

Preface

When I was a child we used dusters cut from our old clothes, made worn-out trousers into shorts, and collected the tin-foil milk bottle tops for recycling. Bed sheets were 'side to middled' when they wore out; leftovers were always cooked up the next day; even Christmas wrapping paper was carefully saved for the following year. This was not because I came from a particularly mean, moral or even poor family – although money was always a background concern – it was simply because in our house that was how things were done. Whilst some of my friends with younger parents grew up with a far greater engagement with the consumer culture of the 1980s, the influence of wartime thrift on the generation of *my* parents had been strong and irreversible. It did not dissipate simply because the rationing and making do put in place during the Second World War had stopped, and economic conditions improved. Their parents had passed on thrifty habits to them, and their young lives had been affected by the rationing that continued after the war. Thrift was a way of life, a principle, and it came with its own small senses of pleasure. My mum still enjoys being thrifty in small ways; enjoys the feeling that she has made everything useful and wasted nothing, for its own sake, not even to save money really, as the difference would be negligible. For her and many others, being thrifty is about a sense of self-sufficiency more than anything; a comforting sense of not needing too much, of being able to be happy making do. Perhaps what lies behind this for many people is a sense that one is in control as much as is possible of one's situation; a sense that fluctuations in one's economic situation would not necessarily hit one too hard; and a sense of a kind of freedom and therefore happiness that comes with that. Certainly, for my mum, and many like her, thrift has become an embedded part of her identity; the principled, practical habit of a lifetime, despite the changes in attitudes towards consumerism in the postwar era.

Of course, this inevitably had an effect on me. When I was a child, my mum often said (and still does), 'I wouldn't buy that/waste that even if I had a million pounds', and I feel exactly the same. I too take pleasure in making use of every last bit of something, and of re-using things in new ways if at all possible. Throughout my life so far, I have often needed to be extremely thrifty for financial reasons, but this does not go far enough in explaining the real reasons I do it, and certainly

does not explain why I get so much pleasure from it. That, I am sure, comes from the same sense of freedom and the associated happiness I mentioned above, and is broadly aligned to the motivations of the many people across the Western world who attempt to simplify, downsize and become self-sufficient. However, it does not explain things enough and, in writing this book, I have been forced to consider my own attitudes and behaviour when it comes to thrift more deeply, and in light of various powerful historical strands. I am painfully aware that on one hand I take a harsh attitude towards the preaching of thrift to the less well-off and indeed towards any moralising discourse of it. I resent those in positions of greater economic or political power telling others (whose lives they usually have little to no understanding of) how to live – especially when that telling is for the success of the nation as part of an apparently collective effort, falsely sold. It seems to me that the effort frequently falls to those least able to realistically make it, whilst nothing is required of those for whom it would be easiest. On the other hand, I myself come from, and perpetuate, a thinking and practice which cannot help but be embedded to some extent in moral discourses. I do tend to think that many people would be happier, and the world would be on a better ecological footing, if we wasted less/needed to buy less and therefore earn less/had more time to enjoy life, and I cannot really deny that this is in some way a moral stance.

So where does that leave me? In many ways, as the introduction of this book will explain, this uneasy position is thrown up by the changes in the way the word thrift is used. The thrift I enjoy is based on the older etymological understanding of the word – that of thriving. The thrift I resent is based on the more recent usage of the word – that of frugality (especially that placed on people for false reasons). Even then, I still find myself wriggling around uncomfortably with my own rationale for enjoying thrift. Thrift as thriving tends to be such a singularly individual pursuit, and one that only those who already have enough can engage in. This thrift, whilst garnering the support of sizeable pockets of people across the Western world, is unlikely to challenge the way society is run. It is a luxury pursuit in many ways, and it makes me slightly uneasy. The emphasis on personal happiness is perfectly valid, but it is not enough. It is precisely related to a sense of *personal* freedom, but has little to do with challenging societal inequality and a wider sense of freedom for the many. Those who adhere to it like to imagine that if they lead by example, others will follow, but even if this were the case it would not lead to wide-scale wealth redistribution. It is essentially a thrift based on individual choice and too easily hijacked by the logic of neoliberal economics.

What this book hopes to expose is how thrift as thriving became quite so wholeheartedly embroiled in thrift as a capitalistic practice of frugality. In doing so, it explores key historical strands of thought, and certain historical characters who have been amongst the finest purveyors of thrift (of both the thriving and the frugal variety), attempting to sift through these with the aspiration of finding a thrift more committed to solidarity rather than individualism, and more able to change everyday life for the many. From analysing this strange and wonderful array of people and ideas, it turns out that it is perhaps not a 'romantic ethic' of hedonistic desire to consume that has fed the 'spirit of capitalism' (as Colin Campbell famously argues), but rather a pragmatic ethic of desire for economic freedom through thrift. Thrift has at once defined itself against capitalism and for capitalism and regardless has in reality ended up working for it on almost all occasions. But this is not to say the idea is unsalvageable – far from it. For example, radical ecologists are making great strides towards a more collectively defined thrift that carves out new structures and ways of being. And history reveals subtleties within the work of more conventional thrift advocates that are useful for an alternative future conception of thrift. There is, then, a slightly utopian aspect to this book (for which I am unapologetic), or at least to the place it ends up, in that it is attempting to draw together a way forward for thrift that has practical implications – that is, if you like, a blueprint for a way of living. The blueprint itself is certainly a whole other project, but for now, I hope this book pulls apart logics that have been wrongly glued together for far too long and challenges in a small way some of the long-held 'truisms' about the nature of capitalism.