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John Scanlan
(Manchester Metropolitan University)

COMMENTARY ON:

Recycling Modernity: Towards an Environmental History of Waste

Tim Cooper
University of Exeter, Cornwall Campus

Tim Cooper's 'Recycling Modernity' raises a number of timely observations about the practice of Environmental History and, in drawing together material from several intellectual disciplines and through the links it draws between existing work in disparate intellectual domains that may only be tangentially related to Environmental History, he suggests that the notion of 'waste' may serve to inform and develop the future historiography of the environment, particularly if Environmental History as a field of study is to have any lasting critical value. I think of particular value in this paper was the attention Tim Cooper paid to making a distinction between 'dirt' and 'waste' (of which, more below), which – as he notes – it is unwise to be thinking muddily about.

Points for discussion

I thought that I would raise several points for discussion, arising from a consideration of your paper.

(i) The section 'Waste or Dirt?' (from p. 3) contained a useful and sustained clarification on both the subtleties of the application of these terms that strikes me as a necessary corrective to much thinking about waste. It seems that for many who choose to write about *waste*, whether in conceptual terms or with reference to its materiality, *dirt* – and in particular Mary Douglas's analysis of pollution and taboo – often serves as the point of origin for thinking about the 'otherness' of formless or disgusting matter. Of course, this 'dirt' – in the case of shit, most obviously – can be thought of as 'waste' matter (which is to say,

it still has some value), but your discussion of how 'dirt is pulled out of the realm of the abject and brought back into the realm of value' implicitly (and further on more directly) makes a very pertinent point about how cautious we must be in seeing these terms as interchangeable.

The close link between our understanding of waste (which has changed historically, as you note in several places) and our knowledge of the perhaps latent value to be found in the most unlikely substances or materials illustrates this, too. For instance, one obvious example is the practice of treating and preparing leather ('tanning') with faeces. In the end, the recuperation of *dirt* as a resource may depend on the exact properties of the grubby stuff. A less obvious example than faeces used for tanning (or indeed, used as fertiliser) might be found in the artist Man Ray's 1920 photograph, titled 'Dust Breeding', which captures a section of the conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp's so-called 'Large Glass'. The layers of dust and dirt that had accumulated on its surface give it a spatial quality; like the surface of some distant planet (see Fig. 1). This may seem to be an odd example to point to, but keep in mind that the world of waste is a world of reversals ... Clearly, and unlike tanning (or fertilising, indeed) with faecal matter, we see here a stretching of the use-value of *dirt* beyond any intrinsic powers or qualities of the material itself. Yet – that a work of art (which aims to manifest value) can be so made indicates no less that our naming of 'dirt' and 'waste' (and the negotiations that take place between the two terms) are bound up with ideas of value.



Man Ray, 'Dust Breeding' (1920)

N.B. if you can't reproduce the image on the website, can you link to it here:
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/duch/ho_69.521.htm

I wonder if during your historical and archival research you have come across many more such examples that help to illustrate the importance of this conceptual distinction?

In the same section of your paper ('Waste or Dirt?') you also discuss D. Laporte's *History of Shit* which, as you note, equates civilization with a grand cleansing project. I wonder if his thesis suggests to you a point at which the material that had been wasted but was capable of being recuperated – i.e., shit – was reduced back to the simple status of dirt – which is to say, just 'stuff' to be got rid of?

What do you think are the consequences of our tendency to banish defiling, abject, or seemingly useless matter? Is anything, indeed, ever *useless*?

Could it also be the case that the confusion of 'waste' and 'dirt' underlies the attempts of modern societies to make that which is designated waste stuff invisible, with all the implications this has had for the issue of waste as a social and environmental problem?

In this regard, I think of the modernism of Le Corbusier – the dream of a clean new world – as perhaps illustrative of a turn taken by governments and planning agencies in the 20th century, which reflects as well to your view that 'waste' implies the need for improvement (pp. 7-8), whilst perhaps concealing that improvement itself is merely productive of new and perhaps unforeseen wastes. This is something, for the philosopher Martin Heidegger (in his *The Question Concerning Technology*), that is implicit in technologized knowledge (which views nature as a resource we have historically become ever-more adept at exploiting).

I wonder if you, as an historian of modern Britain, would say that a possible alternative path that was not taken – one aiming more towards something like Ebenezer Howard's 'Central City' (Garden City) idea – could have altered the way we think of, and live with, waste today?

In other words, do we all have to labour in our own allotments to maintain a properly balanced relationship to the environment? Can there be, indeed, a balanced relationship when we begin every day with the magical whoosh of the flushing toilet? Perhaps, like cats, we should be forced to dig our own hole

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(ii) In your discussion of Zsuzsa Gille's work I was struck by your discussion of her notions of the *material agency* of waste matter, and *waste regimes* – and the way that these draw you into compelling conclusions about future studies in this field, but also – and this feeds into your concluding comments on the practice of Environmental History – the problems that academic disciplinarity raises for any attempt to come to grips with the fact and problem of waste.

To consider the first point – does our ability to understand 'waste regimes' rely on the kind of evidence or data that has, historically, not been found for the simple reason that no one (aside from figures on the fringe of academic inquiry, such as Henry Mayhew), thought that detailing the extent of the social production of waste, and the technologies and practices employed in its management, was worthwhile?

And, as an historian whose work (although not in this paper) usually draws substantially on archival research, do you think you would you have to be an historian a hundred years hence (as opposed to today) to develop the kind to critical Environmental History you speak of? If that sounds too convoluted, let me put it this way: can there only be an adequate environmental history – one that does not continue to separate the human from the natural and see the 'environment' as nature devoid of human tinkering – after 'waste' is recognised as being central to any understanding of what the term 'environment' means?

Finally, to go back to Zsuzsa Gille's notion of 'material agency', I wonder what implications you see in that notion for the practice of history as a discipline, when – with reference to the likely gaps in evidence noted above - it seems to complicate notions of historical causality and explanation? In considering the force of this notion of 'material agency', is one driven necessarily to the often maligned position of interdisciplinary research?

Given the title of this conference – 'Breaking down Barriers' – it seems perhaps the most obvious question to ask – and one that clearly exercises you. I have strong feelings about my own discipline's inability to come to terms with 'waste', but perhaps this is something we will be able to discuss further after I post these comments.