

Cultural political economy, new materialisms and the world of waste

When we look back at the geographies that have mattered in recent decades – those that have captured imaginations, brought together critical masses, moved knowledge on, made a difference to lives and livelihoods and to the ways in which we work as geographers, to the practice of geography – two developments stand out: the emergence in the 1970s of analyses inspired by Marxian political economy and, rather more recently, what has become known as ‘the cultural turn’. Whilst much subsequent work in both traditions proceeded in parallel, the development of a cultural political economy – in geography, but also in anthropology, sociology and cultural studies - represents a critical manoeuvre. Such work has reinvigorated conceptualisation of economies, of commodities and of value, of the activities that comprise working lives and of regulatory regimes, whilst simultaneously holding to the importance and effects of spatialities. The emphasis, nonetheless, has remained firmly on the immanent realisation of the commodity, in both its particularity and generality. In this session, and in line with the concerns of the ESRC-funded *The Waste of the World* programme, we stretch the boundaries of such conceptualisation, arguing that cultural political economy requires engagement with waste, with waste regimes, with acts of wasting and with acts of accounting. It also insists we take seriously physical materiality, recognising that what stuff is – as well as what it might become- has consequences for what might be done with and to particular things in their wasting, and where. As such, cultural political economy has to confront two fundamental critiques: whilst the original critique of political economy was that it did not do fluidity or meaning, the subsequent critique of the cultural turn was that it was all too immaterial. The key question posed by this session therefore is what might a different materialism look like that is neither one nor the other?

Such issues are not just conceptual. Wastes have profound implications for ways of life in particular places and for the geographical imaginations that underpin them. To live in proximity with wastes, to volunteer to be their custodians, to work with wastes, to handle them, to generate them, is to inhabit the liminalities of the wasteland; to risk contamination, both physical and symbolic. How possible, indeed how positive, are such modes of life? At what costs are they lived? For whom and on behalf of whom? And where in the world are these wastelands? For a Geography that aims to reach out beyond the academy, such are the types of questions that need foregrounding.

Session Organisers

Nicky Gregson (University of Sheffield), Mike Crang (Durham University) & Catherine Alexander (Goldsmiths, University of London)

SESSION 1 – WASTE REGIMES: ECONOMIES AND THE CULT OF WASTE

Paper 1

Waste, scrap and the Chinese economy

Presenter

Adam Minter (Freelance journalist, Shanghai)

It's no accident that the rapid growth of China's economy over the last three decades roughly parallels the growth of its scrap metal imports. Indeed, since 1978 and the inauguration of China's "reform and opening up" period, growth in industrial production required resources that China either doesn't possess, or couldn't extract economically, and so – with a key role played by Hong Kong and Taiwanese scrap traders – China became the world's top importer of first world waste materials. In the process, China has changed the dynamics and direction of the world's waste trade, and its environment. Due to the scale of its economy, and well developed trading relationships, China is positioned to dominate the world's scrap metal and paper markets for at least the coming decade. However, other developing Asian economies – Vietnam and India, in particular – are adjusting their waste import regulations to compete for the first world waste that China used in the development of its own industrial base. If they are successful, China will have pioneered a new form of industrial development; if not, China's example will stand as unique in world economic and environmental history.

Paper 2

Waste regimes of state and postsocialism

Presenter

Zsuzsa Gille (University of Illinois)

Liberal and Marxist treatments of state socialism and postsocialism agree on one thing: that the dominant form of ownership is what has the most significant effect on the political make-up of a social order, including its mode of (ab)using nature. However in my research on Hungary, I have found counterintuitive continuities and similarities between the so-called socialist and capitalist modes of production and

<p>surprising discontinuities within state socialism with regards to ideas of nature, concepts of waste and waste practices. The patterns I found are relatively independent of ownership and have more to do with the natural/material foundations of the economy and attitudes to scientific expertise. I call these patterns waste regimes. In this paper I will define the concept, illustrate its significance, and provide a classification on empirical data from Hungary and the European Union. In conclusion I will draw out the implications for social action.</p>	
Paper 3	Political waste
Presenter	Catherine Alexander (Goldsmiths, University of London)
<p>One of the commonly remarked on changes in 'post-socialist' counties is the increase in the quantity of rubbish and the inability to deal with it. For those unhappy about the turn to a free market, this phenomenon is cited as symptomatic of the effects of individualistic excess and state retraction from effective infrastructural care. The growth of waste rarely finds its way into ethnographies appearing, if at all, as marginal asides by informants. As this paper discusses, waste is a central concern in Almaty, Kazakhstan's former capital. Here, perestroika and the early years of Independence revealed a Soviet legacy of inadequate waste management: until recently, untreated industrial and household wastes were co-located in the city dump next to residential areas. The dump has moved, but the wastes are still untreated: 'a disguised time bomb' in the words of an employee. Many of the local debates on urban pollution have now been shut down, as presidential control over the media tightens. Drawing on ethnographic material from Almaty, this paper uses these discussions and instances of waste to propose an alternative to understanding waste simply as a negative externality. Rather, as one overarching system crumbled and confusion shadowed the introduction of a largely unregulated market economy, this sudden emphasis on waste suggests that waste and value are co-located but, by turn, fore- and back-grounded. In the absence of a coherent story, all that was left was the revelation of obscurity and pollution from both the Soviet and present era.</p>	
SESSION 2 – NEW MATERIALISMS	
Paper 1	Completing the refuse revolution: the politics of 'controlled tipping' in Britain, 1920 - 1960
Presenter	Tim Cooper (University of Exeter)
<p>This paper examines how landfill became the main mode of refuse disposal employed by the British 'waste regime' after the Second World War. It examines the emergence of controlled tipping between the wars as a means of reviving the reputation of tipping, and rescuing dumps from the accusations that they were unhygienic and wasteful by stressing the 'controlled' environment and recuperated landscape created by a controlled tip. The paper then investigates the alliance of controlled tipping technology with the science of bacteriology, which through re-reading the processes of 'decomposition' rescued putrefaction and moulded it into a scientifically controllable process that could have useful effects and whose risks could be ameliorated. Finally the paper investigates the post-war relationship between controlled tipping and amenity and the challenges that arose from the changing character of grass-roots landscape aesthetics which increasingly sought to protect 'wile' and 'derelict' spaces from the land reclamation schemes associated with controlled tipping. It concludes that although landfill became the main means of municipal waste disposal, its hegemony was neither uncontested nor secure. The 'Refuse Revolution' must consequently be seen as a continuing and contested process.</p>	
Paper 2	Plastic materialities – bottled water as commodity and waste
Presenter	Gay Hawkins (University of New South Wales)
<p>Over the last ten years consumption of plastic bottled water has dramatically increased. It is now the fastest growing market in the global beverage industry. In the same period amounts of plastic waste have grown phenomenally. It is obvious that the marketing of water in disposable containers involves not simply the creation of new values for water, and the promotion of new drinking habits but also, complex disavowals of the material recalcitrance of plastic bottles. Far from being just a food fad, the ubiquitous presence of plastic bottles, full and empty, reveals the fundamental intersections between commodity and waste.</p> <p>My claim in this paper is that in selling bottled water the brute materiality of the bottle has to be diminished. Bottled water marketing has to deny the links between drinking and disposing. The bottle of water, marketed for its convenience, has its imminent future as rubbish inscribed in its very plastic materiality but this connection between the bottle as access to health/life and the bottle as waste has to be suppressed. While bottles are promoted as enhancing the healthy status of the consumer, identifying them as 'responsible' in networks of person/thing exchanges, the capacity of the bottle in these configurations is as a convenient and portable resource for being. This is the aspect of plastic materiality that is enrolled in these arrangements. However, the moment that the water is drunk the stubborn materiality of the bottle is confronted as waste. In the temporal logics of disposability the <i>persistence</i> of matter after single use has to</p>	

be aggressively disavowed. This is because the symbolic value of the commodity, of the clear plastic bottle signifying health, purity and portability, collapses in the face of recalcitrant waste plastic and its serious environmental impacts.

This paper explores the potency of the plastic bottle in two settings: branding and recycling. How does the bottle perform in each of these settings? How does it invite different calculations about what counts as 'healthy' or 'natural'? The economic power of the branded bottle frames 'natural water' as both timeless purity and essential to the vital character of human health. In this process the industrial mediations of collecting, bottling, transporting and disposing are completely disavowed. In contrast, governmental recycling programs invite drinkers to confront the stubborn materiality of the empty bottle and do their bit for a nature besieged by waste. In each of these assemblages the bottle generates different natures, different social-material practices and different political and ethical concerns about how should one live.

Paper 3	Panel discussion
Presenter	Nicky Gregson (University of Sheffield), Mike Crang, Ray Hudson (Durham University)