

Repair cafés in the Netherlands: Capitalist abstinence as a challenge to a linear capitalist economy

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Abstract

Repair cafés have become a common phenomenon in the Netherlands and some other European countries. In repair cafés, owners of broken objects and volunteer-repairers meet to try to salvage broken appliances. While their economic effect is negligible, repair cafés are a small step towards attaining a circular economy because they motivate their visitors to lead more sustainable lives. By extending the life-cycle of objects, by refusing payment and by criticizing producers who frustrate repair by impractical design, customers and volunteers challenge the capitalist mode of production.

Key words: community repair, circular economy, planned obsolescence, extension of product life, capitalist abstinence, moral consumption.

Repair cafés na Holanda: a abstinência capitalista como um desafio para uma economia capitalista linear

Resumo

Os repair cafés tornaram-se um fenómeno comum na Holanda e em alguns outros países europeus. Nos repair cafés, proprietários de objetos quebrados e voluntários que se propõem a consertar os objetos se reúnem para tentar resgatar eletrodomésticos quebrados. Embora o seu efeito econômico seja insignificante, os repair cafés são um pequeno passo no sentido de alcançar uma economia circular porque motivam os seus visitantes a levar vidas mais sustentáveis. Ao prolongar o ciclo de vida dos objectos, ao recusar o pagamento e ao criticar os produtores que frustram a reparação através de um design impraticável, os clientes e voluntários desafiam o modo de produção capitalista.

Palavras-chave: reparação comunitária, economia circular, obsolescência planejada, extensão da vida útil do produto, abstinência capitalista, consumo moral.

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Introduction

The demand for professional repair services has decreased in Europe and, indeed, at first sight repair of broken objects goes against the logic of the ‘short innovation cycles, the rapid turn-over of products, and ideas of planned or designed obsolescence’ of a consumer society (Van der Velden, 2021: 2, 8). For producers, it is more profitable to have customers replace broken objects by the purchase of new ones and for consumers it is more expedient to accept this option. Time is money and spending time on a repair with an uncertain outcome is often assessed as uneconomical by both consumers and producers.

However, as Anna Bohlin (2019: 1) has argued, over the last few decades, ‘the consumerist ideology that has long privileged disposable products and newness has been increasingly challenged by ideas and practices which proclaim the benefits of more responsible and less environmentally harmful kinds of consumption’. In 2007 Nicky Gregson, Alan Metcalfe and Louise Crewe already argued that the term ‘throwaway society’ to designate the UK (and presumably other European countries) was empirically proven to be inappropriate; people simply preferred to sell, barter or donate objects rather than disposing of them as waste. Repair is an essential element in people’s efforts to get responsible forms of consumption and avoid disposing of broken objects.

The incongruity of a demand for affordable repair with a market that has made repair prohibitively expensive may partly be solved by new forms of community repair, such as repair cafés. Maja van der Velden defines community repair as ‘a citizen-driven, locally organised public event, in which volunteer repairers and people with an object in need of repair are matched’ (Van der Velden, 2021: 1). Rikke Marie Moalem and Mette Alberg Mosgaard (2021: 2) speak of an emerging ‘community repair movement’. Repair cafés are one form of community repair. Repair cafés are meeting places to which people can come to try to have broken objects repaired with the help of volunteers against no or limited payment. If the repairs were to be done by a business, their costs would not have warranted reparation and the owner of the object would in all likelihood throw the broken object away.

Several authors have discussed the potential role of community repair in the transition to a circular economy (Bradley & Persson, 2022; Moalem & Mosgaard, 2021; Niskanen & McLaren, 2023; Van der Velden, 2021). In a neoclassical approach to the market economy, production is a unidirectional process in which resources enter the production process and products come out of it; when objects are no longer functioning properly or have become obsolete, they are discarded. In a circular economy, this open, unidirectional process becomes a closed loop in which the economy ultimately no longer extracts more resources from the environment (Andersen, 2007; George et al., 2015; Ghisellini et al., 2016: 24). Julian Kirchherr, Denise Reike and Marko Hekkert (cited by Bradley & Persson, 2022: 3) define a circular economy as ‘an economic system that is based on business models which replace the “end-of-life” concept with reducing, alternatively reusing, recycling and recovering materials in production/distribution and consumption processes’.

Admittedly, repair is not enough for attaining a circular economy, because it does not feed resources back into the production process. Nevertheless, the ‘extension of product life’ slows down the ‘resource loop’ (Moalem & Mosgaard, 2021: 3), because repair keeps materials in use for longer, and uses less energy and less other resources than new production (see also Van der Velden, 2021: 1-2). The circular economic framework identifies three practical approaches to waste management: prevention of the generation of waste, reuse, and recycling as a zero-waste strategy. Isenhour and Reno (2019) in their overview of ethnographic engagement with reuse and repair, recognize the significance of repair as a practice preventing waste (see also Genovese et al., 2017 and Eckert, Rial & Colombijn, 2020).

Unfortunately, as Johan Niskanen and Duncan McLaren (2023: 3) contend, most academic literature on repair and the circular economy ‘is remarkably technocratic and largely devoid of political analysis. Circularity and, within that, [...] repair are presented as opportunities for a “win-win” outcome, in which economic and sustainability gains run hand in hand’. Also the European Union presents a transition to a circular economy as an economic opportunity and not an environmental necessity. The European Commission (cited by Arisi, 2020: 61) optimistically states that the transition to a circular economy will ‘boost global competitiveness, foster sustainable economic growth and generate new jobs’.

To counter such technocratic and growth-oriented approach, Niskanen and McLaren make a plea for an analysis rooted in political economy, studying who stands to lose and to gain from repair, or a study of the ‘politics of repair’ (Bradley & Persson, 2022: 2). A ‘right-to-repair’ movement has stand up against industry in the last few years, in which consumers demand ‘the right to repair the products they buy, that products should be designed so that they can be easily repaired, and that spare parts and repair manuals should be freely available’ (Bradley & Persson, 2022: 1). Also the European Commission mentions the citizens’ right to repair in its policy documents, and in response manufacturers, defending their own interests are actively lobbying ‘to restrict repair rights’ (Van der Velden, 2021: 2).

We have studied repair cafés in the Netherlands as a possible force to counter corporate interests to discourage repair. The activities at the repair café conflict with hegemonic capitalist logic, in which the exchange value of objects dominates the use value. The repair café not only contradicts capitalist logic by investing time in salvaging broken (and therefore almost valueless) objects but also distinguishes itself from most capitalist practices by the strong community feeling, which breaks the strict division between producer and consumer or between service provider and client. The question we want to address in this article is: How do repair cafés in the Netherlands operate and to what extent do they challenge the hegemonic linear capitalist economic system?

We propose to call the behaviour of the volunteer-repairers and the people bringing objects in need of repair a form of capitalist abstinence. We define capitalist abstinence as a mild form of critique in which people very much embrace the value of consumer items, but in a practical manner refuse to go along with the capitalist logic of the infinite expansion of production and the concomitant need of ongoing new purchases by consumers. With capitalist abstinence people neither reject, nor openly attack the capitalist system as, for instance, a movement like Extinction Rebellion does. The concept of capitalist abstinence is reminiscent of James Scott’s *Weapons of the weak*, in which people do not openly confront the rise of capitalism either, but they do see through the logic of capitalism, try to make a mockery of the capitalist ideology and aim to minimize the negative effects for themselves (Scott, 1985). In this article we hope to show in more detail what such capitalist abstinence entails in the case of repair cafés.

Following Maja van der Velden, we have adopted a sociomaterial perspective, referring ‘to the idea that materiality takes on meaning in its entanglement with social phenomena’. If repair is only analysed in its material manifestation the political aspect will be ignored. The sociomaterial perspective ‘brings out its politics and economics’. In the proposed sociomaterial perspective, repair is considered a value-based activity,

reflecting a variety of values, such as economic or sentimental values, but also professional pride, community, sense of achievement, and care for people and planet (Van der Velden, 2021: 3).

There are, of course, more forms of informal repair, like self-repair and solutions offered on Internet. Moreover, there are more practices that avert the purchase of new products, which range from freely giving away used materials with the description 'gratis' to purchasing second-hand artefacts, and selling and buying goods on 'Marktplaats', a popular online trading platform, on which many people exchange used objects at a relatively low price. We leave these other forms out of consideration now and focus on repair cafés.

Methodology

Data on the repair café practices were collected by a combination of participant observation, interviews with open questions, online sources and document analysis. The field study was conducted in the repair cafés of Tilburg (Egboko) and Voorschoten (Colombijn). The locations were chosen because of convenience, near the residences of the fieldworkers. Tilburg is a city with over 200,000 residents, by Dutch standards a middle-sized city. It used to have a big textile industry but, when this industrial activity moved to countries with lower production costs, the city diversified its economy to services and higher education. Voorschoten (25,000 residents) is a residential area for mostly (upper-) middle-class people, working elsewhere.

Fieldwork was done intermittently from 2020 to 2022. The opportunity to do participant observation was, apart from our other commitments, constrained by the rhythm of opening days (once a month), and temporary Corona lockdowns. It therefore became all the more important to collect additional information in documents obtained from some repair café locations, revealing the most frequently repaired objects and repair success rate. In January 2021, when the Netherlands were still in lockdown, we extended our research to online communications, seeing how on social media repair cafés integrated their repair practices with ideological statements. This process involved the search for Instagram accounts of repair cafés across other locations, making use of what was most easily accessible, expanding our research beyond Tilburg and Voorschoten. We also conducted a remote one-on-one interview session with a participant while still in the pandemic situation.

Participant observation enabled us to socialize with the group, learning *in situ* their way of talking about and dealing with the broken objects. Both Egboko and Colombijn took broken objects for repair to gain an insider perspective into how customers feel when their items are repaired. Participant observation blended with casual talks. Most of the repairers liked talking in their work environment at the repair café, but some of our interlocutors preferred to meet for an interview in a neutral public space. Interviewing repairers at the repair café had the advantage of watching participants at work, asking questions to make sense of the repair practices and their motivations. We interviewed in total seventeen participants, paying attention to the context and meanings of what the people said and how they said it.

The idea behind repair cafés

The first repair café event was organized by Martine Postma in Amsterdam in 2009. The event, initially meant as a once only, was such a success that she established a foundation (*Stichting Repair Café*) to organize repair cafés on a regular basis. The foundation helps people to launch local initiatives and the movement has spread from the Netherlands to Belgium, Germany and then to more European countries, the US, Canada, Brazil, Ghana, India, Japan, Australia and other countries outside Europe. The foundation offers a handbook with practical tips on how to set up a new repair café, and the logo to be used in external communication.

The biggest number is still found in the Netherlands where the concept has been firmly established and is widely known in society.¹

In very accessible language, the website of the foundation explains the rationale behind the repair cafés. People throw away a lot, including items with which there is nothing amiss and which could be easily repaired. Unfortunately, many people no longer think about the possibility of repairing objects or no longer know how to do it. The old skills for repairing objects are rapidly disappearing: ‘People who do have the practical expertise to repair are not always highly valued by society or have been shunted aside against their own wishes. Their experience is hardly used, if at all.’² The repair café restores the social standing of these people with repair skills and allows them participate in society; practical skills are transferred to other people during the events.

At first glance, the repair café seems to aim at helping skilled people who have been side-lined by society, but this should not detract from the focus on the objects: objects are used for a longer period and do not need to be discarded. The resources and energy necessary to produce new objects are saved and, just as importantly: the volume of carbon dioxide produced both during the production and the recycling of products is diminished. In a nutshell, the repair café teaches people to take a fresh look at their objects and rediscover the value of their possessions. The repair café contributes to a change in mentality which is ‘needed to make people enthusiastic about a sustainable society’.³

In its respect for old, half-forgotten skills, the repair cafés seem to be a nostalgic, backward-looking organization but, in their approach to making objects reusable, as alternative to new production or the recycling of the material, they are progressive. With the growing societal interest in a circular economy, old patterns of behaviour in repair and reuse are becoming fashionable and institutionalized again. A study by the European Commission shows that repair can increase the average life-expectancy of objects, for instance, a washing-machine (six years), dishwasher (six years), coffee machines (four years) and a vacuum cleaner (four years) (International Resource Panel, 2018: 60). The maintenance and lengthened use of objects can conserve economic resources and reduce the frequency with which waste ends up on the landfill and also reduces pressure on recycling facilities.

While the practice of repair looks good on paper, it does require more effort to maintain the continued use of valued items. Some of our informants talked about how they noticed a slower functioning of their valued items after updating the software of gadgets; forcing them to replace a functioning mobile phone or laptop. Another obstacle to the prolonged use of goods is the rapidity with which they become outdated in combination with inaccessibility to their spare parts. King et al. (2006) distinguish between functional obsolescence, the physical and sudden default of items in use, which might be undone by a repair café, and planned obsolescence, the introduction of new trends in the market with added features. For instance, with the launch of a new type of iPhone, suddenly earlier types appear ‘old’, ‘cheap’ and limited. Repair cafés do not offer a solution for this planned obsolescence as market strategy.

Another feature of the market economy which negatively affects the practice of repair relates to the high cost of repair service in regular shops. As a result, individuals prefer to hand over their prized possessions to second-hand dealers for reuse or throw them away rather than bear the high cost of repair. Most of our young informants, between seventeen to thirty years of age, said it is a societal norm that damaged items are frequently thrown out because of the ease with which a replacement can be purchased at a relatively low price. John Urry (2010) refers to this era as one characterized by accelerated consumption as an inherent trace of modernity in the capitalist economic system. We will now first present one case of a repair before discussing the various aspects of repair cafés thematically.

1 <https://www.repaircafé.org>, accessed 25 July 2021.

2 The original quotations on this website are in Dutch. <https://www.repaircafé.org>, accessed 25 July 2021.

3 www.repaircafé.org, accessed 25 July 2021.

A broken hedge trimmer

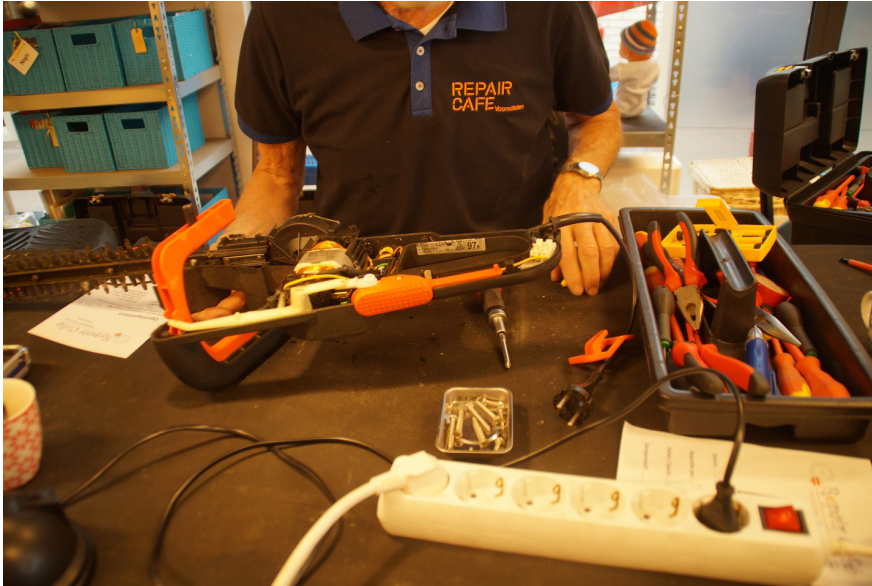
Although gaining access to the repair café communities has never been a problem for us, one of us (Colombijn) sent an email to the volunteer coordinator to ask formal permission to take photographs. I arrived just before opening time and through the window I saw the volunteers drinking coffee together, but by the time I had locked my bike and entered the building, all volunteers were at their post. They had been well informed by the coordinator during the coffee: *'You are the Freek'* were the words with which I was welcomed.

The repair café consists of three rooms which give access to each other without doors: a reception room, a large room for the repair of objects, and a smaller room with sewing machines to repair textiles. A fourth room for bicycle repairs is situated across a passageway, but is practically empty. The large room of about fifteen metres length is dominated by a long worktable with the repairers sitting on one side and clients on the other side. Multiple sockets, open boxes with tools and table lamps are lying or standing on the table along its full length. More tools can be found in racks along the walls and handicrafts decorate the empty space on the walls.

I brought a failing hedge trimmer to break the ice and being the first customer of the day I was helped immediately after I had registered at the reception desk. My job was assigned to 'Jake' (not his real name), and his neighbour who was yet idle, got involved as well. *'It no longer goes like "chaka-chaka-chak"'*, they jested, imitating the sound of an old television advert for Black and Decker hedge trimmers. They listened to my explanation and tested the trimmer by moving the electricity cord up and down at the point it entered the machine. Then Jake started to unscrew and they continued joking that sometimes after a repair was done, they discovered some screws had not been placed back in position. *'If not essential, we throw them away'*. The two repairers continued discussing the repairs, also when the neighbour had begun his own job, a vacuum cleaner.

After Jake had opened the trimmer, he told me about the interior and pointed at little coils which *'easily shoot away and are difficult to keep in position'*. He placed the trimmer on his side and asked me to keep it in its position, but apart from this little service, no activity was required from me. Although it seemed rather obvious that the electricity cord did not make contact at one point, Jake appeared set on employing an ampere meter at several spots in the machine. He later also demonstrated his expertise by explicating the function of different screwdrivers, sometimes using for me new, incomprehensible words. He explained the good practice of first screwing anti-clockwise until a screw fell into place with a click, before screwing it down. Despite his knowledge, his first attempt failed, so that the trimmer had to be opened again for a second, this time successful, attempt at repair. I suspect that this his 'trial-and-error and tinkering [...] repair strategy' (Van der Velden, 2021: 8), was unconsciously a way to extend the time for showing off his skills (Figure 1). His neighbour had a similar manner of demonstrating his expertise, giving a technical exposé to his client about the special qualities of an electricity cord curled up in a vacuum cleaner. Pleased with Jake's work and thankful for his stories, I happily forgave his slightly conceited manner.

Figure 1 - A hedge trimmer under repair



After the repair was done I donated ten euro in an open cash box at the reception desk as a voluntary contribution. Later I was told that the donations amount to 100-150 euro per opening day.

With the exception of one young client, all customers and volunteers looked in their sixties or older and were neatly dressed; the males were clean shaven or had nicely trimmed beards, most women wore make-up. Jake told me that he had enjoyed a technical education at his youth, started his career as a mechanic, but then moved on to management functions. After his retirement he loved working with his hands again. The neighbour with whom Jake was joking was in his seventies and was there together with his wife. The latter was sister-in-law of the coordinator, who in her turn worked at the repair café together with a brother of hers. Also non-kin interacted in a convivial atmosphere. The above case is exemplary of the interactions we have repeatedly observed in Tilburg and Voorschoten.

The repair café proceedings⁴

The repair cafés of Tilburg and Voorschoten open once a month: the repair café in Tilburg every first Thursday evening of the month (19:00-21:00) and Voorschoten every last Saturday of the month (10:00-17:00). Although the decentralized organization of repair cafés in the Netherlands allows individual cafés to set their own opening hours independently, they have coordinated their opening hours with other repair cafés in the region. The variation in the days of operation facilitates complementary repair service opportunities and alternatives for participants to opt for a repair café in a neighbouring city, if a customer by any chance misses a repair date in their hometown. In another form of collaboration, every once a month, the repair café organization sets up a meeting at which different repair café unit coordinators are represented. This monthly conference is essential to measure their performance, reinforce their culture and focus on repair support missions and environmental awareness, among other related goals.

At the repair café, repairers meet customers and tools meet damaged items in a marketplace of material restoration.⁵ Customers are handed out a tag number when they enter and report the kind of broken object they have brought with them at a reception desk. They then wait for their tag number to come up and approach

⁴ For a fine description of the proceedings at another repair café in the Netherlands, see Van der Velden (2021), which lends credence to our analysis.

⁵ This description has found inspiration from Actor-Network-Theory (O'Hare, 2019: 8).

the repairers specialized in the particular kind of repairs. Maintaining order is necessary to ensure a smooth operation for the sake of punctuality.

Both in Tilburg and, as we have already seen, in Voorschoten, the repairers are seated in a central space with the clients circling around them. The seating arrangement results in a face-to-face setting which allows repairers to ask the customers about their objects' biographies and the possible root cause of the damage. The sitting pattern enables collaboration and mutual learning: the repairer learns about the object and the customers learn about the technique. Most of the customers appear in the role of an apprentice, and the repairers show their competence and mastery in repair practice.

The repairers have a peculiar attachment to their instruments –knives, screw-drivers, needles, etcetera–, which they keep with them as personal items (Figure 1). In most cases, repair instruments are not exchanged but individually owned by each repairer, but the repair coordinators also make additional tools available. Repairers are uncertain without their repair tools just as the equipment is ineffective outside the repairer's hand. Therefore, knowing the repair equipment by name, its function and knowing how it feels in the hand add flair and precision in handling the tools. Understanding the relationship with the tool comes with timeless, constant practice. A repairer develops a certain close intimacy with the repair tool through continued practice in 'a process of mutual becoming' (Sørhaug, 2021: 367); in itself, this relationship between repairer and tool already goes against the logic of a throwaway society.

One step at a time, the repairer develops confidence in trusting the tool in his hands and discovers new tricks, standardizing processes which solve imminent technical difficulties. The explanation of Jake how he starts screwing counter-clockwise until the screw falls in place with a click is a case in point. Dant describes the type of interaction existing between humans and the objects in their physical environment as the concept of 'affordance' (Dant, 2004: 64). He asserts that the tool by itself is a dead object, but it does allow the repairer to repair a broken object. The repairer must discover how to use the tools, sometimes in unintended ways (unintended by the producer of the tool).

An important element in the repair is the social activity. The website of the Repair Café foundation emphasizes that the repair café forms a 'community' (the English term is also used in the Dutch language communication): 'Repair cafés are *free meetings* which revolve around repairing (*together*). Tools and materials to carry out all sorts of repairs are available on site [...]. Visitors bring broken objects from home. At the repair café they set to work together with the experts. [...] Those persons who have nothing to be repaired can *enjoy a cup of coffee or tea* or they [...] can always find some inspiration at the reading table on which there are books about repairs.'⁶ The tone of the website is the tone of capitalist abstinence without a sign of overt anti-capitalism: here the capitalist maxim 'time is money' does not count and the economic activity of repair is for free. The webpage with information about the repair cafés ends with the joyful exclamation: 'Above all the Repair Café wants to show that repairing is fun and often quite easy. Come and give it a try yourself!'⁷

The social aspect of the repair café activities were immediately apparent during our visits. For instance, during Egboko's first visit to the repair café in Tilburg, the event hall was a warm setting offering the individuals coming in from the cold winter comfort, while a clock on the wall ticked, keeping account of the time spent. Individuals exchanged pleasantries with warm greetings, shaking hands and sipping coffee. This first time, the fieldworker seated himself gingerly on a repairer's chair for a second, unaware of the proper procedure, until a volunteer with a cheerful smile redirected him to the visitors' seats in the middle. The differentiation between visitors and repairers whose specific competence is underlined by reserved, privileged seating had to be maintained, but in a friendly manner (Figure 2).

⁶ <http://www.repaircafé.org>, accessed 25 July 2021, our italics.

⁷ <http://www.repaircafé.org>, accessed 25 July 2021.

Figure 2 - Separated spaces for expert repairers and customers



There was a sense of togetherness in the meetings. Everyone had come for a common purpose: to prolong their objects' lifecycle with the offering of free service from the volunteer repairers which gave customers the satisfaction that their valued object was being restored. While the volunteers could have earned a considerable sum for their effort, the repair café practices appeared to be free of monetary value: the participants collaborated and shared their unique talents with the aim of extending the use of objects through the repair effort.

Social interaction between repairer and client is essential in the process. For instance, we observed a customer who came with a damaged lamp. She explained that the lamp would not switch on when she pressed the button; the lamp had suddenly stopped working but she had no idea what the fault could be. After listening to the problem, the usual answer of the repairer was that no guarantee of success could be given, but there was the possibility of salvaging the lamp with their effort and skill. Maja van der Velden also stresses the importance of these conversations between repairer and customer: 'information was exchanged on the basis of questions asked by the repairer [...] During the repair information was exchanged that was not directly related to the repair, but which provided more context to the product [...] used in the house, how it was used and how often, family histories with the product, and its sentimental value'. In their turn 'the repairers showed the owners problematic issues with the design of the product, such as products that are difficult to open [...] and plastic parts that are not robust enough for everyday use' (Van der Velden, 2021: 7).

The social interaction among the repairers and coordinators of the repair café is even more important. The repairers regularly consult each other on difficult cases (Figure 2). Moreover, the donations from clients are used not only for the maintenance or replacement of tools and spare parts, but are also spent on a get-together at certain times to celebrate their achievements, both in Tilburg and Voorschoten. The older participants have long-established friendships or are, in Voorschoten, kin and quite a few had worked at the repair cafés since their respective opening. The bonding resulted in a corporate identity. For instance, most volunteers in Voorschoten were wearing a sweater with the logo of the Voorschoten repair-café. They proudly contrasted the interaction between repairers and customers in Voorschoten with the repair café in the nearby elite village, Wassenaar, where clients could leave their broken objects behind for repair, but were not expected to stay during the effort.

Customers could also become regulars and sometimes they reported to have waited patiently for the monthly opening time of the repair café. One couple in Tilburg, for example, had temporarily switched to boiling water in a saucepan in the hope that their electronic water cooker could be repaired and suspended the

purchase of a new cooker until they had at least given the repair a try at the monthly opening. In Voorschoten the absence of a mother and daughter was noted as striking, *'because they are here every month'*.

Again, the limited opening hours of the repair cafés are not a radical critique of capitalism, but they are a form of capitalist abstinence. In a capitalist society, services are ideally available 24/7. If people want to reverse the 'overheating' (Eriksen, 2016) of society and to abstain from purchasing the newest model electronic water cooker, they will have to show patience and wait until the next opening day of the repair café.

The people of the repair café communities

Most of the repair café participants are at least fifty or over and many elderly members are retirees, a fact also noted by Barbara Arisi (2020: 79). There is a clear gender differentiation, with the majority of male repairers concentrating on electronic gadgets, while repairing clothes was the responsibility of women. The women also assisted in making coffee, so the division of labour was very traditional (perhaps partly as a result of the relatively advanced age of the repairers). The collective participation in the repair café creates an event to which most of the participants come to have their item restored while enjoying each other's company. As a retiree some volunteers see an opportunity to contribute to society with their time, skillset and dedication. Their socio-economic status as retirees perhaps makes working for monetary reward unnecessary; instead, they see the act of volunteering in the practice of repair as fun. Moreover, they have the time that a repair usually takes. When a retiree, no longer in formal employment, feels discarded by society, the repair café saves both discarded objects and discarded persons.

The repairers and clients are not only of a certain age category, but also as belong to a certain generation. They connect to a specific era in which repairs were still commonplace in households. Several participants recalled how they had watched their parents, grandparents and other family relations engage in repair activities in their childhood. They acquired the fundamental knowledge about fixing objects by observing, asking questions, participating and familiarizing themselves with the tools and tricks of repair practice. Unintentionally they copied the division of tasks seen in their adolescence, with women sewing or mending clothes, and men were described as handy at fixing things.

The volunteers were aware of and quite explicit about the generational differences. Discussing another frugal practice, keeping leftovers in the fridge for the next day, one volunteer in Voorschoten, now in her seventies, quoted her mother when the latter would rebuke people who threw away food: *'Darling, I can see you have not experienced the [Second World] War'*. Another volunteer grumbled that her fifty-year old daughter had barely begun separating household waste and *'knew nothing about sustainability'*. Nevertheless, she also varnished over the younger generation's absence from the repair café: her grown-up children did not have time for the repair café, because on Saturdays they have to accompany their own children (the volunteer's grandchildren) to their sports clubs.

Individuals found out about the repair café from their immediate circles of friends and family. In other words, the repair cafés attracted both repairers and customers through traditional forms of communication and connection. Although the conventional network functions efficiently, the mouth-to-mouth communication still appears to exclude the younger people, despite the significance of free repair services for them. In our view, this should be a point of concern: how and why could the repair café practices attract younger age participants using communication channels more appropriate to this generation?

The repair café community states the event is open to everyone; yet, the younger people appear to be either few and far between or entirely absent from the practice, despite the sumptuous guarantee of free object renewal services. Talking to some of the younger people living close to the repair café location but who had never attended an event, we got the impression that most of them did not know about the activities. There

were even less young volunteers than clients; in Voorschoten there had been two, among whom the son of a Syrian refugee family, but both stayed away after a while.

The apparent indifference of younger people to the repair café practices might be caused by the channel of information dissemination, by the age disparity which makes younger people less at ease when they enter the convivial atmosphere of the gatherings, or it might be because of a different habitus. Pierre Bourdieu uses the word habitus to explain that individuals are likely to have been conditioned to perform in specific ways aligning interests with their shared experience (1990). When individuals share such attributes of historical events, trends, belief, culture, and ideology, the experience constitutes their collective sense of reality. Seeing repair as a feasible, and perhaps the preferred, way of dealing with a broken object is part of the habitus of older generations, but not younger people.

The presence on social media

Wondering whether social media would be the means to attract more people from a younger generation to repair cafés, we directed our focus to the repair café community's performance on such media platforms as Instagram. In January 2021, we followed the activities of three Dutch repair cafés on Instagram; we repeated the search in August 2021 to get some quantitative data on followers. The cafés were selected as we happened to find them and in no way do we pretend to give a systematic random sample of Instagram accounts of repair cafés. However, our findings do give an indication of their presence on Instagram. Six accounts had an average of 197 followers, with a maximum of 566 followers and a minimum of 1. Given the limited Instagram accounts we could find, compared to the total number of repair cafés, we assume that many cafés are not interested in this medium at all.

Incidentally we also erroneously selected an Instagram account that, we discovered later, belonged to a repair café in Germany. Although situated in another country (with, for instance, different regulations pertaining to discarding old objects which might affect the use of repair cafés), it is worthwhile citing this case as an illuminating counter-example to the repair café in Tilburg and Voorschoten. The German repair café had 818 followers on Instagram, far more than any of the Dutch cafés. How can the difference be explained?

The German repair café was based close to a university and the followers on Instagram were mostly young students. We held an online interview with the coordinator, who was himself thirty-three years old and who had learned his repair skills from his grandfather, whom he joined on tours gathering scrap which could be resold after repair. The coordinator told that most of the items brought for repair were laptops, iPhones, coffee machines, bicycles, game cursors, headsets, DVD players and other electronic gadgets typically popular among students (probably with the exception of DVD players). He told they are the only repair café opening throughout the week on the basis of individual appointments, hence suiting the rhythm of busy students. He explained that the students want to maximize the limited time they have and making appointments is convenient and allows the customers flexibility. The popularity with a younger group, reflected in the unusually large number of Instagram followers, can therefore be explained by the *modus operandi* which caters to people who have more commitments than most retired people might have. The communication on social media went both ways and a grateful customer sent them a video saying; 'You [the repairer] are my hero'. The repair café posted the video on its Instagram account and then went viral. On the basis of the German example we may conclude that the channel of communication indeed matters when it comes to attracting younger clientele.

Unfortunately, the success of this German repair café came at a price because it struggled to mobilize enough volunteers, who were also younger than their counterparts in the two Dutch repair cafés. A notable concern of this repair café community involves the inconsistent commitments by the younger repairers, especially when most volunteers have to balance their free repair service with proper jobs engagements from

which they earn their income. Sometimes there are only few repairers and at other times there is a crowd because the younger volunteers cannot always come.

The upsurge in attention from younger clients at this German repair café came to a halt when the repair café temporarily stopped working during the corona lockdown. However, the repairers continued collecting laptops and computers to be mended. The repaired computers were donated to children who needed them for schooling, especially at a time in which schooling in Germany switched to online, distance education (and not all families could afford a laptop). In this instance, the social motivation took precedence over the environmental motivation of the volunteers.

The importance of different means of communication can hardly be overestimated. While the older people's navigation across repair practice is by word of mouth, snowballing as it goes, the younger people come to repair cafés communicating through trends on social media platforms. One of the coordinators in his late fifties gave his opinion about using social media: *'Here in our repair café, we are not interested in or use social media. I'm not too fond of it. Our way of doing things might be old fashioned, but it saves me a lot of trouble, energy and time [by not going to social media]'*. He recalled another repair café which resorted to mass publicity of a particular repair café event on social media, in a local newspaper and on other platforms. There was a massive turnout on the scheduled day, attracting so many visitors that it was beyond the capacity of the volunteers-repairers to handle. Most of the visitors were sent away without a repair even being attempted.

The objects at repair cafés

Despite the importance of the social aspect, the main activity was repairing objects and the repair cafés did this quite successfully. Figures for 2019 provided by the repair café foundation show the success rate of the repairs is high: 63 percent of the objects is fully repaired and 13 percent half repaired; in 24 percent of the cases repair was not possible. The success rate differs from product to product: high for non-electronic goods like trousers (96%) and bicycles (84%). Electric equipment like sewing machines (69%), lamps (68%) and vacuum cleaners (63%) have a somewhat lower, but still considerable success rate. At the bottom are coffee-makers (55%) and computers, laptops and mobile phones (45%).⁸ These figures show that, even for the more difficult objects to repair, a visit to a repair café is worth a try.

There are several reasons some objects are more difficult to repair than others. Repairers find it challenging to repair the old devices because of the unavailability of spare parts as well as rust in nuts. Spare parts are sometimes ordered but this implies the reparation will have to wait till the next time the repair café opens and the customer must be willing to pay the costs of purchasing the spare parts. As for the task of finding spare parts, a fruitful symbiosis exists between the repair café in Tilburg and the adjacent thrift shop which offers the repair café work space and support. Objects offered to the thrift shop which are classified as irreparable can sometimes be disassembled for spare parts which the repair café can use to build a whole item. Conversely broken items which are beyond repair and which are left behind at the repair café by clients can sometimes be used to upgrade half-broken objects for reuse in an upscaling process.

Most of the repairers we talked to complained about the limited access to quality replacement parts because the inability to find a similar broken component can cause the whole item to be discarded. Fortunately, the European Commission has taken measures to set limits on built-in obsolescence of manufacturers. Accessibility to spare parts has become a significant factor in design. Sustainable designs which take accessibility to spare parts into account align with European eco-design directives (2009/125/EC), implemented in 2021.

⁸ https://repaircafé.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/05/RepairMonitor_analysis_2019_05052020_ENGLISH.pdf

The European directive encourages manufacturers to develop repair-friendly product designs and to make spare parts and information accessible for specific energy-related commodities like dishwashers, coffee machines, and refrigerators (Rodríguez Quintero et al., 2021).

Arguably the biggest challenge posed by the planned obsolescence is not finding spare parts but opening the object to get access to the inner compartments (see also Van der Velden, 2021: 2). As one exasperated repairer said: *'If we try to open the object forcibly, it might get broken, hence, when this happens, we have no option but to leave the object [unrepaired and] throw it away'*. Many of the repairers claim that most of the time the faults identified in electronic equipment are no more than a burnt cable or some other minor technical fault, but the complexity in design makes it difficult to open and repair. As an experienced repairer told Barbara Arisi about the electronic appliances: *"They mainly are glued, so it is almost impossible to open an electronic utensil up without destroying it"* (Arisi, 2020: 80).

The inability to open an object can give rise to enormous frustration. In Voorschoten we observed how three volunteers by every means in their power tried in turn to open a vacuum cleaner but, to their exasperation, could find no way other than by smashing the covering. This failure was a blow to their professional pride but also upset their natural frugality. In their frustration, they openly voiced criticism of the electronics company which –in their view– had deliberately designed the cleaner in such a way that it was impossible to repair. In their critique of the in-built obsolescence, they came close to the more ideologically inspired motivation of younger repairers which we indicated above.

Fortunately, most companies are sensitive to the argument of durability (if only for the sake of a positive brand name), hence reparability. The 'reparability index' introduced in France (Bradley & Persson, 2022: 1) stimulates companies to 'design for disassembly': a strategy for 'improving product reparability in which the need to disassemble products for repair [...] and recycling is already considered in the product design phase' (Moalem and Mosgaard, 2021: 3). If in the past the repair of broken objects meant a postponed sale of a new item –hence a loss to the company– nowadays in order to gain competitive advantage companies are more cooperative. Therefore, there is more collaboration between the repair café and companies responding to the requests for repair manuals to equip repairers with the know-how to undertake the restoration. Furthermore, the annual monitor of the repair café reports the ten most often repaired brands (Sony, Siemens, Black & Decker, Bosch, Miele, HP, Samsung, Tefal, Nespresso and Philips)⁹ and, in the context of the repair cafés, such listing is a compliment. On the other hand, by making repairs challenging, companies run the risk of being delisted, which could influence their reputations, consumer loyalty and choice in purchasing a particular product.

The economic logic of capitalism stimulates people to discard broken objects rather than invest time or money in their repair. However, as we have argued throughout this article, a strictly economic logic cannot be applied to the process of repairing the broken objects. Product attachment is a major incentive to have broken objects repaired, and as Van der Velden (2021: 8) observes: *'Knowing the age of an object enable the repairers to relate to the emotional value of these objects'*. Two broken record players serve as an example here. Mr Stein (an alias for one of the participants in the Tilburg repair café), who is now in his fifties, purchased his record player twenty years ago. He compared the purchase price of his player to the cost in the current market. The record player is priceless, he explains. It holds a historical value of all the favourite records he has listened to, from records in his collection dating from the 1970s and 1980s. The record player is the material manifestation of his youth.

Similarly, a younger participant Nora, (also an alias) in her mid-thirties, narrated her experience of using a vintage record player. *'[My whole life] I have been a fan of the record player; my dad has one. I watched him play it and I see myself using it. I received mine as a gift three years ago. It was a gift from my brother. I like old, vintage things;*

9 https://repaircafé.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/05/RepairMonitor_analysis_2019_05052020_ENGLISH.pdf

it is simple to use. I love the process, taking my time to get the record out of the sleeve, placing it on the player. Every time I listen to the sound the player produces, it is different because of the little scratches emerging in the background. It gives a certain feeling that is entirely different to just playing from Spotify. I also like the process of putting the needle on the record with a flourish and it plays. Listening to some of my records on the device makes me happy and I also cherish it as a gift from my brother.'

The tales of both Mr Stein and Nora highlight their experience using a device like the record player. Although they were born in different eras, they had a shared sense that the record player singled out a similarity which resonated with their individual identity to the object. The exchange with Nora's brother describes another aspect of value, namely the emotional value of a reciprocal relationship. Gifts strengthen ties and symbolic meanings of mutual exchange—sharing, kindness, love, among other emotional rationales. The exchange process is a general form of reciprocity in which no exact equivalent in terms of economic value is expected. This context of the use value of objects with strong emotional, symbolic attachments makes understandable why both Mr Stein and Nora endeavour to keep and rescue their valued items from becoming obsolescent.

Whereas in the case of the two record players, the emotional value was not based on their economic worth, in other cases the exchange value of an object does have an impact on its emotional value and hence the desire to have the object repaired when it breaks down. Another of our interlocutors made this point when he talked about the changing costs of consumer items. He said that nowadays the norm is purchasing a big-size smart television for 500 euros and then feeling like changing it within a few months. *'When I was younger'*, he recounted, *'having a Philips match-line Television had as much value as being rich. In those days it cost about 2,000 guilders, which approximates two to three-months' salary back then. Now, 500 euros is like a quarter of your monthly salary, earned in a week'*.

While the factor of pricing might be conceived as an aspect of the value exchange in object consumption, at the repair café Mr Stein narrated how disappointed he felt when the record player he had used for over twenty years was damaged. *'It broke down suddenly'*, he said. Even when the player showed no sign of functioning anymore, he left it unused in his home, arguably because it added an aesthetic value. Even though he did toy with the idea of throwing the player away, he hesitated to part it. His reluctance to throw the item away was unrelated to its monetary value as it was a long time since he had bought it, but the trouble of searching for something similar to match the record player's quality was an investment in time he could not afford. Moreover, it had been *this* record player on which he had played his records. In other words, his experience of such a unique product met his criterion of quality in use. He later heard about the possibility of repair at the café and when Mr Stein reflected on his experience at the repair café, we could see expressions of excitement about the restoration of the player light up his face. We could sense that the repair of the device meant more to Mr Stein than just the object's physical transformation. Playing his seventies and eighties records, the record player reminded him of past and current events in his daily life. These interactions constitute the social transformation of items from 'waste' to new use value in the 'biography' (Kopytoff, 1986) of things through repair.

Ideological motivation of the repair practice

We would like to end with a reflection on the motives prompting both the repairers and the owners of broken objects to go to repair cafés. In the preceding sections, we have discussed the emotional value of objects, a sense of belonging to a convivial gathering and a particular habitus as reasons to bring broken objects to repair cafés or to act as a volunteer at one. In a broader context, the repair café gives the participants a satisfied feeling arising from contributing to the underlying goal of a circular economy (see also Moalem & Mosgaard, 2021: 11; Van der Velden, 2021: 6). The ideological aspect and the various forms of convenience are inseparable.

Therefore, ignoring such benefits and incentives received from the practice might negate the significance of environmental activism.

The debate about what motivates individuals to participate in ensuring human well-being and environmental development extends to the concept of pro-social/pro-environmental behaviour. For instance, the volunteer repairers say they find pride in providing such services even in the absence of monetary reward, asserting it is a hobby and they enjoy doing it as recreation. Even more pertinently, they receive the emotional gratification of seeing the smile on customers' faces when their items are restored.

Hartmann et al. (2017) elaborate on the motive of pro-social/pro-environmental behaviour from two perspectives. They refer to 'altruism' as a benevolent or charitable act of goodwill towards the well-being of humanity and the environment. The motive behind such a performative action reveals a one-way exchange system: no reward expectations. However, the warm-glow effect presents another motive for individuals to carry out pro-social/pro-environmental acts. In this case, the emotional feeling generated as pleasure, ego, pride and recognition can reward such deeds. The warm-glow concept suggests that individuals are more likely to act for the greater good of society and environment, to win the praise of a community. The warm-glow effect was also mentioned by Maja van der Velden (2021: 6), who reports that: 'The best experience was the one of fulfilment'.

Pro-social behaviour has become part of the culture of the repair café. The deliberate denial of a monetary reward in exchange for labour defines a rare sense of valuable service rendered. This situation is clearly unlike that in regular shops, in which payment for repair assistance is obligatory (unless still under warranty). The denial of a monetary valuation of services and the free sharing of resources at the repair café creates a sense of belonging to a unique community.

Steven Jackson has pointed out the strong moral element in repair. He considers repair a manifestation of 'care', which involves care ethics: 'foregrounding maintenance and repair as an aspect of technological work invites not only new functional but also *moral* relations to the world of technology' (Jackson, 2014: 231; see also Bohlin, 2019: 7; Bradley & Persson 2022: 4; and Carrier, 2018). The volunteers working as repairers at the repair cafés see their work in such moral terms but, in these small acts, the repairers could rightfully claim special knowledge 'by virtue of their positioning vis-à-vis the worlds of technology' with which they engage (Jackson, 2014: 229).

These repair café community activities resist the capitalist mode of operation in terms of the value of products. Firstly, the fundamental ideology pitches the retardation of accelerated consumption by extending the life-cycle of an object. Secondly, the idealism of the repair café community which communicates the collective ownership of resources conflicts with the capitalist system which is founded on the private ownership of resources and profit-oriented benefits (Araujo, 2017). The sharing of resources, time, expertise and tools fits the term 'commons' as referred to by Helfrich et al. (2010) and, thinking in terms of commons, also goes against the logic of individualism dominant in capitalism (which, *inter alia*, makes it so difficult to protect commons like clean water, fresh air and biodiverse forests in our time). Protecting commons is a practice which contests the hegemonic consumption morality of a capitalist system. Opting for repair is a form of moral or ethical consumption through 'voluntary simplicity'; it is in a way a 'consumer boycott' (Caruana, 2007: 208).

The approach adopted by the repair café community shows the need for collective responsibility, with various stakeholders transitioning into a pragmatic design solution which focuses not only on the creativity of producers but also on the interpretation of a product's value from the perspective of the users interacting with objects in their daily life experience. Such an argument points to the extended use of items and the concomitant reduction in raw materials, which offers the opportunity to head towards the transformation from a linear to a circular economy, countering the logic of linear capitalist consumption. Taking their place alongside state regulatory structures put in place to control excessive consumption or wasteful production,

the repair café practice can be interpreted as a bottom-up initiative in which renewed sensitivity to use-value of products, as opposed to the exchange value of products in capitalism, spreads among the people.

Conclusion

The repair cafés we have studied in the Netherlands are a form of community repair, in which the product life of broken objects is extended. The convivial atmosphere, the demand for repair of –often emotionally valuable– objects of the clients, and the desire to use their skills on the side of the volunteers-repairers are major factors contributing to their success.

‘Repair is radical’ a volunteer at a repair café said to Barbara Arisi (2020: 79), but truth be told, the repair cafés do not constitute a radical critique of a capitalist mode of production. Neither volunteer-repairers nor customers are anti-capitalism and they treasure material objects. It is better to see repair cafés as a form of ‘abstinence capitalism’, a mild form of critique in which people in a pragmatic fashion desist from a capitalist economy: repairers take their time; both repairers and customers give up on a 24/7 availability; not much effort goes into marketing and certainly not into social media; the financial compensation for the service rendered takes the form of a voluntary gift; old objects with a biography have more value than the newest mass-produced consumer items.

Repair is only in theory a powerful challenge to capitalism. Paul Sweezy argued in the 1940s that the wasteful behaviour of throwing away objects is essential to get rid of the surplus production inherent in the expansion of capitalism, especially in the final stages of capitalism when there are no more new markets left to conquer (Colombijn & Rial, 2016: 23). If repair makes planned obsolescence obsolete, the expansion of a capitalist production could grind to a halt. As it is in reality however, although there is a clear demand for the services of repair cafés, their material impact on attaining a circular economy must be deemed negligible, because of the small scale of the repairs compared to the total production of new objects.

The educational impact, however, is probably bigger, because repairers become very aware of the planned or functional obsolescence of the products. The repairers share their anger about the manufacturers’ strategies with the customers during the informal talks taking place during the repairs. Both repairers and customers, who on the whole do not seem to have an activist attitude, are becoming critical of the linear production process and their enlightenment may spread to others who are willing to act against producers. The two different roles for repair discerned by Johan Niskanen and Duncan McLaren (2023: 4), the sustaining-nostalgic role, and the transformative, future-oriented role, are in practice very close to each other.

A major finding of our research is that repair cafés appeal especially to an older generation. This finding goes against the popular belief that youth is more concerned about a sustainable future and more radical in their criticism and activism than older people. The older generation’s attitude to mend broken objects likely stems foremost from an upbringing in which frugality had been an important value, and less from a modern sustainability concern. The generational effect is reinforced by the social function of the repair cafés, which give purpose to both the repairers and the customers, many of whom are already retired or close to retirement. The relatively limited social media skills of this older generation is an obstacle in reaching a younger generation. If the coordinators of the repair cafés were more active on social media, an intergenerational transfer of anger about companies’ functional obsolescence hindering the attainment of a circular economy would become possible and a strong alliance against non-sustainable capitalist practices could be forged.

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