

Letter to Editor

TREATING THE SYMPTOM? A MARXIST REFLECTION ON 'ZERO WASTE' AND SARDINIA 2019 SYMPOSIUM

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ABSTRACT

Written as a reflection on Sardinia 2019, the purpose of this letter is to draw attention to a perceived failure within waste management studies to adequately engage with the socio-economic and socio-political conditions that drive the production of waste. By way of a solution, it proposes a return to Marxist dialectics and modes of analysis in order to reframe contemporary debates on waste management practices to include more critical discussion and engagement with the root causes of waste, specifically capitalist production and class- addressing the illness rather than merely treating the symptoms.

1. INTRODUCTION

"Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not owners of the earth, they are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations, as boni patres familias."

-Karl Marx (1981), *Capital, Volume III*

Within waste management academic discourse, Marxist reflections on the interplay between waste and society are rare. Even from disciplines prone to ground their analyses in critical social theory, such as anthropology and geography, Marxist modes of analysis, based on class relations and social conflict, are infrequently utilised. The reasons for the unpopularity of Marx within the field are unclear. One explanation could be that researchers, working within an inherently multi- and inter-disciplinary space, aim to avoid excessive theorising in order to make their work as accessible to as broad an audience as possible. Another reason could be the historically close partnerships that waste management scholars, and the STEM disciplines more broadly, have fostered with industry, and the financial and technological interdependence that has resulted. It can be hard to be critical of funders, and too often research agendas are tailored to meet the objectives of the capitalist class.

Material considerations aside, a final possible explana-

tion, as articulated by Foster (1998), could be Marx's often contentious reputation on environmental issues, having been accused of subscribing to an overly 'productivist' view of history and labour (see Benton, 1989; Giddens, 1981) or being fundamentally anti-ecological (see Clark, 1989; Ferkiss, 1993). These criticisms have been controversial however, as a number of influential scholars, such as John Bellamy Foster and David Harvey, have maintained the opposite, insisting that a fundamental appreciation for the limits of growth and the perils of environmental degradation are inborn within Marx's basic formations of both communism and capitalism, and that an early conception of stewardship and sustainability is inherent within his vision for future societies, as the quote at the top section alludes (see Foster, 1998, 2010; Harvey, 1996). Regardless of the reason, Marx's lack of popularity within waste management studies is unfortunate, as, according to this author, it is a field that is in serious need of more critical and theoretically-grounded debate on the economic systems that continue to allow for the creation of unprecedented amounts of waste and the socio-political factors that serve as barriers to accessing waste management services.

This letter has been written in the wake of the 17th International Waste Management and Landfill Symposium, held in Sardinia, Italy between 30 September and 04 October, 2019. It is meant to serve as a reflection on the nearly 600 studies presented at Sardinia 2019, as well as a critical observation of intellectual trends within waste manage-



ment studies. It is not meant as a criticism of any specific piece of work, rather it's in response to a perception by the author of a broader failure within the field to critically engage with the root causes of waste, namely capitalist production and accumulation, as well as a lack of nuanced analysis of class, one of the most significant socio-economic factors predicating access to waste management services, particularly within the Global South (Cornea et al., 2017; Getahun et al., 2012; Nda & Tilley, 2018; Oyekale, 2015). Although Sardinia 2019 featured discussions on numerous innovations in waste management practices and technologies, it is my opinion that we, as a discipline, remain overly orientated towards simply managing one of the many societal consequences of capitalism, i.e. waste, without questioning or challenging its legitimacy or sustainability- essentially treating the symptom without addressing the illness.

Materialist criticisms of waste management studies aside, it is beyond the scope and scale of this piece to highlight all of the ways in which greater engagement with Marxist dialectics could add value to such a broad, international, and multi-disciplinary field. Rather, by way of example, I present a brief critique of the 'zero waste' paradigm; both as a set of principles guiding the redesign of resource life cycles within a circular economy, as well as a movement or lifestyle that shifts the emphasis of action to consumers, in order to highlight the depth of socio-economic and socio-political analysis currently lacking within the discipline. Although Marx's writings have been used as an analytical lens to critique the circular economy, notably by Valenzuela and Böhm (2017), critical Marxist critiques of the zero waste lifestyle movement have been absent within academic discourse, and this silence is particularly notable because critiques are taking place, often eloquently, on social media platforms. It is time for us, the academic community, to contextualise and elevate these discussions.

2. 'ZERO WASTE'

'Zero waste' as a concept has evolved beyond academic peroration to the level of normative buzzword that can be adapted to suit a specific objective or agenda (see Specter, 2019, for instance). As such, a variety of definitions exist for the term, depending on the primary focus area of the application, however, they can all be generalised to include an emphasis on waste prevention, re-use, and the comprehensive use of resources (Cole et al., 2014). On examination, two major manifestations¹ of the concept can be discerned within contemporary discourse. First, there is the notion of 'zero waste', as embraced within the confines of Sardinia 2019²: a set of principles for academics and waste management practitioners to guide the redesign of product life cycles so as to eliminate waste and maximise the recovery of resources, in line with the idea of a circular economy (Franco-Garcia et al., 2018). The second manifestation of 'zero waste', as a lifestyle or movement, is even more nebulous, but has resonated more profoundly within popular discourse. Touted in countless books, blogs, websites, and social media pages, the 'zero waste' lifestyle movement shifts responsibility for waste minimisation to

consumers, advocating for more sustainable living through reduced consumption of single use products³, re-use, and recycling (see Cohen, 2017; Johnson, 2013; Korst, 2012; Moss 2018). Less of a scientific methodology than a set of beliefs and best practices, the lifestyle movement broadens the narrative of 'zero waste' from the exclusive domain of industry and waste management practitioners towards a platform for collective action (see Figure 1).

Certainly, both aspects of the 'zero waste' paradigm have positive features- treating waste as a resource and instilling greater personal responsibility for waste minimisation are undoubtedly social goods. However, these narratives, as Valenzuela and Böhm (2017) describe, have also served to de-politicise the discourse around the unsustainability of capitalism, enabling ever increasing levels of consumption and waste, while legitimising unsustainable production and notions of limitless growth⁴. Moreover, this depoliticisation of capitalism reinforces class structures, a consequence that is explicit within the 'zero waste' lifestyle movement which shifts the burden of sustainability from capital to labour (see Harvey, 2014; Yates 2011).

In regards to the manifestation of 'zero waste' bound to the circular economy and widely discussed at Sardinia 2019, Valenzuela and Böhm (2017) provide a valuable example of how a Marxist reading or analytical approach can be utilised to broaden an investigation of waste or waste management practices to include thoughtful critique of the socio-economic and socio-political systems that underpin them. Their analysis fuses Marxist critique with psychoanalytic readings from French psychiatrist Jacques Lacan in order to interpret the materialist dynamics that place actors in the position to both produce and consume waste as a commodity, as well as the subjectivity that lies at the heart of waste as a socially constructed concept. The objective of their critique is the re-politicisation of waste, as a step towards interrupting the endless repetition of its creation, management, and attempts to eradicate it.

Valenzuela and Böhm's (2017) case study critically examines the circular strategies of Apple Inc., a globally iconic brand and one of the world's largest producers of e-waste. Over the past decade the company has espoused a significant commitment towards 'zero waste' principles, to the point where its dedication to circularity has become central to its corporate ethos. According to Valenzuela and Böhm (2017, p. 46), both the design and features of Apple many products display an attempt towards 'zero-waste' optimisation and timelessness, "everything is engineered to perfection, mimicking nature's wasteless cycles and systems." Apple branding and marketing leans into this perception, with products prominently featuring recycling logos, as well as graphics of leaves, trees and other representations of nature (beyond the obvious apple motif). Within Valenzuela and Böhm's (2017) Marxist-Lacanian frame of analysis, such a green and guilt-free imaginary is irresistible to the consumer searching for affirmation in a world inundated with commodities, waste, and recycling bins. They interpret this brand of circularity as a contradiction-engine in a Marxist-Lacanian sense; affirmation drives the subject to consume further, but the reality of the unpackaged product,



FIGURE 1: Zero waste meme derived from a quote by Anne-Marie Bonneau (Irwin, 2019).

designed to swiftly decay into obsolscence, cannot match the enjoyment derived from opting into the discourse on circularity, contributing to a disenchantment that can only be endured by further reinforcing of the trust in the guarantees of circularity espoused by the Apple brand and perpetuated by the endless purchase-consume-discard cycle (Valenzuela & Böhm, 2017). In their critique of growth capitalism and the circular economy, Valenzuela and Böhm (2017, p. 48) find the example of Apple powerful because it is illustrative of the way, as they state, “the image of a wasteless post-growth economy is never far away from the affective enjoyment that capital’s ‘green’ rhetoric seeks to command in the experience of the sustainability-way consumer.” For the repoliticisation of waste to emerge, the

endless cycle of consumption must be interrupted. Thus, the re-politicisation of waste must entail the interruption of the self-affirming sustainable image of consumption that is enabled through the purchase of ‘green’ commodities (Valenzuela & Böhm, 2017).

Valenzuela and Böhm’s (2017) commentary directly confronts the contradictions inherent in the notions of sustainable capitalist production and consumption which lie at the heart of the ‘zero waste’/circular economy paradigm. Their critique echoes the Marxist notion of the ‘fetishisation’ of consumption, what Harvey (2014) and Yates (2011) have characterised as a yearning for the facades of the exchangeable fruits of labour, such as luxury goods and name brands, which serve to mask the loss of one’s

own humanity that occurred during their production and subsequent exchange. To Valenzuela and Böhm (2017), sustainability can be seen as having been driven to the logical conclusion of this fetishisation of consumption when it in turn is transformed into fetishised content, typified by Apple's 'green' and guilt-free imaginary and its hordes of devoted fans who line the streets for each new product release, and becomes an essential part of the discourse and practice through which capitalism organises and legitimises itself. Their critique has been highlighted because it adds, what I feel, is important and critically needed theoretical and ontological depth to waste management discourses and provides a good example of how Marxist analysis remains relevant within our field.

In regards to the 'zero waste' lifestyle or movement, however, no such critique has emerged from academia, although criticism has been mooted within online blogs, editorials, and other journalistic platforms (see Sattlegger, 2019; Tan, 2019, for example). As previously described, the 'zero waste' lifestyle centres on a platform of waste minimisation, what best-selling author Bea Johnson (2013) has termed her five R's of waste avoidance: refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle, and rot. Within this paradigm, sustainability is an individualised responsibility, where each consumer is encouraged to make decisions deemed best for society. Sustainable consumption becomes both the illness and the cure. However, as Sattlegger (2019) notes, this individualisation of responsibility also serves to trivialise structural barriers (such as capitalist production and class) to a sustainable society.

When responsibility has been individualised within a capitalistic system it is left to the market to initiate or respond to changes in consumption patterns, and in regards

to the 'zero waste' movement, the market has responded enthusiastically, offering a wide-range of products, such as metal straws, re-usable coffee cups, and glass jars, to name a few, to facilitate a consumer's transition to a 'zero waste' lifestyle (see Figure 2). This capitalistic response reveals the sustainable consumption contradiction that lies at the heart of the 'zero waste' movement. Moreover, as Tan (2019) points out, these products often have more significant environmental impacts in their production and disposal than the single-use products they were designed to replace. Thus, the movement has not served to disrupt consumption, rather to refocus it in other, more environmentally ambiguous directions. For consumers, a 'zero waste' lifestyle and the myriad of 'sustainable' consumption practices it has spawned may lead to a clear conscience- Valenzuela and Böhm's (2017) fetishisation of sustainability- but for capital, the sustainable consumption contradiction has instead functioned to bolster capitalistic production, opening up new markets for purposely-designed goods and providing a green-washed public image burnished by the veneer of sustainable production (Sattlegger, 2019).

Finally, the 'zero waste' movement cannot be analysed without interrogating the role that its complicated relationship with capitalistic production and consumption plays in discounting, and often aggravating, class dynamics and inequality. The 'zero waste' movement individualises action, but as Sattlegger (2019) rightly notes, different distributions of income, wealth and knowledge create disparities between individual's freedom for action. For the poor, the difficulties of coping with the challenges that emerge within everyday life often leave little room for considerations to sustainable consumption. For instance, how much freedom does an individual in a rural area, with little time



"At what point does it stop being sustainable?"

FIGURE 2: A critique of the consumption inherent in the 'zero waste' lifestyle movement (Larson, 2019).

and few financial resources, have to make sustainable choices? They simply consume what is available from a limited range of market options. Thus, a 'zero waste' lifestyle has largely become the preserve of the privileged: a small group of rich and highly educated consumers who have the time and resources to affect such a change in living. As Tan (2019), notes, even if these privileged individuals successfully become 'zero waste' (ignoring the problem of consumption), it does not discount their disproportionate environmental impacts in other areas, such as energy and CO₂ emissions, or negate the class disparity and social inequality that equipped them to make the change to begin with. These critiques raise a number of questions that the 'zero waste' movement has not been able to adequately answer, for instance: how much should the poor be concerned with waste management challenges caused by the rich, and can they be faulted for aspiring to similar patterns of consumption? This remains a fertile space for grounded theoretical discussion within waste management studies. Moreover, these critiques point to the inherent intersectionality of these debates, challenging prospective researchers to consider the ways in which their points of analysis may mask potentially classist, racist, ableist, sexist, or other discriminating narratives.

3. MOVING FORWARD

In a Marxist waste management discourse, the underlying social structures that drive the creation of waste and structural access to waste management services must be examined. Marxist waste management studies should also attempt to change the basic structures of society. However, these conversations are not currently happening within our field, and most seem content to merely engage with waste as a point of reality, rather than engage with it as a consequence of our socio-economic and socio-political systems, that may or may not be fundamentally illegitimate⁵.

Why are these discussions not happening in spaces such as *Sardinia 2019*, and why has Marx proved unpopular as an analytical lens within the discipline? I previously offered a number of possible explanations including the multi-disciplinarity of waste management studies, its historically close relationship with capital⁶, and Marx's often criticised take on the environment. Regardless of the reason, it is important to note that outside of academia, on various social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, these conversations are occurring, and often with the nuanced dialectical understanding of class-structures and capitalistic power dynamics which academics and practitioners within waste management studies have too frequently ignored. For instance, *Intersectionelle*, a Canadian-based Facebook page launched in 2013, regularly features class-conscious critiques of the 'zero waste' movement in addition to a wide range of left of centre content. Their response to the meme of the quote by Anne-Marie Bonneau cited previously properly centres the role of the capitalist class in the creation of our global waste crisis, and attempts to reframe the solution from a movement towards individual action to one for systemic change

and class awareness- jokes on 'consumption' aside (see Figure 3). *Green Memes for Communalist Dreams*, another Facebook page that traffics heavily in memes, promotes a broader social ecology platform and often posts content critical of liberal environmentalism, green capitalism, and the sustainability movement. Finally, *Turning Green*, on Instagram, although promoting content catered to those pursuing a 'zero waste' lifestyle does so with an intersectionality and class-awareness atypical of similar pages. These are just a few of the many critical voices that have proliferated across social media that have spoken specifically to the 'zero waste' movement. Although I'm reluctant to assign too much weight to individual commentators, nonetheless, it is important to not discount the power of these platforms to shape public discourse, as well as to reflect broader undercurrents of discontent within society with our current global socio-economic systems (see Ballantyne, 2017). Finally, these critiques of 'zero waste' are more poignant for their absence within waste management academic circles, which should be best positioned to contextualise and inform public debate.

The purpose of this letter has not been to comment critically on individual pieces of work. Rather, it has been written to reflect on how Marxist frames of analysis might reframe contemporary debates on waste management practices to include more critical discussion and engagement with the root causes of waste- rather than merely treating the symptoms. Moreover, the work of Valenzuela and Böhm (2017), has been highlighted as one of the few examples of how Marx's writings have been utilised as an analytical lens within our field, and as a successful blueprint for waste management academics who feel that some level of Marxist critique may add depth to their analysis. Not every scholarly contribution within waste management studies needs to include nuanced class critique or make an original theoretical contribution, particularly those coming from the STEM disciplines, nonetheless, there is certainly room for broader multi-disciplinary awareness and concern for the systemic socio-economic and socio-political conditions that created, and continues to create, our waste problem. A thought to Marx may help.

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FIGURE 3: A class-conscious critique of zero waste from social media (Intersectionelle, 2019).

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¹ A third, but lesser discussed manifestation of the 'zero waste' movement has also been discerned in the opposition to waste to energy, i.e. incineration, in the European Union.

² Sardinia 2019, for instance, featured multiple panels and lectures on the circular economy, in addition to more than a dozen papers. It would be impossible to list them all. Please refer to the conference proceedings for a complete list.

³ This distinction is important, as the movement remains profoundly materialist, with most 'zero waste' lifestyle platforms sporting a wide range of products available for sale in order to facilitate more sustainable living.

⁴ Doeland (2019, 1), in a recent editorial for *Detritus*, also alludes to the danger of 'zero waste' narratives normalising and destigmatising unsustainable capitalist consumption, noting that "the resourcification of waste strips it of its power as a doomsayer urging us to curb our consumption".

⁵ One notable exception, that often contains highly innovative and creative academic and research-based discussion of these issues is Discard Studies. Serving as an online hub for scholars, activists, environmentalists, and other communities engaged in waste, Discard Studies provides a platform for critical and informed discussion around the relationships between waste and society, contextualised within broader sociocultural-economic analysis. Their monthly compilation 'The Dirt' seeks to assemble recent articles, job postings, and calls for participation relevant within the discipline.

⁶ This dynamic alone could be a worthwhile object of critical inquiry.