas and new ways forward. In a conceptual take on degrowth this paper presents a study of an existing economic system, the second hand market, and argues that understanding how values are created in this market can contribute to a change towards greater sustainability in the cultural industries.

Second hand markets has a long history and spans most of the world through local markets, global networks of wholesale traders, charitable donations or sites for disassembling used objects, from clothes to oil tankers (Crewe & Gregson 1998, Norris 2010, Hansen 2000 Gregson et al. 2010). This mixed economy consists of individuals selling in flea markets or online, private companies as well as charitable organizations. There is a growing interest in second hand, which is also noticeable over a number of research fields including anthropology, sociology, cultural geography and cultural studies, but so far scholars have paid little attention to how value is created in these markets. A re-examination of how these economic systems work and what constitutes value may provide knowledge that can help conventional cultural industries move beyond production and growth and towards a sustainable market that is not solely driven by economic gain.

Studies of value in other industries (e.g. Beckert & Aspers 2011, Moeran & Pedersen 2011) and of unique economic settings (Myers 2001, Wiener 1992) are relevant for the study of these markets, as are elements of gift economy (Mauss 1950/2000). In his book *Towards an Anthropological theory of Value* (2001), David Graeber presents a critical reading of some of the theories that have shaped the study of value in cultural theory over the last century. Besides being an attack on a reductionist economic rationality the book presents a concept of value that places human actions at the centre. He argues that what is valuable is not the thing but the social action around it. In the study of second hand markets a focus on action is conducive since the remarketing of objects is a labour intensive socio-cultural process.

In the ethnographic study that forms the basis of this paper I followed the process of remarketing second hand objects from collection to reselling. Through participant observation and interviews I got an in-depth understanding of the practices involved. Over a period of five months I worked alongside the employees on each work-station in a charity organization in San Francisco. By training and working as an employee the fieldwork became highly participatory, and through the study I gained insight into how the organization turned discarded objects into marketable commodities while providing paid and voluntary jobs, supporting local artist, raising money for charity and creating a social and cultural worth in the community.

Although there are several issues that question the sustainability of reuse economies which will be discussed in the paper, I argue that second hand markets should be considered viable examples of an existing economic system that challenges current fixations on production, creation and growth.

By proposing a different concept of value that takes social, ethical and economic factors into account the paper aims at facilitating a broader change in the cultural economy.

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