

Info from the global world

THE SOURCE OF WASTE AND THE END OF WASTE: COVID-19, CLIMATE, AND THE FAILURE OF INDIVIDUAL ACTION

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After COVID 19, time to have a specific column on developing countries is over: the pandemic highlighted - if ever necessary - the need to think as a whole.

The new corner called "Info from the global world" wants to collect thoughts and impressions from different parts of the world, with the aim of promoting cultural intersections on issues affecting circular waste management, environmental protection and human health. We will discuss how gender inequality and environmental racism can also be combated through truly sustainable waste management and how the circular economy and Sustainable Developing Goals can contribute to worsening already precarious situations.

The first issue concerns COVID19, supplementary article to the editorial of this first issue of Detritus after the start of the global health emergency.

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The Covid-19/Coronavirus pandemic, which has gripped the globe for the first half of 2020, has patently demonstrated the fallacy of emphasising the role of individual action as a determinant step in addressing our waste and climate change challenges. Throughout the first half of 2020, as states across the globe have enforced lockdowns, quarantines, and stay-at home orders, individuals have retreated: into themselves, as social connections grow distant, and from public space into private, domestic life. On a societal level, we have witnessed a collective experiment to determine how much any one person can do to reduce their level of consumption and individual carbon footprint: no air travel and severely curtailed travel by car; shuttered shops and malls leading to fewer purchases; restaurants and entertained venues closed, driving individuals to creative ways to entertain and feed themselves within their homes, and; renewed interest in urban farming and household food production, etc. Yet, although these actions have all surely added up, and carbon emissions have visibly dipped (see (UNEP, 2019), it has not been enough.

The Covid-19 pandemic has revealed the true depths of our climate crisis, and has starkly illustrated the changes necessary to correct our catastrophic trajectory. Of course, the pandemic has been accompanied with positive environmental impacts. Though many of the fantastic stories of ecological regeneration and renewal that have circulated on social media have proven to be fabrications or wishful thinking (and have often carried less than subtle eco-fascist tones, as well), the air quality impacts of stay-at-home orders in major cities, for instance, have been very real,

and for residents, highly visible (see (Chen et al., 2020)). Nonetheless, despite the radical changes that many individuals across the globe have accepted to their lives and livelihoods, which have collectively forestalled hundreds of millions of tonnes of CO₂ emissions, these individual efforts will not be enough to prevent further global heating. A 2019 report by the UNEP paints this picture unambiguously. According to models based on current carbon-cutting pledged, they estimate that we can expect a potentially disastrous 3.2oC rise in global temperatures over pre-industrial levels by 2030 (UNEP, 2019). To achieve a moderate and hopefully more manageable, warming rate of only 1.5o they estimate that total annual emissions would need to be cut by 7.6%.

And yet....

Despite this knowledge, the numerous existing carbon reduction agreements in place, and the historically unprecedented impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, analysis by Carbon Brief (2020) suggests global emissions for 2020 are only expected to drop by approximately 5.5%. This sharply reveals the limits of individual action. Travelling less helps, but not enough to make a difference. Differences in purchasing, consumption, and choice, limited without our current crisis, have not been enough to meaningfully shift the climate change equation. There is of course nuance to the data. For instance, a 5.5% reduction is preferable to the likely increase in total annual carbon dioxide emissions we would be facing in a normal year, and keeps us further from the more precarious consequences of a 2o or

30 increase. However, these are near-impossible choices to have to make, and in a time of such overwhelming hardship and grief for so many across the globe, society must be driven to think bigger, and do better. As Valentine (2020) observed, individuals are currently doing about as much as you could reasonably ask from them, and it has not been enough. Individual action is not the solution to our climate crisis and it will not be the solution to our waste crisis.

Waste management academic discourse has historically centred on the role of individual agency within our interrelated waste and crises. For instance, a brief literature search reveals multiple authors linking increased personal consumption (often within nations in the Global South) to the creation of unprecedented amounts of waste, inundating our rivers and oceans with plastic (see (Sanni, 2019; Van Rensburg et al., 2020; Zambrano-Monserrate & Ruano, 2020)). However, often, within these narratives, individual action is also presented as the panacea, through sustainable choice and switching to multiple-use products, the consumer is presented as both the cause and the solution to waste (see (Cohen, 2017; Moss, 2018; Willis et al., 2019)). Likewise, individuals have also often been represented as the linchpin around which our waste management systems turn. We may be the cause of waste, but if we source separate, reuse, and recycle we can all become cogs in a more circular economy (Bernstad, 2014; Khattab & El Hagggar, 2016; Roustia et al., 2016; Zoroufchi Benis et al., 2019). This outlook has also become entrenched at the intersection between waste and climate change. By choosing to go 'zero waste' we can each reduce our individual carbon footprint, and do our part to combat climate change (see (Korst, 2012; Song et al., 2015; Wunsch & Simon, 2018)). Within these narratives, the individual has become both the problem and the solution: the source of waste and the 'end of waste'; the protagonist, antagonist, and deus ex machina of the climate change story. This observation is not meant to cynically detract from the power of the individual as a force for positive change. Moreover, we should be sceptical of any attempt to deny agency to any community, particularly the most marginalised and vulnerable. However, by shifting responsibility to the individual, we fundamentally ignore the systemic, socio-economic, and socio-political conditions that have created, and continue to create, our interrelated waste and climate problems. While small steps are important, and studies which centre individual action certainly remain interesting or potentially illuminating, they are, as Tallie (2020) points out, inherently non-transformative. Rather they tend to individualise responsibility for ecological failure instead of pointing to the large structural oppressions of global capitalism.

Others within our field have, within recent years, tried to widen the scope of analysis to account for the systemic factors driving waste creation and management globally. For instance, Doeland (2019) has alluded to the danger of 'zero waste' narratives normalising and destigmatising unsustainable capitalist consumption, while Hawkins (2019) and Loibron (2014) have written on disposability as a fundamental (in-disposable), component of modern capitalist economies. Moreover, within the context of Covid-19, Kalina and Tilley (2020) have discussed the in-

herent structural inequalities within waste management systems globally, which have, and will continue to, shape different nations' ability to respond to the pandemic. I myself, have advocated for a return to Marxist analytics within waste management discourses, in order to foster greater critical engagement with class and capitalist production and accumulation, as the principal barrier to access for waste management services, and the root cause of waste, respectively (Kalina, 2020). However, although these modes of analysis have begun to gain traction within waste management discourses, it has taken a crisis to emphasise the urgent need for broad-based, systemic socio-economic change. Meaningful change can only be structural change, and as academics, we must adjust the focus of our analyses towards informing a more just transition.

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