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Zsuzsa Gille
(University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign)

COMMENTARY ON:

Recycling Modernity: Towards an Environmental History of Waste

Tim Cooper
University of Exeter, Cornwall Campus

The argument of this paper is that waste can be a new galvanizing focus for environmental history that will guide that discipline back to its more critical traditions. The author argues that it is waste's complex yet innate relations with modernity (including colonialism) that makes this a likely prospect.

I welcome both the objective of adding a more critical edge to environmental history and to enrich the waste scholarship. It seems to me however that the article operates with a particular definition of modernity and of waste that might not be able to produce the desired outcomes in scholarship (whether in history or other disciplines) that the author has in mind.

This definition of waste as, in essence, the Derridian present absence of modernity, is rooted in a concept of modernity, such as Bauman's, that equates it with a desire for order. For Bauman, chaos, ambiguity are inherent in nature and the project of modernity is to order, control and manage this chaos by classifying and sorting, in sum, by disciplining it through the imposition of a cognitive and spatial order. Then, in the works quoted by the author, to the extent that waste is seen as un- or underutilization, as a lack of efficiency and productivity, it gets to be equated with chaos, and modernity comes to be defined as a solution to this chaos. Of course, as the author points out, modernity cannot help but create its own waste. In fact the constant struggle against it now appears as the engine of modernization and progress. While with O'Brien (2007) I welcome any project that wants to re-integrate waste into our concept of the social,¹ I remain skeptical of proceeding exactly the way, the author recommends.

Waste in this paper is understood in a lopsided way: it is reduced to a classificatory or cognitive problem. This impulse has its roots in Douglas' definition of dirt, of course, even though, as the author recognizes, many of those who use her theory have criticized it on a number of issues (O'Brien 2007, Reno 2008, 2009, Gille 2007). Nevertheless, from this definition of waste we conclude with a need for an essentially benevolent notion of waste, i.e. as something that is an inherent part of nature (compare with Bataille 1988)—natural-therefore-good--and of society. From this perspective, our goal should not be to eliminate waste since that has always led to various ills from technocratic domination to cultural imperialism. Of course this revalorization of waste leaves no other conclusion to draw. I share some sympathies with this agenda, since I myself have demonstrated how waste goals can serve oppressive political projects. However, it is one thing to recognize this political utility of waste elimination and quite another that we should not even attempt to eliminate waste, especially a waste that I would define as also having a material embodiment.

I would like us to move away from this over-socialized, or over-culturalized concept of waste and recognize that waste is a material, it has a physical substance and it takes up real space where it interacts with other material entities, including human bodies. As such sometimes it does create very concrete harms for very concrete people (not just the abstract victims of modernization and colonization—as one may be led to conclude from the paper). This is not to deny the social or political construction of waste, but to recognize that the materiality of waste places a limit on its construction or mis-construction, and of course on the concrete—often unintended—consequences of this construction. In my book, for example, I analyzed how the misrecognition of all wastes, including chemical by-products, as metallic—seemingly endlessly reusable or recyclable and non-toxic—in state socialist Hungary created severe ecological effects when chemical companies could neither find reuses nor safe ways to dispose of their by-products.

This recognition should also make us revise our notion of modernity, following Latour, as a project to slice materiality off of the social. In that sense, he argues, we have never been modern, of course. To me the author's effort to tie waste, but only as a cultural-cognitive construct, to modernity is thus well within this Latourian notion of modernity. It ignores waste as material so as to recuperate it as a potentially beneficial 'Other' of modernity—through the metaphorical extension of waste elimination to all types of domination of inefficient, unproductive people and nature.

The other problem with relying so much on Scanlan's "moral economy of waste" idea is that it assumes *a priori* that waste is associated with the so-called negative side of a number of dichotomies, such as efficient/inefficient, productive/unproductive, fertile/sterile, useful/useless, etc. In fact whether this valuation holds should be an empirical question. In my research on socialist Hungary, for example, I found that waste was associated with the so-called positive side of these binaries, which resulted in tangibly different waste practices from those of capitalism—such as state-mandated waste registration, redistribution and reuse. This is despite the fact that, by most definitions, state socialism was also a version of modernity.

To summarize I critiqued the author's concept of waste as over-culturalized, and a Western/capitalist one at that. I also called for a definition of modernity and of waste that takes the agency of materials into account.

While some of my comments may be read as overly critical I made all of them in the spirit of a friendly polemic and with the intention to encourage others to engage with this promising new waste scholarship. There is much to be done! (Thanks Tim and the conference organizers for the opportunity!)

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¹ I myself have argued for a need to redefine the economy in which not only value begets value, but waste also begets waste (Gille 2007, Gille forthcoming).