

CALL FOR PAPERS:

Date : February 21, 2010

"Recycling Textile Technologies"

A workshop to be held at the Department of Anthropology,
University College London,
on June 14th 2010

This interdisciplinary workshop will bring together researchers who work on textile recycling, including anthropologists, geographers, historians, political economists, designers, and materials scientists.

This is with a view to develop a research agenda that explores innovation in textile recycling technologies in the widest sense, and how these succeed or fail in becoming socially embedded. Textile recycling activities, as socio-technical systems, arise in specific cultural contexts within global trading patterns, and their study may incorporate the underlying relationships between people and things, raw materials and technologies and the emergence of entrepreneurs and innovators in social networks amongst other (f)actors.

We see at least three possible clusters of themes emerging, but welcome further ideas:

1. Reinventing Old Solutions to New Problems?

Industrial recycling practises are specific, historically situated socio-technical systems. While pre-industrial papermaking industries used rags as a source of raw materials, 19th century textile mills looked to recycled clothing as a cheaper source of raw material for the wool shoddy industries. In the 21st century, the problem has changed to what to do with mountains of cast-off clothing, and this drives the search for technologically solutions appropriate to diverse cultural contexts. Anthropological understandings of technology embrace materials, makers, designers, and users in a relational networks including socio-economic, political, and legal factors. In this broader context, how are some old technologies being reinvented for the future, and in what fields are new technologies being successfully developed?

2. The value of knowledge and skills in cultural contexts

As different cultures have developed different somatic skills and practices, we wish to investigate the importance of tacit knowledges to recycling. Consideration of these embedded knowledges within the global perspective raises a number of questions specific to the processing of waste textiles. How are knowledge and skills valued differently within a textile waste industry compared to primary production? How intimately do

you need to know used textiles in order to process them effectively, and how do differing levels of entanglement affect your social status within a recycling system? For those who are bodily engaged with waste, how valuable are these tacit knowledges and are they acknowledged by others? And what are the cultural specificities of the valuing of people and skills within different textile waste sectors? For example, there are differences in skills and status between an immigrant rag sorter in a UK factory, an illiterate migrant woman cutting up rags in an Indian shoddy factory and the designer creating eco-textiles from recycled materials. Do these differences come down to a narrowing of knowledge domains? Are these limitations the only factors affecting personal value ranking within global systems?

3. Networks of global trade

Since at least the early 19thC rags have been globally traded for reuse and recycling industries. Many rag businesses are family businesses that have been trading for generations, and have nurtured valuable networks of business contacts that span the developed and developing world in both directions. The movement of second-hand textiles across the globe both creates social relations and at the same time is enabled by pre-existing social contacts. Why is it difficult to start up a new rag trade business? A related question is what can waste do as an actor in international trade? For example, how does the trade in second-hand clothing and textile waste facilitate the movement of other goods along similar networks? To what extent is textile waste trade a conduit for other licit and illicit goods? How might the degrees of regulatory frameworks surrounding waste enable or inhibit other flows of goods, and is this conducive to it becoming the visible front for invisible commodity exchange? Is this particular to textiles, to waste or raw materials in general?

Please send abstracts of no more than 250 words by Feb 28th to:

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This workshop is being initiated as part of the ESRC project, the Waste of the World

www.thewasteoftheworld.org