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the thing about  
**things**

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*Second-Hand Cultures*

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The thing about things is that they have such rich and complex lives. While commodity cultures may be fuelled by the fetish of the new, first-order consumption is only the beginning of the story. It's what happens next that is really interesting. Some things end up at the tip, that landscape Don DeLillo describes in *Underworld* as the place where 'all the appetites and hankerings, the sodden second thoughts came running out'.<sup>1</sup> Many things don't. They move into a myriad of different systems of value and exchange; they begin new careers, and it is this multifarious world of the second-hand that is the focus of this book.

Nicky Gregson and Louise Crewe's project in *Second-Hand Cultures* is to fill in some critical omissions in studies of consumption. While consumption studies took off in the 1980s, the focus of this burgeoning field was almost exclusively the buying and selling of shiny new things—hence all the accounts of the emblematic rise of the mall, advertising cultures, consumption and identity and the like. Behind all this glitz and glamour there was always a back story: the recirculation and recommodification of used things in a variety of marginal economic and spatial orders. And there was also the marginal consumer, the one that cultural studies never found particularly sexy—those shopping not to make a statement but to survive, those seeking out the cheapest or the nearly good enough. In *Second-Hand Cultures* we enter this realm of car-boot sales and charity shops, of shoppers driven by desperation or thrift—and what a fascinating world it is. Without wanting to push the binary between first- and second-order consumption too far, what

this richly nuanced study does is complicate all accounts of exchange and value that presume a singular dominant economic logic called capitalism. There are lots of different economies at work in the world of second-hand exchange. There are also lots of different person–thing relations and lots of different shopping subjectivities. From the vantage point of the charity shop, the piles of used clothes and tarnished toys tell a fantastic story of material cultures at work.

Working within the field of cultural geography and studies of material culture, Gregson and Crewe use the idea of ‘location’ to set up their argument. By examining the spatial politics of three sites of second-hand exchange—car-boot sales, retro shops and charity retailing—they show how this sphere has dramatically expanded since the 1970s. They show how it exists in complex relations of power and differentiation with mainstream, main-street retailing. In the case of car-boot sales, local government regulations and media panic have worked hard to keep this sector as far as possible from local market traders in the interests of avoiding unfair competition and dodgy traders. It hasn’t worked and *Second-Hand Cultures* offers a wonderful account of the spread of this distinctive form of leisure shopping as ‘matter out of place’. (32) The description of fields covered in cars with boots spilling junk, hot-dog stands, bouncy castles and thousands of people foraging through complete strangers’ throw-outs is evocative. Gregson and Crewe are right to say that the anxiety this creates is not merely economic, as the regulators argue, it’s also cultural.

This kind of informal direct exchange creates a radically other shopping sensibility. Respectability and deference to the disciplines of the designer shop are completely irrelevant in a zone where people search through a profusion of barely classified things and then negotiate their value. These practices make trouble for the status of the new and for the formalised rituals that produce distinct identities for buyer and seller. When you are haggling over the value of what used to be someone’s favourite dress you’re in delicate territory. Discussions about worth cannot be reduced to some abstract category like ‘recommended retail price’. In car-boot sales the principles of exchange for both buyers and sellers have to be established and they are continually open to transformation. These transactions can be intimate and impromptu, brutal and competitive; they can sometimes leave sellers feeling exposed and buyers feeling conned. What Gregson and Crewe document in interviews and analysis is a distinct tournament of value where price is the outcome of a game that many participants find extremely pleasurable. They also show how valuing is linked to spatiality, how the rules of valuing are shaped by where it happens, by the geographic meanings of the site of exchange.

The insights into the creation and destruction of value that this book offers are rich but they could have gone further. The continual point of differentiation for this study is ‘first-order consumption’ or the spatial and economic structures of mainstream retailing but surely what is also central is the symbolic meanings of ‘the new’? All cultural goods say things about their owners. One of the major

tasks of advertising is to inscribe commodities with particular meanings and associations in order to fuel desire and help potential purchasers understand how the thing will be culturally useful to their identity. While 'new' may signify a certain purity, a fantasy of origins that obliterates all conditions of production, it doesn't mean that things are free of symbolic meanings. The fetish qualities that advertising and retailing attach to the new commodity work to animate things with autonomy and magic. The issue for any account of the second-hand is what happens to these qualities when things are resold, when the purity of first purchase is lost, when traces of previous use are impossible to hide?

Some things are able to reactivate their original qualities or they never quite lose them. The massive expansion of retro retailing is the prime example. Gregson and Crewe document the rise of the retro shop and its distinctive place on the edges of mainstream retailing. These shops are full of second-hand things that exploit design aesthetics and iconic status to create value; their market is those who want to distinguish themselves from mass consumers and mass consumption. In the retro scene, like the antique scene, time and scarcity contribute to increased worth but the difference is that retro things are generally more recent and more implicated in the history of mass marketing. The used pair of Levi 501s, the kidney-shaped coffee table, speak to a shopper keen to display their knowledge of consumption and design history. We're not talking victims of fashion here but victims of cool, shoppers who know which used commodities have auratic value

and which don't. This is a kind of consumption that displays a knowing relationship to the new and its evolution into the retro. Often contemporary newness is devalued in the interests of celebrating periods when 'real' style prevailed. The point is that the retro thing is often only meaningful in relationship to the new commodity that it once was; only certain brands still retain value, only certain styles are in demand.

In the charity shop a completely different relationship to the new prevails. Gregson and Crewe track the complex circuits of value that order second-hand purchases in these sites. They show how charity shops have been made over or professionalised in the interests of increasing returns and making them seem identical to first-order retailing. (78) Their research shows the futility of this second aim. Shoppers in the charity shop may be there for a variety of reasons but all of them know that they are in a place where things certainly aren't 'just like new'. The central question driving choices in this sector is most often how used is this? Can I transform this thing and make it my own or is the evidence of its previous life too contaminating? Certain things do not pass this test—underwear, shoes, bed linen and pyjamas are all too close for comfort. They are worn next to the body and this use is difficult to shake by subsequent owners. These are things that seem permanently inhabited by their first owner. (155–7) The quote from a shopper describing how their pleasure in the look and feel of a nicely washed, recent-style T-shirt was destroyed by the lingering smell of vomit is a graphic example of how all things bear the traces of their previous uses.

The power of the new is fundamental to consumption. It underpins seriality and the logic of the commodity as endlessly replaceable. And, as Susan Strasser argues in her great social history *Waste and Want*, pleasure in the new had to be learnt.<sup>2</sup> Mass consumption could not have taken off without a complex series of shifts in discourse and material practices that encouraged people to throw away without compunction, to see purchases of the latest model as an expression of their consumer status and power. We all know the results of this: mountains of rubbish and a sense of horror around the whole culture of making do, handing down, using and reusing. Try telling a child nowadays that rather than head for the shops they could easily wear their sibling's outgrown jeans. New isn't just good for capitalism, it's a moral imperative and those denied access to it live in a world where shopping is very hard physical and emotional work. The constant search for the bargain, the demands of thrift, the inability to buy children the latest fad or fashion can breed despair and resentment. Gregson and Crewe capture this with force and their commitment to documenting the experiences of these shoppers gives this book ethical depth. *Second-Hand Cultures* shows that there is a shame in certain forms of shopping, that purchasing does not necessarily eliminate the sense of accepting charity. (80)

Apart from the question of the new, another suggestive but underdeveloped theme in this book is waste. Transformations in uses, significations and values have always been a central concern in material culture but the transformations involved in the production of waste have

been largely overlooked. While theorists have been happy to see waste as an historically changing category or as a source of archaeological insight they have, until recently, been less interested in comprehending waste as a distinct classification or form of value. Now, there is an emerging body of work investigating how objects become waste, how they cross value boundaries and reach the end of the line.<sup>3</sup> Gregson and Crewe are part of this trend and what their emphasis on the second-hand reveals is how reluctant many people are to convert things into waste. In stark opposition to tales of environmental disaster that emphasise profligacy and disposability, here we have a story of how things *avoid* this trajectory—how things can keep on recirculating, how they can remain caught up in seemingly endless games of value.

If waste is a generic category describing things that have exhausted all value and function, then the significance of this book is its documentation of the myriad taxonomies, uses and valuing regimes that objects can move through before they reach the end of their lives, *if they ever do*. Using the biographical approach to things pioneered by Arjun Appadurai, Gregson and Crewe show the creativity of material practices, the constant reincorporation of objects into new categories and systems of exchange.<sup>4</sup> The evidence amassed in this book makes any essentialist claims about the identity and fixed life cycle of things difficult to sustain. *Second-Hand Cultures* shows that games of value are hard to finish; many things just want to keep on playing. This means that waste, as a point of absolute separation and de-materialisation, is

often a radical conversion process. Getting to waste is complicated, and the importance of Gregson and Crewe's study is the way it reveals an extraordinary liminal zone where objects are suspended in time-space awaiting reevaluation, their biographies stretched 'potentially to infinity'. (201) So next time you contemplate that out-of-fashion jumper in the charity shop just biding its time, feel sympathy for it; without second-hand sites of exchange its life could be cut very short.

The only real query I have with this book relates to its method. As cultural geographers Gregson and Crewe are committed to the empirical. Through participant observation, cultural mapping and interviews, they track second-hand sites of exchange and the practices that surround them. The benefits of this are rich description and an ability to capture the qualitative dimension of being a second-hand buyer or seller. The limitations are a certain reluctance to analyse deeply what is documented. There is a tendency to develop the argument on the run, to make it in the conclusions of chapters rather than in analyses of the empirical material. In places I wanted less descriptive content and more theory, more engagement with and use of concepts and ideas. In cultural studies there has been a very important debate about theories of value and the relation between culture and economy but it doesn't surface here. Perhaps this is a product of a certain distance between cultural studies and cultural geography? I'm not sure; all I know is that as I was reading I kept wanting to hear more about how the example of second-hand cultures demands a radical rethink of the

meanings of economy, seriality and waste. Second-hand objects also demand a rethink of the differences between the history of things and the history in things, but that's another story altogether.

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1. Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, Scribner, New York, 1992, p. 184.
  2. Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want*, Metropolitan Books, New York, 1999.
  3. See Gavin Lucas, 'Disposability and Dispossession in the Twentieth Century', *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2002, pp. 5–22 and Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979.
  4. Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986.