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Where do our clothes go?

Leslie Belton Chevallier

The international and industrialized market for used or secondhand clothes—known in French as "*fripes*" - is not a genuine alternative to "fast fashion". Rather, it preserves, pursues, and reproduces economically, socially, and symbolically the characteristics of the market for new clothes.

Reviewed: Emmanuelle Durand, *L'envers des fripes. Les vêtements dans les plis de la mondialisation (The other side of fripes: Clothes in globalization's "folds")*, Paris, Premier Parallèle, 2024, 168 p., 9, 50 €, ISBN 9782850612114

This book, which is diminutive in size as well as length, is the fruit of doctoral and postdoctoral research in anthropology. It ²explores what becomes of our clothes--those we have worn, resold, or donated, as well as those that are not bought, such as surpluses and other unsold textiles. In keeping with the book's title, we will refer to this category of textile objects as "*fripes*"--a French word for old, used or second-hand clothes." Beyond production, how do clothes and textile objects circulate once their initial life is complete? In this context, the meaning of circulation is twofold: it can be geographic (circulating from one part of the world to the other--from Paris, Brussels, or Hamburg to Beirut, Aleppo, or Dubai and their various neighborhoods) as well as symbolic (circulating from merchandise to trash, from valued to devalued labor). These definitions account for various forms of mobility, in all their semantic diversity (relating to people as well as to merchandise, migration, daily movement, social mobility, and so on).

The second life of clothes in motion

While tracing what happens to our clothes, Emmanuelle Durand organizes her story around a wide range of portraits: Mona, the Parisian influencer; Issam, the Syrian-born Belgian entrepreneur; Bassen, a Syrian immigrant to Lebanon who owns several *fripes* stores in various Beirut neighborhoods; Jeanne, her grandmother; Camara, a parcel deliverer; and many others. These various characters--including the author herself, who is a Vinted user, a volunteer in a second-hand thrift store in Paris, and a researcher in the field--are the physical nodes of a thick description of flows, exchanges, and everything involved in collecting clothes that are considered used or withdrawn from the market for new goods--in short, *fripes.*

Following on the heels of the new clothes market, *fripes* are exchanged and transported from one part of the world to another, usually in the opposite direction of first-hand clothes. They are sold online (in France, by Mona and the author), placed in collection bins or distributed to volunteer workers, or acquired in Europe by wholesalers (in France and Belgium, in this instance). They then pass through Germany before being shipped as cargo to the Middle East (Lebanon and Dubai, in this case) and to free port zones. From there, they are sent to other continents, finishing their lives in market stalls in Beirut or open-air landfills. Rather than long-distance trade, Durand describes, with considerable delicacy, e movements that take place on more local or individual scales. For example, Mona goes from store to store to find rare items; Durand navigates her resell app, transforming herself into a logistics expert; Camara delivers parcels; Bassen delivers to and visits his various stores; Fadi travels to Tripoli in his car; and others. These daily movements illustrate, at its most commonplace, the logistical work associated with *fripes* and other goods.

While this emphasis on ordinary circulation tends to hide or downplay the global flows the book describes, it makes apparent the forms of domination and inequalities--particularly class and racial inequalities--that characterize the *fripes* trade. In the case of Mona, for example, one sees how the skills she relies on to run her little "upcycled" clothing business depend as much (and perhaps less) on her talents as a seamstress than on her ability to communicate and ensure that her messages on social media and to recycling companies get attention. As Anne Jourdain (2023) and Adrien Bailly (2019) show in their works on different online exchange platforms, these dispositions or skills are necessary social resources, more commonly found within middle or upper social classes. Similarly, the example of Bassen and other merchants

of Syrian origin illustrates how *fripes* work in Lebanon is rooted in class-based and racial categories, which were constructed over several generations and bequeathed by Middle-Eastern migratory and colonial history.

The "dirty work" of *fripes*

Beyond geographic flows and circulation, Durand describes and carefully retraces the historical trajectories of clothes and *fripes* in France and the Middle East, two regions that, since the early nineteenth century, are intimately tied to the globalization of the clothing industry. As they have evolved from being goods that are scarce and expensive to goods that are cheap and abundant, new clothes and their dregs no longer have the same image or social and moral value. For some *fripes*, the trend towards hyper-consumption is now challenged in the name of sustainable development. Care for things (Denis & Pontille, 2022) and the need to ensure that things last (Ginsburger & Madon, 2023) are reappearing in the discourse and practice of households and actors, with the result that *fripes* and second-hand clothes have become commodities that are both valuable and appreciated, particularly for their sustainability. As Elodie Juge--whose work Durand draws on--emphasizes, second-hand exchange platforms are less an alternative to the mass market for clothes than an extension of it. It allows major brands and labels to unload their surpluses and other unsold items, while allowing their clients to fill their closets as quickly and frequently as possible. Put differently, the *fripes* market harmonizes the rapid renewal of collections, overproduction, and depleted inventories. Rather than making clothing last longer, second-hand platforms increase the distance it travels over its life cycle (Juge, Pomiès & Collin-Lachaud, 2022), which raises ever greater questions about the pros and cons of e-commerce as it relates to sustainability, particularly from a logistical perspective.

Though last mile logistics is a dynamic sector that is at the forefront of political debates, the scientific consensus concerning its environmental effects is a long way away, as is clear from the abundant English-language literature in geography and the socioeconomics of transportation (see, for instance, Rai, 2021). As for its social effects, a dynamic French-language literature demonstrates the ambiguities and problematic nature of the goods delivery sector (Aguilera, Dablanc & Rallet, 2018; Lay & Lemozy, 2022; Mias, 2018; Rème-Harnay, 2023), to which the second-hand clothes market and platforms are invariably tied. Durand presents the complexity of these flows and their

impact on the people who make them happen--the fatigue and labor conditions that could easily be described as degraded. By following the *fripes* sold on platforms, Durand grapples with a form of labor that is not specific to this merchandise, but whose common denominator is that it is devalued and considered "dirty work," in Everett C. Hughes' sense (1996 [1951]). While delivery is an unavoidable element of online commercial exchanges (an online purchase is concluded at the moment the material transfer of the purchased good occurs), it is most often delegated to service providers, meaning that it is a task that represents something that "in some way goes against the more heroic of our moral conceptions" (Hughes, 1996 [1951], p. 81).

While the definition of *fripes* is broad, it always refers to the moral idea to which it is tied: somewhere between an economically valued good and trash or filth, the boundaries of which have evolved over time, as Durand's book explains. Beneath the methods for categorizing and thus identifying *fripes*--those that have economic value (because they can be resold on the market) and those that do not and are considered trash, consistent with last mile delivery (mentioned above)--lurks many forms of invisible labor that is "dirty" (once again, in Hughes' sense) to varying degrees.

One of the book's most stimulating passages is its description of the selection and classification of *fripes* quality that occurs at different moments and in different places: volunteers in a Parisian thrift shops separate clothes that are clean and in good condition from those that can be repaired and those that are too dirty or in poor condition; workers in a Belgian factory determine the quality and nature of textiles, while workers in Dubai separate them by clothing type; and so on. In one place, *fripes* are categorized by their cleanness and their resale potential once they have been repaired and "upcycled"; in another, they are sorted by their quality ranking (from "cream" to "grade 3"). The selection process and its different modalities, down to the senses it relies on (sight, smell, touch, and so on), illustrates all that is at play in the categorization of goods that are neither new nor throwaways. In addition to confirming that "one man's garbage is another's treasure," the constant reformulation of systems for classifying *fripes* across different stages of their itinerary illustrates the inherent social complexity of such classificatory activity (Bowker et Star, 2023 [2000]).

Yet, as Durand emphasizes, the further the selection process takes place from the *fripes*' point of origin, the lower their cost and the more their value is depreciated by those in charge. Issam, for instance, moved his *fripes* selection from Brussels to Dubai, where labor costs are cheaper. Put differently, the further the selection process occurs from the *fripes*' origins, the more it becomes dirty work. At the same time, the

merchandise's cost increases in proportion to the distance it must travel. Consequently, the greater the share of dirty work needed to process and complete a bale of *fripes*, the greater its value.

Drawing on an interdisciplinary body of literature (from sociology to geography by way of management science) Durand dives into the inner mechanisms of a market that preserves, pursues, and reproduces at an economic, social, and symbolic level the dynamics of the market of "new" or straight-out-of-the-factory clothes. While Durand could have followed batches of *fripes* longer and further, notably to Africa and Asia or even online, and while textile metaphors are used throughout the book, it is nonetheless an interesting and illuminating start to deconstructing the myths and narratives relating to reuse, recycling, and other so-called "alternative" practices. The book makes it possible, for instance, to recognize, by examining what we discard, the extent to which dirty work and its delegation are necessary principles for understanding the social implications of flows and other commodity movements, from the most local to the most global level.

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