

# Economies of moral fibre? Recycling charity clothing into emergency aid blankets

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## Abstract

This article examines the complex interweaving of moral values, material goods and market economies arising where unwanted clothing donated to Western charities is transformed through industrial fibre recycling in India into millions of aid blankets distributed worldwide as humanitarian relief. The commoditisation of the donor's gift, its destruction, transformation and subsequent use as a gift once more reveals how the moral values of Western donors, charities, relief agencies and aid recipients are negotiated through the global used-textile economy. In contrast to contemporary moral discourses on thrift and sustainable consumption practices that promote values associated with longevity, durability and resourcefulness, the ephemerality of the aid blanket made from recycled fibres materialises the tensions and uncertainties surrounding social and economic reconstruction in crisis zones. Through its qualities and affordances, the material is deeply implicated in the construction of moral economies.

## Keywords

charity gifts, emergency aid, India, moral economies, textile recycling

## Introduction

How do we measure the value of our old clothes, and how is it translated when a donation of second-hand clothing to charity grows into a mountainous glut of discarded old textiles, traversing geographical, commercial and cultural borders? Political, economic and moral expectations are increasingly bound into material processes of refashioning and transformation as concerns about global waste rise up political and social agendas, yet few of us know what happens to discarded clothing once we give it up for recycling – we have done the right thing, the stories unravel, the clothes appear to simply disappear. Instead, alternative frameworks of value are brought to bear as worn clothing weaves in

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and out of gift economies and various stages of commodification, and processes of re-contextualisation, deconstruction and recycling reconfigure the object. Yet by tracing the recycling of worn clothing into emergency blankets in India, it becomes clear how densely the moral is implicated in the material at every twist of the thread. These intimate linkages reveal the dissonance between value systems as it is shown how much of the recycling industry that imports our cast-offs and exports aid blankets fails to meet international ethical and environmental standards. I begin with examples drawn from two different sets of conversations which highlight the potential moral dilemmas of value translation across the overlapping domains of cultural economies in transaction, one during fieldwork in north India and the other during discussions with visitors to an exhibition in the UK.<sup>1</sup>

In late 2009, I was talking to Prakash, the owner of a large, fully integrated woollen mill in Panipat, north India. Prakash buys up old woollen and mixed-fibre suits, coats and jumpers that have been donated to charity, then sold on the international market. He then shreds them and re-spins the fibres into low-quality, regenerated 'shoddy' yarn (see Norris, 2005, 2012). This yarn is woven into cheap, low-quality, high-volume runs of woollen fabric and blankets bought by the poor in India and institutions such as prisons, hospitals and the military across the globe. Grey aid blankets for international disaster relief are one of his main lines.

We were discussing whether the quality of his recycled, shoddy-wool products could ever be raised high enough for them to be marketed as environmentally friendly goods, with all the added value that might bring in the global market. Prakash outlined the problems of promoting shoddy yarn as recycled fibre due to the difficulty of establishing which fibres were in the end product and what chemical processes they had been subjected to previously. Sludgy colours, smelly and scratchy, the sensory qualities of the products themselves also make it difficult to like them, let alone value them for their potentially green credentials, and of course it requires investment in materials, labour and equipment to improve quality. In fact, Prakash was concerned with a basic quality control problem arising out of the industry's role as the global supplier of aid blankets, namely that some locally produced blankets were not even good enough to be distributed to disaster victims.

In this industry, a multitude of short-cuts are used to augment a tight profit margin, and many mills are quick to stamp aid agency logos on their websites as a mark of quality whether or not they are official suppliers (actual suppliers are normally prohibited from advertising themselves as such). Prakash produced a draft document that addressed the issues of how to ensure that aid blankets were 'clean, hygienic, and fit for a human being in distress', that they 'ought not to lead to further deterioration to the health of the needy', should not 'cause itching, rashes and skin diseases', and 'should keep the recipients warm as per the specification'. He spoke of the abject conditions of disaster victims and how the blanket was also a symbolic gift made with love and should reflect that appropriately. He was one of a handful of larger manufacturers running integrated mills that had begun to work with the procurement team from an international aid agency (which I shall call *Relief*) to improve low standards. The project features in the article as an example through which I address certain wider issues in relation to production and procurement.<sup>2</sup>

The challenge in Panipat was how to turn rubbish commodities (shoddy blankets) into suitable gifts (emergency relief). At an exhibition in London, visitors who gave their unwanted clothing to charity were trying to determine the criteria for deciding whether shredding their donations in order to produce rubbish commodities was really the best available option. In 2008–2009, I had curated an exhibition of photographs taken in Panipat and Delhi, some of which formed part of a much larger public event staged in January 2012.<sup>3</sup> The images depicted the sorting, exporting and destruction of winter clothing for recycling into ‘new’ products in Indian factories, with background information about the low pay and poor labour conditions found in the industry, and a chance for visitors to feel the blankets themselves. The exhibition was intended to elicit and possibly challenge assumptions about the second-hand clothing trade and contemporary textile recycling, and highlight its global scope, commercial nature and complex issues surrounding its social and environmental impacts. For many, it provoked confusion over the appropriate response; unlike exposés of the conditions found in recycling of e-waste in developing countries, for example, used clothing is not classified as hazardous by the Basel Convention – it is organised by, and in the name of, charities, and has not been subjected to similar public scrutiny.

In these two examples, the same old clothes are entangled in highly contrasting value regimes, one concerning how one’s charitable ‘gift’ of a cast-off is commoditised as low-grade waste, the other attempting to turn a commodity made out of that waste back into an acceptable charitable gift. As used garments move through a series of exchanges and transformations, their value is reconfigured through transactions that are framed as moral, social or political, and alternative framings are made less visible. The tracing of the transformation of clothing donations into recycled emergency blankets brings these apparently conflicting value systems into a common focus in order to be able to unpack some assumptions as to how each operates with and impacts upon the other, and explore the messy overlaps between them.

## Moral economies

Anthropologists have long argued that all economies are inherently moral in that they involve value judgements concerning what is just and good economic behaviour in relation to others (Browne and Milgram, 2008), in contrast to an economic focus on the maximising individual that successfully minimises the impact of moral, social and political expectations on exchange (see Bloch and Parry, 1989; De Neve et al., 2008; Gudeman, 2001; Hann and Hart, 2011). Exchange is enacted between moral persons (Parry, 1989), and moral economies emerge from social contexts where certain sets of moral principles operate.

In his essay on the uses of value, Miller (2006) explores how the incommensurability between the economic ‘value’ of something and the moral ‘values’ held by a society are dealt with, contrasting those calculative transactions that posit a single bottom-line value, such as maximising quantitative shareholder value, with those that acknowledge the breadth of inalienable values held by members of a society. The former transactions are reductionist; they destroy value in the broad, qualitative sense as it is used in daily life, while the latter work to create value by transcending complex competing factors and

forming new overarching categories of value, which may then be perceived to be of wider benefit to society. This is exemplified by Zelizer's (1997, 2011) work on money and value, for example her research into how, by the 1930s, insurance companies in the US were able to set financial compensation levels for the death of a child once they had become economically 'useless' but emotionally priceless (Zelizer, 1994).

What is interesting about exchange between different cultures is precisely how these moral economies interact, how friction occurs as value systems may come into conflict as goods move through them and the work that goes on to minimise this conflict, whether in small-scale societies or large-scale capitalist economies. Munn's (1986) classic ethnography of Gawa explores how cultural frameworks of value are grounded in human interaction with the material world and under what conditions value may be encouraged to grow or be destroyed. Recycling discarded objects involves a particularly complex set of value transformations, involving judgements concerning which material, perceptual and contextual 'qualities' to preserve and amplify, and which to strip out or conceal; it may be that in the initial impulse to recycle it is morality itself that is being commoditised.

To re-commoditise what was previously regarded as waste into a singular thing (Kopytoff, 1986) involves taking it out of one social and economic system and profitably inserting it into another. This may involve ingenious re-packing, re-branding and cultural marketing, or more profound technical processes that reconfigure its essential materiality. Waste managers, industrial re-processors, rag dealers and craftsmen re-valuing leftovers face obvious problems in that the transformer has to judge to what extent the degree of relationality to former lives should be referenced and highlighted or obliterated when selling recycled products in new markets, in order to both reduce concerns over contamination from dirt and pollution, and promote positive value judgements based on a series of factors from the functional and economic to the moral and ethical, which lead consumers to favour recycled goods. For example, one may look at the contrast in methods of selling second-hand clothing described by Clarke (2000) for middle-class mothers' groups, where the connection to their families and by extension their values is emphasised, and Gregson et al. (2000) for charity shops, where all personal associations are stripped away.

These material transformations usually take place out of sight in industrial warehouses and factories. In the case of used clothing, the garments are often moved from one back-stage to another in the anonymous 'black plastic bag'. Thompson's 'rubbish theory' suggests that objects that are declining in value have to pass through a rubbish category before they can begin to achieve durable status (Thompson, 1979). Such clothing may not be actually conceived of as 'rubbish' by discarders, dealers or post-consumers, but at the point where it has its lowest value, it becomes an undifferentiated mass of dirty clothing sold by weight, which has to be skilfully sorted to extract the specific high-value items desired by niche markets around the world, and buyers need to be found for as much of the poorest quality textiles as possible to offset the costs of collecting and sorting.

In fact, the visible aspects of the trade operate largely within the morally positive framework of the charitable gift, which masks both the self-interested aspect of the donors' discarding (see Mauss, 2001[1954]; Parry, 1986) and the commercial nature of

the recycling process. By and large, neither charities nor dealers make the complexity of the links in the international value chain of used clothing transformations explicit, and often they themselves are not aware of exchanges further along the network (see Foster, 2006). Once some of these linkages are made visible, the entangled moral, social and political questions of how to responsibly deal with the surplus from over-consumption, the expectations and consequences of charities collecting those leftovers as gifts and the tensions between for-profit activities and sustainable ethical trade with developing economies become all too apparent (Barnett et al., 2011; Browne and Milgram, 2008; De Neve et al., 2008).

These clothes and fibres are active players in various moral economies through their material qualities, commercial value and symbolic entanglements. The millions of emergency aid blankets made from poor-quality shoddy highlight the complexity of these issues. The material and the moral are integrated into the form of the blanket itself whose short fibres and loosening weaves convey the potential discontinuities of moral matters in the chains from donor through charity, dealer, factory, buyer and recipient, objectifying the ephemerality of emergency relief aimed to provide immediate comfort whilst not prejudicing longer-term development.

### **Discarding and durability**

People often have to work quite hard to rid themselves of things in ways that they judge to be appropriate (Gregson, 2007; Gregson et al., 2007; see also Norris, 2010). Diverting used clothing from the waste stream is considered to be right in terms of environmental sustainability (Defra, 2010) and conserves some form of use value in the garment. Over half of all the clothing consumed annually in the UK by weight is simply thrown away (estimated at approximately one million tonnes in 2008), and just over a quarter is collected for reuse (Morley et al., 2009). Giving old clothes to charity is a convenient means of disposal, and particular fund-raising campaigns may prompt wardrobe clear-outs (Fisher et al., 2008), although calls for donations of used clothing, books and toys by charities working on international crises never means that these goods will be given to those in need, simply that they will be sold to raise money for those projects. The informants in the report by Fisher et al. (2008) were not aware of options for recycling, as opposed to reuse, and claimed that they binned tatty clothing and personal items such as underwear (see Gregson, 2007), despite the fact that charities do want to collect (clean, good quality) underwear for profitable sales in overseas markets. Paradoxically, charities and textile recyclers increasingly complain about 'donations' of filthy clothing and rubbish, suggesting that some people simply use them as dustbins. Behaviour around the classification and disposal of waste is one of the classic anthropological examples of the discord between what people actually do and what they may say they do, as shown from ethnographic research on the domestic politics of ridding and changing social relations (Gregson, 2007) and garbage archaeology (Rathje and Murphy, 1992).

Donating items of old clothing to charity is an acknowledgement that someone else might be able to use them and use them up. This socio-economic model translates the value of old clothing into an alternative regime; giving unwanted clothing rather than money reinforces the value of thrift in the household while utilising the potential power

of the gift to reaffirm moral beliefs in the wider sphere. As Wilk and Cliggett (2007: 174) point out, 'it is because gifts contain ... aspects of self-interest, elements of social integration and possibilities for establishing or reaffirming moral order – that they are so powerful and pervasive.' As Gregson's (2007) ethnography of ridding shows, judgements are continually made as to which things are suitable for charity, but it is not clear what people think really happens to them. There is a social expectation that charities will use their value to help other people in some direct or indirect way, and it could be argued that a threat to this perception is a threat to one's moral self. The sale of used clothing may raise funds for charitable works and prolong the life of the garment, but the subsequent economies of recycling they enter are largely unknown. Conversations with visitors to the exhibitions, third-sector organisations (including collectors of charity clothing) and rag merchants have all suggested that some members of the public remain unaware that clothing is sold to the developing world rather than given away for free, for example.

Donated old clothing that cannot be sold through high street charity outlets is usually sold by charities to commercial rag dealers; it enters a market that is highly specialised in creating hundreds of categories of used textiles and finding niche buyers across the globe (Botticello, 2012; Hawley, 2001, 2006). Charities try to obtain the most they can for their clothing stocks, but unless they have their own sorting factories it is the dealings of the rag merchants that really constitute the market and where the maximum value is extracted (Hawley, 2006; Rivoli, 2005). Reusing clothing provides the best financial returns, and there are established markets in Eastern Europe for top quality fashionable clothing, in Africa for good quality summer wear, and in Pakistan and Asia for the lowest quality goods. Items of clothing that are of too poor quality to be worn again are down-cycled into a variety of recycling grades, including rags and wipers, shredded for the flocking industry or their fibres reclaimed for regenerated woollen products.

## **The Indian shoddy industry**

There is now a growing surplus of low-grade textile waste for which new products and markets urgently need to be found (Oakdene Hollins Ltd et al., 2006). Nearly 6 per cent of used clothing (about 28,000 tonnes) collected in the UK is recycled abroad rather than reused (Morley et al., 2009), largely by the Indian shoddy industry. But while the rag sorter's category of 'recycling grades' implies only torn, tatty and stained goods, like the T-shirts that become wipers, the cast-offs used for woollen and acrylic shoddy are not necessarily rubbishy rags at all. They are winter clothing such as woollen and acrylic jumpers, tailored women's coats and jackets from northern climates for which there is insufficient demand for re-use in the global south. That these may be of good enough quality to be re-used but no market for them can be found poses another moral dilemma for discarders.

Shoddy processing began in about 1813, when Benjamin Law invented the technology to 'pull', i.e. reclaim, woollen fibres from used garments and spin them back into yarn, thus establishing the shoddy industry in Yorkshire. As the wool staple is broken down during the process, shoddy wool does not have the strength or fineness of virgin wool, hence its use as a derogatory term: rag shredders or grinders were popularly known



as ‘devils’ in the 19th century, and Marx refers to the coats made from devils’ dust that wore out in a matter of weeks (Marx, 1995[1887]: 214–216).

But when skilfully blended with new wool it helped to make cheap, affordable clothing, uniforms and army blankets, and was a major competitive element in the Yorkshire wool trade, sourcing rags from all over the world (Jenkins and Malin, 1990; Malin, 1979). The industry developed across continental Europe, and particularly later in Italy and Poland, until the second half of the 20th century, when the shoddy industry shifted to India and developing countries with a cheaper labour force and growing markets for poorer quality goods. The use of re-processed wool in Europe and America declined in particular after garment labels had to include full details of fibres and their origins after 1939 (Freer, 1946–1947). Woollen and acrylic clothing is now imported into Panipat from sorting factories around the globe. There are hundreds of qualities of blankets produced in Panipat, and the more expensive, heavier-weight wool ones used to be favoured by the middle classes, but they are now being replaced by fluffy new ‘mink blankets’ from China, decorated with laser-printed designs. As new synthetics become popular, the shoddy wool mill-owners’ association claimed that demand was falling for all but the cheapest qualities. Panipat makes approximately 350,000 blankets a month, of which 80 per cent by volume is sold into the domestic market, but it is the export orders from the aid industry that create the most value and keep the industry going.

The problem for donors who learn of this story is that the value of their old clothing may not be properly translated into new social and symbolic realms, and the end products are degraded and potentially degrading. In order to increase the wool content of a batch to complete a particular order specifying for example 75 per cent wool, factory managers have to buy in bales of wool-rich rags to mix with existing stocks and then sort by colour. This results in the mechanical mutilation of an otherwise perfectly good child’s wool coat, a nearly new designer jacket, or the sleeves of a hand-knitted pure wool Icelandic jumper. The current market reality for recycling used clothing entails very little value being extracted from good clothes that may once have been treasured, with expensive clothes used to make such cheap tatty products. A long chain of discarders, charities and sorters extract value from the bales of clothing before the remnants reach the factory floor, and very little value in terms of materials, skills and technology is reinvested. But in the case where these yarns are spun into aid blankets, does the fact that it is reinserted into a gift economy add to its moral value once again?

## Humanitarian aid blankets

The provision of supplies for humanitarian relief operations is a highly profitable global industry: UN agencies alone spend over \$50 million annually. Discussions with *Relief’s* director in Delhi, major aid blanket suppliers in Panipat and contacts with aid officers in the UK revealed just how difficult procurement could become. Developed over several years in the field, the aid blanket has become relatively standardised. Specifications from the IFRC (International Federation of the Red Cross, 2010) state that blankets should be circa 50 per cent wool and made from recycled fibres, which are cheaper and appropriate to all climates so long as minimum specifications are met and good manufacturing processes respected. The catalogue specifies the TOG (warmth) rating for various climates

and notes that colours other than grey, brown and dark shades are available at a higher price and longer lead-time. The list also includes weight, thickness, finish, tensile strength, fire and flame retardancy, resistance to air flow, packing and so on, and limits weight loss and shrinkage to <5% after washing three times consecutively. It also requires an organoleptic test to be carried out to ensure that the blankets have 'no bad smell', are 'not irritating to the skin', 'contain no dust', fall between 4<pH<9, are 'free from harmful Volatile Organic Components' and are 'fit for human use'.

Despite the professionalisation of supply chain management in aid relief with its structures of tendering pre-qualification, long-term contracts, depots and lean supply chains, one estimate places the industry at least 20 years behind the retail sector in terms of its logistics (Thomas and Kopczak, 2005). Yet as recipients of public donations and distributors of aid, NGOs are one of the most visible sectors in which good 'value' in procurement must be seen to incorporate the underlying moral values of the organisation (for example, see Oxfam, 2010a, 2010b). Anthropological studies of ethical trade and corporate social responsibility (CSR) examine examples of how to integrate the moral politics of production and consumption with capitalist, for-profit market economics, ranging from those who seek to place it at the heart of trade to those who may use it to draw attention away from other practices (e.g. Dolan, 2007; Garsten and Hernes, 2009; Luetchford, 2008; Rajak, 2009). As *Relief's* director explained, not-for-profit aid agencies have to fulfil multiple moral expectations of ethical and sustainable procurement, quality, efficiency, speed and value for money, transparent business practices and anti-corruption measures as an integrated core function, not just add-ons.

Aid supplies are increasingly bought from developing economies at more affordable prices, and *Relief* sees the procurement process itself as a means of helping local businesses become more internationally competitive through acquiring modern management skills. This acknowledgement of the scope, scale and effect of procurement as a development practice ties in with studies of the development of a 'global aid architecture' and macro-level instruments of development (e.g. Mosse and Lewis, 2005). Yet *Relief's* problems in implementing these policies also reveal their theoretical distance from difficulties encountered on the ground and the necessity to pragmatically reformulate policy in practice (see Mosse, 2004). Literature on aid procurement for development agencies warns that inefficiency, ignorance and corruption are major concerns. Buyers are advised to target points in the supply chain where corruption could be minimised (Schulz and Søreide, 2006), including the risk of kick-backs and embezzlement by those who place the orders or are responsible for quality controls (Cremer, 1998; Ewins et al., 2006).

A list of goods commonly adulterated describes how volumes are inflated, quality reduced; prices are set by cartels and suppliers collude to limit supply unless bribes are given (Schulz and Søreide, 2006: 12, Table 4). The authors also advise procurement officers to focus on the outcome, not just the process – 'where it is unrealistic for auditors to compare data from other purchasers, they can ask beneficiaries directly whether they felt value-for-money was achieved' (p. 33). NGO field officers collect data on the local perception of aid supplies, and information may be fed back through internal channels in order to develop future specifications, but there appears to be a lack of research into aid objects as material culture and the relationship recipients have with them.



## Fit for purpose?

Despite aid agencies being prepared to pay higher prices for better quality, there are many well-known ways through which manufacturers might circumvent quality controls in the industry, the most common being that large orders may be split up and illegally subcontracted out to smaller, local factories where standards are low and processes carried out in separate units that are hard to monitor (see De Neve, 2009). After assessing the industry's compliance with *Relief's* standards, its director concluded that it was almost impossible to guarantee where, and under what conditions, blankets were manufactured. Third party auditors, who may not be above corruption, check factories and consignments, and testing samples in independent labs in Europe is expensive. *Relief* paid about \$5 per blanket; the poorest quality ones were sold in the local wholesale market for about \$1.50–\$2. But it may be hard for agencies to really improve upon the quality of the cheapest shoddy blanket without carefully vetting suppliers, regularly visiting factories and building personal relationships with their owners; *Relief's* concern was that many of the larger international organisations procured blankets through chains of agents, making controls even harder to implement.

For a standard grey blanket, the shredded unwashed clothes in shades of grey and black are mixed with chopped-up recycled polyester threads to strengthen the recycled yarn. The polyester has to be pre-dyed to match, and this is usually done without the use of fixative or rinsing. Yarns are dyed in vats heated on open fires, fuelled by rubbish from local factories including plastics, rubber and building debris, which produce choking black fumes. These mixed fibres then have to be lubricated overnight with 'batching oil' before being fed through the teasing machine to reduce static and make pulling the fabric easier. This oil is unfiltered, non-refined used transformer oil (UTO) from the local power plant to which have been added various other necessary chemicals: the waste oil from ghee factories, carbolic acid, MEG (methyl ethyl glycols) and caustic soda.

After weaving, aid blankets are dry-raised to fluff them up, rather than being washed to full them. The shredding process produces very short staple fibres which are not tightly bound into the yarn and tend to fall out with shaking or washing as dust; equivalents of these blankets in the local market have labels saying 'Do not wash'. Blankets are mainly categorised by weight – in any case, the blankets which *are* fulled for the local market may have bags of salt or *maida* (fine bread flour used in chapatti) added to the water, bulking out the weight significantly. These are then stretched out to try in tenter fields, where local animals 'wander about and shit', as Prakash put it. The result is a semi-felted woven mesh of short fibres, dirt and dust barely stuck together, soaked in a chemical cocktail composed of unprocessed waste oils, possibly bulked out with salt or starch.

It is likely that most charities are unaware of these processes and so their potentially harmful effects on the bodies of workers or users may not be fully evaluated, while other criteria are easier to measure against. One procurement officer I spoke to in London (who also wished to remain anonymous) was purchasing blankets through agents in Mumbai. Discussing the quality control checks they had in place, he related how the agent had rejected a whole batch of blankets on their behalf on the grounds that a small label had been glued on rather than stitched. But his department lacked the time and resources to

audit the supply chain in any depth themselves, and hence they had little direct knowledge about the manufacturing process itself and the physical properties and perceptive qualities of the blanket as an object and what actually glues it together.

International aid procurers also strive to ensure suitable levels of CSR through systems of pre-qualification for tendering and the use of auditing. However, most textile factories in Panipat and Amritsar run on subcontracted labour, known as the *thekedar* (jobbing) system, where the owner employs only key personnel such as production managers and quality checkers. Most of the workers in the factories migrate from the poorer states in India such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Orissa, using contacts with *thekedar* in their home villages to find jobs in Panipat. In common with up to 97 per cent of Indian labour described as working in the 'informal' sector (Jha, 2006), they receive no state benefits or bonuses, have no right of association, have few health and safety regulations, and women in particular are paid very low wages; the subcontractor is paid for each kilo of yarn spun or per blanket woven and is responsible for producing them to an agreed schedule with the labour he hires.

Perhaps not surprisingly, *Relief's* idea of a good, well-run factory involved highly mechanised units having as few employees as possible, who were skilled and properly paid. In fact, they were willing to pay more per blanket if the social and economic conditions of production met the agency's moral and ethical standards. But to date nobody has mechanised the women's job of sorting and pre-cutting the rags; they operate as an exploitable, unskilled and underpaid workforce, and this bothers *Relief's* director.

In fact, *Relief's* director was thinking of switching to buying more polyester fleece blankets, made in big, modern factories with proper management systems. He showed us a picture of clean products made from virgin fibres by skilled operatives wearing white coats. Fleece blankets are softer and fluffier, and can be developed in a scientific lab. Dirty, unpredictable fibres, antiquated machinery and subcontracted labour are variable, messy and difficult to control, while mechanised synthetic production is simpler all round. But as a Department for International Development (DFID) officer later explained, community knowledge built up over time in disaster-prone areas such as Bangladesh, for example, has resulted in a cultural preference for wool blankets and a resistance to fleece, and changing over would not be easy in many areas.

However, the women who work to cut up the clothing prior to shredding did not consider themselves to be working in a waste industry, although it was dirty and dusty, low-paid work. The garments were needed for making yarn for poor Indian consumers, and their job was to return them to raw materials for subsequent re-making into useful things. In fact, they spoke of the need for mutilating the clothing before import to stop others from stealing the clothing (for the black market) and thereby denying them their rightful access to the materials. This reflects a very different perspective from some of the Western visitors to the exhibition, who saw the mutilation of wearable clothing as little more than absolute destruction of value. None of the women interviewed expressed the view that these mountains of clothing were 'wasted' by their former owners, in the sense of use-value unused, and although small items were sometimes stolen from the piles, most of the garment styles were of no use to the low-class Indian women, although they were interested in Western women and constructed images of their lifestyles and values through examining their clothing and comparing it to images they had seen on

television, for example. In fact, a story was circulating in the town amongst cutters, managers and truck-drivers that explained riddance on such a vast scale as being due to a water shortage in Western countries. This meant that it was cheaper to buy new clothing than wash worn clothing, so getting rid of things was justifiable economically. However, many of the women we spoke to assumed that the clothing was sold to second-hand dealers abroad as it might be in India, rather than simply given away to charity or dumped in a recycling bin (see Norris, 2012, for details).

Although direct links are never made between the source of fibres from charity rags and its distribution as humanitarian relief due to the operation of the market, an aid blanket originates out of, and circulates within, intersecting cloth economies with peculiarly heightened and often very different moral expectations. When gifted to someone in need, an aid blanket should materially and symbolically wrap the receiver with warmth and care; it should not literally fall apart along with the burden of expectations placed upon it.

But the blanket is just one element in a humanitarian shelter kit, which may also include tents, tarps and cooking sets. The anthropologist Peter Redfield has written about the medical emergency 'kit' as an 'immutable and combinable mobile' (Latour, 1987: 227; Redfield, 2008: 161), where people, places and things have been brought together as stable, controllable elements by a centre but are constantly recombined. As Redfield observes, humanitarian response battles with inflationary demands; where populations struggle for survival, humanitarian effort constitutes the work of minimalism (p. 148). With jokes in Panipat about the cheapest blankets falling to pieces after a few weeks and attempts to improve production of aid blankets to ensure they do not actually harm the recipients, it might seem that the shoddy blankets symbolise an *unstable* element in the kit, that the blankets have failed in the job we expect blankets to do.

But the ephemerality of the blanket is also an important part of its function. Humanitarian aid is an interim response to longer-term development. DFID expects an aid blanket to last for about a year in stable conditions where people are not sleeping outside or moving camp, but ground realities often mean that people are using emergency equipment for months or even years. A DFID procurement officer described the whole humanitarian aid kit as 'drab', 'bland' and 'functional'. International specifications only suggest that for cultural reasons blankets should not be red or black, but sludgy grey is the colour aid blankets have always been. It is cheap, does not show dirt and is accepted everywhere. So what might a really good aid blanket look and feel like? In terms of its ability to convey a message of care, or simply to cheer someone up, would the addition of colour be 'worth' it?

Maynard (2002) explores the ambiguities of gifting black shoddy blankets to Aborigines in colonial Australia, replacing traditional cloaks and rationing supply as a strategic tool of social and political control in the mid-19th century. In contrast, aid agencies strive to supply quality items that are not available locally in an emergency, often all too aware of the power they wield as providers. According to the DFID officer, in the case of the Haitian earthquake, often high-specification items thought to be basic necessities by the aid agencies, such as strong plastic sheets and buckets, are so much better than those locally available before the disaster that unaffected outsiders are attracted into the town by the new objects on offer in the market. Often blankets have recognisable

agency logos attached that may become markers of quality. But from the agencies' point of view, humanitarian aid objects should not be too attractive. To quote another procurement officer, 'without wanting to act in a paternalistic fashion and try to stop people outright from selling distributed aid for cash, we also don't want to fuel local secondary markets and distort local economies.' The blanket must provide warmth and be 'fit for human consumption', but ideally without lasting too long and without becoming an object of desire. 'Luckily', he said, 'shoddy blankets have no long-term effects upon the environment – unlike plastic sheeting, they *disappear over time*' (my emphasis).

## Conclusion

The recycling of old clothing into aid blankets constitutes two complex intertwining trajectories of the material and the moral. As we trace the apparently more visible, substantial material transformation of old clothing from cast-off to commodity, actually most of what goes on remains invisible, and in terms of the sequence of value transformations, this is essential. But at the same time there is a parallel trajectory of a less tangible but equally important substance, morality, which also goes through more or less commodified states. This begins with the impulse to give one's unwanted clothing to others and avoid a more environmentally degrading fate for used clothes and ends with the charitable ideals behind the provision of the aid blankets themselves.

Following these parallel trajectories and discovering precisely the twists and turns in these threads reveals the dissonance at the heart of these global recycling economies. It reveals a series of disjunctures between economic bottom-lines and the cultural values associated with avoiding waste and recycling, charitable giving and caring for those in need. The situation is far more complex than suggesting that the changing object materialises the changing moral frameworks; at certain points the regimes of value in which they circulate appear to contradict each other, and morality itself appears to be commodified.

The cast-offs given freely to charities have become a standard vehicle for raising funds for their primary goals. These do not necessarily include either providing affordable clothing for poorer local people nor international development, so the charity must maximise their monetary value; the garments themselves as material objects have no direct agency to 'do good' by clothing bodies or providing warmth through charitable efforts, they are simply a means to an end.

From the millions of tonnes of used clothing sold on to commercial textile recyclers, the highest value is extracted from the global second-hand clothing markets. Sorters make better-quality used clothing available more cheaply, although the distribution of value along the supply chain is only rarely challenged, as in recent UK press reports of charities being paid very low rates by commercial buyers (Booth, 2011a, 2011b). In the case of the shoddy recycling industry, donated clothing does eventually reach those living in poverty or suffering in a crisis, incarnated as blankets either sold locally or gifted as emergency aid, but usually in a highly degraded form. Transient, ephemeral, often already decomposing as they come off the loom, shoddy blankets mark out the poor and those struggling at the margins to survive, whether they are those workers sub-contracted to produce them, or those who buy or receive them.

As Stallybrass (1998) recounts, Marx's ability to continue his research for *Capital* at the British Library was directly related to his ability to retrieve his coat from the pawnshop – not to be suitably clothed was to become socially unacceptable. Over a century and a half after Marx wrote about the poor in Britain wearing coats made out of dust, which turned threadbare in a matter of weeks, the poor living in developing economies, and survivors in humanitarian disasters, are still wrapped in shoddy spun from the shredded leftovers of better-off societies.

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## Notes

1. During fieldwork in 1999–2000 on local systems of recycling clothing in India (Norris, 2010), I began to study a textile recycling industry in Panipat, north of Delhi, that imports used clothing for raw materials (Norris, 2005), returning for brief visits in 2004 and 2008. In 2009 I was able to spend two months in Panipat and the markets in Delhi, interviewing international rag merchants, mill owners, managers, factory workers and traders in secondary markets as part of the ESRC-funded *Waste of the World* project. I was assisted by Meghna Gupta, who returned to Panipat in 2009 for another two months to make a short film about the industry, *Unravel*, and I am grateful to be able to draw on her research here. At the same time I followed and participated in debates about the sustainability of clothing production and textile recycling in the fashion sector, the development of UK textile recycling policy, and the small but growing body of academic work on aspects of the global second-hand clothing market, which exposes the material and conceptual disconnect between many of these viewpoints.
2. 'Relief's' procurement director requested that the agency remain anonymous to maintain impartiality within the aid sector and local business community. In this article, I have also anonymised mills, their owners and/or managers, since much of the data used here was collected in the context of 'Relief's' attempts to improve quality control and the pre-tendering process.
3. *India Recycled* was held at the Horniman Museum, London, from May 2008 to January 2009, and *Everything Must Go* was held at the Bargehouse, London, in January 2012. The exhibitions included workshops, talks and informal discussions open to the public, and generated invitations to talk to special interest groups. More details are available at [www.wornclothing.co.uk/events](http://www.wornclothing.co.uk/events).

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