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Linking Rural and Urban Circular Economies through Reuse and Repair

Brienne Berry and Cindy Isenhour

In rural places across North America, secondhand exchanges have long proved useful for communities with inconsistent access to wage employment and weak markets for new goods. Used goods save money and reduce waste, while the sale of secondhand objects can serve as critical support during times of economic uncertainty. Energized by an ethic of thrift and frugality, the swapping, selling, bartering, gifting, and/or repairing of used goods has helped to define many rural communities (Berry, Bonnet, and Isenhour 2019; Sherman 2009). Indeed, in times of economic uncertainty, the practices and objects that make up reuse economies can become a source of resilience amid rapidly changing conditions.

Our attention to the links between reuse and resilience in rural areas is motivated in part by perceptions that the most recent downturn in the pulp and paper industry in rural Maine, the site of our research, has left behind communities with little hope and few prospects for economic development. It is becoming clear that many people who live in rural peripheries around the world have few opportunities to participate in wage-based work or the larger global economy (Ferguson 2015). If recent trends toward urbanization (United Nations 2018), uneven development (Smith 2010), and economically eroded rural spaces (Rignall and Atia 2017) continue (and most accounts would seem to suggest they will) then what does the future hold for rural Maine?

Our work in several rural Maine communities suggests to us that these politically and economically isolating narratives of depletion (see Johnstone and Lionais 2004) in “places that don’t matter” (Rodríguez-Pose 2018) place the burden of decline on rural communities, neglect consideration of linkages across scale, and fail to recognize the value that continues to be

generated in these places. Maine is home to a consistently strong reuse sector, one that remains steady even in the face of the booms and busts the state has experienced over the last century (Isenhour et al. 2017). Here, at thrift stores, yard sales, and community auctions, reuse is more than just a tool to help people scrape by at the margins, it generates value and provides a means to create a life worth living (see Millar 2018).

In what follows, we argue that scholars focused on rural North America might avoid the pitfalls of depletion narratives and develop more nuanced understandings of persistent value and resilience by exploring the social, political, and economic relationships between urban and rural spaces. While rural is often defined as the binary opposite of urban, the two terms in fact exist along a continuum with important interdependencies and linkages (Flora, Flora, and Gasteyer 2015; Irwin et al. 2010). Still, we rarely see recognition of urban-rural connections in anthropological research design beyond studies of migration. Our interest in urban-rural relationality is informed by our own work, which investigates the generation of value in Maine's secondhand markets and anticipates links between urban and rural secondhand markets where urban consumption, fueled by a growing interest in vintage goods, portends new modes of material dispossession.

With the coming "end of cheap nature" (Moore 2014), as energetic and material resources reach peak appropriation, scholars have already observed a trend toward the commodification of discards. Indeed, waste has recently been termed "the new commodity frontier" (Demaria and Schindler 2016). It is in this context that interest has grown in the wealth of material goods, such as the furniture, tools, and household goods that many Mainers so assiduously save in barns, garages, back rooms, and attics circulating in rural places, particularly given the recent explosion of interest in creating more sustainable "circular" economic systems

(EMF 2012). Discussed in many progressive urban centers, circular economic logics seek to eliminate the waste associated with our dominant system of production-consumption-disposal by redesigning and recirculating materials instead of disposing of them. Circular economies operate within a capitalist logic and require “that wastes are turned to commodities bought and sold in markets” (Gregson et al. 2015, 226). Increasing attention to the economic and environmental potential of circular economies, however, has not been paired with equal attention to the social impacts of such systems (Geissdoerfer et al. 2017; Hobson 2016).

Motivated by a desire to reduce waste and drive green growth, the emphasis on reuse and repair within circular economic logics in fact threatens the exclusion of those who have long “saved stuff,” picked, tinkered, and swapped at yard sales, waste transfer stations, flea markets, and auctions. Here, rural/urban linkages become critical: in the movement toward circular economies and more sustainable futures, many urban planners and policymakers are working to incentivize, support, and formalize reuse and repair as a strategy for waste reduction, climate mitigation, and reduced energy use. Secondhand markets and the use of digital exchange platforms like ThredUp, Letgo, Oodle, and Facebook Marketplace are rapidly proliferating in these urban spaces. At the same time, the loss of industry and wage labor in rural places may be compounded by the increasing momentum of circular economies, which have the potential to upend longstanding practices of secondhand redistribution that have not only helped communities cope with global economic ruptures but also provided a means to a life rich with relationships and meaning. As centralized and formalized marketplaces capture more used goods to be sold for profit, we see potential threats to the social and economic liveliness of rural places. When national markets capture the used materials of Maine, how might the vibrant and often

ephemeral practices of buying, selling, swapping, and picking change? What impacts might this have on the social and economic fabric of rural places?

Rather than lamenting the decline of rural communities, we might look at the practices and institutions that have long flourished in these spaces to help us envision sustainable futures. Rural people are not a simple and austere other, nor are they motivated by wholly different concerns than people in urban environments. Yet perhaps the diverse economies (see Gibson-Graham 2008) that flourish in rural places can be instructive as we seek alternatives to current systems of production-consumption-disposal. The highly localized secondhand marketplaces that are critical at the economic margins risk being pushed out as discards are commodified and sold on a larger scale. The emerging tension between rural resilience and commodification in reuse economies demands attention to rural/urban linkages. It may be that recognizing the localized social and economic value generated in rural reuse economies can help to design policies to protect them from increasing dispossession.

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