Stretching global production networks: The international second-hand clothing trade

Andrew Brooks

Department of Geography, King's College London, Strand, London WC2R 2LS, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to stretch the GPN approach through investigating a second-hand trade network. One of the understudied geographies of the world economy is the large-scale international trade in second-hand clothes which are exported from the Global North to Africa. Clothing collected by charities and commercial recyclers is sold in the developing world. This article examines how secondhand clothing commodities are produced in the UK, the international economic geographies of the used-clothing trade and labour activities in Mozambique. The societal, network and territorial embeddedness of GPNs are investigated illuminating how there are coordinated and non-integrated patterns of trade. Migrant and diaspora populations play key roles in coordinating activities between some exporters and importers, whereas in other networks British charities undertake the more profitable collection and sorting activities and are separated from African wholesale and retailers. Within global second-hand clothing networks there are different power relations between charities, firms and individuals, which enable them to extract more or less value from second-hand things. The socially and historically embedded roles of British charities and firms in the collection, sorting and export of second-hand clothing are discussed and the importance of the material culture which surrounds these networks of intersecting charitable and commercial activities are highlighted. The reproduction of exchange-value in used clothing through socially necessary labour time in sorting factories is examined. Different case studies are discussed demonstrating the difficulties of studying the complex webs of networks with dynamic geographies which constitute second-hand trade. This article stretches GPN analysis to consider the back-end of the global economy and explore how profit is accumulated from the trade in low-value commodities from the Global North to the Global South.

1. Introduction

Arrangements of people producing and consuming in different places in the global economy are connected to one another and understanding these links has long occupied geographers who investigate the cultural, economic and political cartography of international trade (Amin and Thrift, 2000; Fine, 2002; Harvey, 2006). Research using the global production networks (GPNs) approach has mapped some of the changing geographies of the global economy and the impacts of broadly defined 'globalisation' by linking together the design of new commodities, the sourcing of constituent parts and the processes of production, transport, export, import and sale (Henderson et al., 2002; Lane and Probert, 2006; Woxenius, 2006; Hudson, 2008). In contrast, the reproduction and consumption of second-hand goods has been marginalised in cultural and economic geography and there have been calls for further research (Gregson and Crewe, 2003; Hansen, 2000). Through

this article I map a second-hand trade pattern and argue that the GPN approach can be 'stretched' to explore the trade in used goods.

Some used things are reproduced as commodities to be sold again. These are important and increasingly transnational activities, which depend upon connections between firms and individuals in different places. With the nascent interest in recycling and reuse, the cultural and economic geographies of the trade in used stuff, such as cars, e-waste and household goods has begun to be investigated (Brooks, 2012; Lane et al., 2009; Lepawsky and Billah, 2011). However, the connections between reproducing used things as second-hand goods and consumption requires further analysis. Kaplinsky (2000) has argued (from the Global Value Chains (GVCs) position) for studies which attempt to explain how global industries are organised and governed, which extend *beyond* commodities' first life cycles. This has yet to lead to rigorous analysis of the transnational work activities that are required to reproduce, trade and retail second-hand goods. The "back-end" of international trade has been neglected and there is a need to both map empirically and discuss theoretically how commodities are re-made through secondary processes of production (Gregson et al., 2010,

E-mail address: andrew.brooks@kcl.ac.uk

p. 246; Lepawsky and Mather, 2011). GPN analysis offers a lens through which to examine the international geographies of second-hand trade, linking used commodity production in the Global North to consumption in the Global South. In particular the GPN approach can enable us to investigate the distribution of power and embeddedness within second-hand trade networks that straddle the Global North and South (Brooks, 2012).

One of the most important second-hand sectors is the used clothing trade and the arrangement of firms, charities, and individuals involved, requires further exploration (Hansen, 2000). In recent decades the international trade in second-hand clothing has been fuelled in the Global North by the rapid circulation, consumption and disposal of garments for recycling, export and reuse in the Global South (Norris, 2010). The United States is the largest exporter and dispatches over 500,000 tonnes of second-hand clothes per annum, to more than a 100 different countries (Rivoli, 2009, pp. 216–217). Second-hand clothes are retailed in low and middle-income countries and the trade is habitual and widespread, although little understood by most people across both the Global North and South (Haggblade, 1990; Hansen, 2000; Milgram, 2005; Norris, 2005, Palmer and Clark, 2005). Second-hand clothing networks have long histories and great geographical reaches that have attracted only limited popular and academic attention (Ginsburg, 1980; Jester, 2002; Mark, 2012; Strasser, 1999). The connections between production and consumption in the second-hand clothing trade can therefore be used as a signal case for applying the GPN approach to investigating the trade in used goods.

Following from Hess and Coe's (2006, p. 1207) research of the mobile-telecommunications industry, the GPN approach is used in this article to research some examples of

(a) the complex nonlinear networks of charities and firms involved in the production of second-hand clothing commodities in the Global North;
(b) the role of labour in the process of creating exchange-value from second-hand clothing in the UK;
(c) the distribution of power within and between actors (charities, firms and individuals) operating in (and across) the Global North and South;
(d) the embeddedness of actors in production networks and the roles of diaspora populations at different geographical nodes;
(e) the import, wholesale and retail of second-hand clothing at a consumption node; namely Mozambique.

As with Hess and Coe (2006, p. 1207) the overall approach "focuses on the organisationally and geographically complex webs of intrafirm, interfirm, and extrafirm networks that characterise contemporary production systems." What is central to understanding these relationships is the notion of the embeddenes of different actors within societies and territories, advanced by the GPN framework (Hughes et al., 2008). Networked practices become embedded and different forms of governance and power, as well as situated knowledges, migrant populations and cultural practices effect linkages between spaces of production and places of consumption. Ideas of societal and territorial embeddedness, developed through the GPN approach (Coe, 2011; Hess, 2004), are drawn upon to illustrate how different socio-economic contexts influence second-hand trade geographies.

The state of knowledge regarding second-hand clothing networks is not well developed; therefore this article provides extensive empirical sketching of the connections between different moments of trade. Second-hand clothes pass through networks of charitable and commercial exchange that intimately link the richest and poorest people; as the waste clothes of the former

are valued and re-worn by the latter. Intricate and perplexing supply networks are a feature of the global trade (Haggblade, 1990; Velia et al., 2006). Clothing donors in Canada, the United Kingdom and United States do not understand the final market, and the origin is not known by people who consume second-hand clothes in countries such as Kenya, Mozambique, the Philippines and Zambia (Shea and Brennan, 2008; Field, 2008; Milgram, 2005; Hansen, 2000). People in the Global North who can readily afford to buy new clothes, get rid of outgrown, unfashionable or worn out garments and discard them as waste, dispose of them for recycling or donate them to charities (Gregson and Beale, 2004). Second-hand clothes are resold by charities as well as clothing recyclers and intra-charity, inter-charity and extra-charity connections can be added to Hess and Coe's "complex web" (2006, p. 1207 see Fig. 1). It is worth emphasising here that the used clothes collected by charities and clothing recyclers for export to the Global South are overwhelmingly retailed for profit in the Global South and are not freely distributed (Baden and Barber, 2005; Frazer, 2008). This is demonstrated throughout the article and understanding this from the outset will help frame the analysis for readers unfamiliar with the second-hand clothing trade.

This study illustrates different power relations in the second-hand clothing trade, focusing on the production of second-hand clothing goods in the UK, exports of second-hand clothing from the UK to Africa and the import, wholesale and retail of second-hand clothes in Mozambique. Certain nodes in the second-hand clothing GPNs have been challenging to investigate and illegal and morally ambiguous practices are commonplace; as such it has been difficult to trace all the processes (Field, 2000; Lomotey and Fisher, 2006 see Section 4.3). The examples which are analysed through this article are not all directly connected; the same things are not traded through all the nodes of the networks, in contrast to Coe et al.'s (2004) research of BMW car production, for example. Rather, the GPN method is being stretched through the use of different case studies of activities which occur at nodes in networks which link the Global North and South through arrangements of people producing, trading and consuming second-hand commodities.

The article proceeds, in Section 2, with analysis of the reproduction of second-hand clothing commodities by charities in the UK. Interviews were conducted with Choice Textiles, Oxfam, Help the Aged, The Salvation Army Trading Company Limited and the YMCA, and charity shops, sorting plants and head offices were visited between November 2008 and March 2009. Marxist political economy is used to explore how exchange-value is 'produced' in second-hand clothing commodities. In Section 3, interview data and published and unpublished sources are used to explore examples of how charities and firms export second-hand clothing commodities from the UK. The fourth section documents exports to Africa (from the UK and elsewhere in the Global North) and focuses on different patterns of second-hand trade, which involve *coordinated* or *non-integrated* relationships between exporters and importers as well as discussing how actors are more or less powerfully embedded in networks (Coe, 2011). The fifth section investigates the import, wholesale and retail activities in Mozambique and explores how import firms and individual market traders interact with one another. Seventy one interviews and extensive ethnographic and quantitative data collection were undertaken in Maputo (Mozambique), an important second-hand clothing entrepôt, between July 2010 and July 2011. This section highlights how it is challenging for Mozambicans to profit from the second-hand clothing trade. In the conclusion power relations in second-hand clothing GPNs are discussed, specifically focusing on societal, network and territorial embeddedness (following Hess, 2004; Hess and Coe, 2006). The article concludes with commentary on how the GPN approach can be stretched to analyse second-hand trade.