

JOURNAL FÜR ENTWICKLUNGSPOLITIK

vol. XXXV 2/3-2019

WASTE AND GLOBALISED INEQUALITIES

Special Issue Guest Editors: Nicolas Schlitz, Stefan Laser

Published by:
Mattersburger Kreis für Entwicklungspolitik
an den österreichischen Universitäten

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KATHRIN EITEL

Matter in and out of Place:

A Story About Wastefulness, Hybridity, and Flows of Plastic

Wasted, discarded things and rubbish all over the world. A global problem with which we are all connected. According to a study conducted over more than three years (Jambeck et al. 2015), plastics are in our oceans, creating garbage islands, contaminating seawater, and are a serious threat to the world's environment. Therefore, plastic and its debris are highly visible in scientific and societal discourses and common knowledge. Looking from a different perspective of waste and its debris, especially in its relation to question of what is (from) human and what not, we may, from a phenomenological perspective, examine different angles of the visibility and non-visibility of plastic. The unwanted, or the dirt, which is called a 'matter out of place', according to Mary Douglas (2001 [1966]), is omnipresent. But if dirt is out of place for one person, couldn't it conversely then be *in* place for someone else? The following photo-essay aims to answer this question while focusing on the visibility and invisibility of material waste in its environment. Concretely, it allows an insight into the ecology of waste.

1. A delusive paradise

A vast and increasing amount of garbage can be discovered along Cambodia's coasts. Discarded items litter the beaches and stick themselves to its land – even though most of the washed up garbage does not come from Cambodia itself, nor has it been produced here. It comes mainly

from countries of the north, where it was manufactured and then sold to enterprises around the world. Every day, masses of waste products are transported across the sea and washed ashore on long beaches, patterned in colourful plastic shreds and adorned with flip-flops. Hair shampoos, fragments of former Styrofoam packaging, plastic bottles, fishing hooks and nets in all colours: crushed, deformed, dismembered. Gone with the wind, dissolved in the oceans of the world, the deformed garbage reaches the last stop of its journey. And it whispers of what it has experienced.

On a small island in the south of the country, about one hour by speedboat away from a popular destination for Cambodians, the former French colonial city *Kep*, lies the island of *Koh Seb*. *Koh Seb* has about 50 residents, depending on the season. The island is small. And, depending on tides and annual rhythms, it is flooded with garbage from the West or the East – constantly. Here, a small centre of dedicated people opened their doors some years ago, aiming at the conservation of marine cultures and fighting against the fringing coral reef directly in front of their door. In a study, the centre identified 25% of the coral which were bleached during 2016 (Reid/Haissoune/Ferber 2017: 1). While focusing on the conversation of aquatic environments in the sea, they have also inevitably taken on the task of keeping large parts of the island clean from garbage. This also includes the daily accumulation of silt. Marine cultures are also threatened by ghost nets forgotten by fishermen, who leave them at sea after using them. Those nets figure as sometimes deadly traps for fish and marine birds. *Koh Seb* is just one island in a growing number of islands, which face the threatening growth of unwanted materials – especially plastic – in the world's oceans. However, due to the active engagement with washed-up rubbish by people inhabiting the island, the entanglement of the global interrelatedness of this matter, which are visible or non-visible from different angles, seem very graphic.

“We find everything here”, one person tells me, while we're walking by the blazing mountain of plastic flip-flops, ready to burn out and leave nothing else visible for our eyes on the beach. “If we don't clean twice a week, we have a serious garbage problem on the island”, he continues, and points to a wooden house at the other side of the island. “Here, we are not allowed to clean, because the Vietnamese police officers, who are situated at this house, allow no one to enter the area”. He shrugs his shoulders

and goes back to pick up things with the other helpers, who have already cleaned up some metres while we've been talking. I'm looking around: most of the garbage that finds itself in the sand next to the palm trees comes directly from Vietnam or China. In the dusk of the rising morning fog, one sees the extent of the debris washed up over the previous night, while in the background Vietnam's most popular tourist destination, *Phú Quốc*, stretches itself along the horizon.

The wrappings reveal their original manufacturing facility, which are from Danone or Coca Cola, which produces the bottled water Dasani, and ranges from Vietnamese and Thai shampoo packaging to sweets and rice sacks. The waste has travelled long distances without any further action of its producer, but ultimately didn't get disposed of. In this case, the garbage is not carried away by paid operators to poorer countries, as is often the case, for example, within the recycling industry or in the flow of e-waste, but rather it sets off on its own. *Koh Seh* and its inhabitants therefore have to deal with an unusually high amount of foreign waste. This small island becomes the representative cumulative place for various practices, tactics, and tides. The garbage collected here is not the only a representation of global inequality; it also reproduces it.

2. In-/visibility of waste

If we think of waste – and especially plastic – it is indispensable to look at its origin, and its possible 'ending' in a timescale as well as in our socioeconomic system, in which it is embedded. The discarded here is, therefore, not only waste in a material sense, but also in its meanings (Discard Studies 2019), pointing to the inherent character of waste of *being* somewhere – in or out of place, depending on one's perspective (in-/visibility). Hereby, I'd like to differentiate between the measurement scales of time and place, arguing that waste is, under the belt of a decreasing time 'slot', de/fragmenting (time), while it is discarded in respect to social interactions and economic flows (place). If waste is out of place, it becomes invisible in a literal sense. Out of one's sight, there seems no necessity anymore to follow and trace the discarded.

When waste is discarded by someone, it happens according to a cultural habit within a system of social and moral injunctions – as Mary Douglas (2001 [1966]: 3) has pointed out. “I believe that some pollutions are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order”. Or, to put it briefly: to structure our daily life. Wasting fulfils us with pleasure, says Douglas, but also with an experience of virtue, a concrete practice which gives the action of discarding waste a moral dimension (Hawkins 2006: 93). This happens intentionally. Waste, or dirt, becomes matter out of place, which is, to say it in Douglas’ (2001 [1966]: 36) words, “(...) the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements”. Traditionally, it then got burned, reused, or buried; yet this is no longer valid for a transnational and globally connected digital world, where waste goes its own (partially still very unclear ways) only to end up in another place from whence it originated: on the island of *Koh Seng*, in fishs’ stomachs or on our plates. In short, it’s everywhere. This common image of wandering plastic becomes graphic in the case of *Koh Seng*, where people pick up waste from the beaches, in their living places and their direct environment, for the sake of conserving marine cultures and their own well-being.

When people from the conservation centre start their weekly waste collection tour, they separate each piece of waste according to its type, count it, and then partially burn it. Aluminium cans are held back and sold later to the mainland once every few weeks. “We have no other possibility than to burn all that stuff!” answers one informant when asking her why they burn it, causing, with that, direct harm to the CO₂ household and the atmosphere. “We cannot collect these mountains of garbage here each week and then bring it to the mainland to dump it there. And there will be no one taking all these things over”, she adds. Waste here is visible for everybody; it lies around in its colourful or already bleached wrappings, and even at the start of its decomposition process. Still, these materials are seen as waste, as something unwanted, unusable – and as something one has to get rid of. After the cleaning process, the beaches seem clean. Nevertheless, bending one’s knee and having a closer look, one might still see small and tiny pieces of plastic, which haven’t been collected because there’s not the time, nor the amount of people to pick up everything washed ashore from all over the world. While locals of the island

collectively dispose of waste, they put it further to another place, either as particles into the atmosphere, or as leftovers, which are eventually washed into the sea again. What happens here is the transformation of place that waste goes throughout the world – coming “from somewhere” in the world through sewages and from the seawaters to the island, where human and non-humans have to deal with it.

This intended action of discarding waste is putting waste, respectively its fragments, into another place, where it becomes invisible to our eyes; yet, time and environmental conditions are the constant companions of waste. So, plastic is not per se toxic, but when it meets other agents (sun, fish or water), it ‘translates’ itself and constructs a new hybrid form of *natureculture*. In the process, the shampoo bottle becomes plastic debris and then dissolves into particles (micro-/nanoplastic), of different sizes, which disperse to every last corner of the world, either by themselves or as or heteroaggregates mingling with other trace components such as organic matter, trace metal, metal oxides etc. (Gigault et al. 2018: 1032).


Eventually, it’s a process of ‘re-naturalization’, insofar as it merges again, as micro- and especially nanoparticles, with organic and environmental agents. To answer the introductory question: for many living beings, these particles are highly ‘visible’, in the sense of being recognisable, and are used in different ways, as fish eat them or coral reefs die because of the vulnerability created by a single marine plastic token hitting their surface. Material, therefore, is not only active, dynamic, and a present part of our world (Barad 2007), but it assembles and merges itself with other agents, becoming part of our nature again, being waste^x – even if we’re not able to see it anymore. To sum up, what we do see is not only the fatal environmental outcome of our collective actions, but also global inequalities, visible through the simple quantity of waste in a place. The irony of the affluence of society is the abundance of waste in marginalised countries in the world. Moreover, it is pleasant when the garbage disappears from one’s field of vision by being taken away from the land or lost in microscopic invisibility. However, eventually, it does not care about these limits because it follows its own (purely physical, moral-free) global agenda.

3. How to read the essay

The following pictures show the daily practices of discarding and re-using waste by residents of the island, as well as sea level waste^x-pollution and functions. As part of my field research on the infrastructures of waste in Cambodia, those pictures were taken in spring 2017 and are to be understood as seeing the world how I perceived and grasped it while visiting the island. Thus, they are subjective. The knowledge, and how it is produced by the academic text written above, is hereby substantiated by the following pictures. At the same time, the photo-essay sheds another light on the relationship between environment, society, and human practices, and touches on further anthropological and sociological questions.


Photo Essay






The island. Within a grid of tourist places, fisher villages and little towns and its material emissions, the island finds itself within tides and ocean currents, being an attractive spot for many waste materials to land and stay, after traveling a long distance from unknown places.






Here it likes to stay. It flaps in the wind, covers plants and the ground, and hugs the island's curves. It lies one on top of the other, seemingly with no order – over and under plants and stones, on a wooden tray or in a tree's branches – getting used to being a part of the island. With the help of storms, wind, and weather circumstances, the plastic only moves further. A shoe tread may be used as a fast-track to another place, children's fingers enclose quick pinkish materials, which function now as a toy, or animals carry waste unconsciously in their fur while they wander around.






Empty plastic water bottles, tiny shampoo bottles, colorful soft drink and milk bottles, and cardboard packages paired with cosmetic leftovers, tubes, and little tins and boxes pattern the island's surface. In between pieces of styrofoam, fragmented and unidentifiable materials of plastic and parts of fishing nets and gear lie awkwardly among bamboo branches and twigs, brownish stones and dead fallen leaves.






This is the time when the team of the conservation centre starts cleaning, because they know that the longer plastic, styrofoam and cardboard lie around, the faster they fragment into tiny pieces and either flow back into the ocean or are taken over by other agents on land.






Here, a young woman is collecting styrofoam, which she, after the rice bag is full, brings to a weighing scale, which is carried by residents to every single collection activity. The weight of the gathered material is then inserted into a form for documentation, which is eventually sent to *Trash Free Seas*, a programme of the NGO *Ocean Conservancy*¹.






After weighing, the majority of trash is burned. The practice of burning waste is often used in Cambodia in order to quickly get rid of trash in huge amounts. Especially in rural areas, where no infrastructure of (further) waste collection exists, people frequently burn their waste. This common practice is a direct hazard to human health, as it releases huge amounts of toxic gases and particles of dirt. It also pollutes the air with the carbon dioxide produced. From one place, it goes to another. Ashes, micro- and nanoparticles remain on the ground, while other substances are produced and released into the air.






Some waste materials get eventually upcycled and used for different purposes, as with the filled plastic bags, or plastic bottles, as shown in this picture. After being filled, bottles are bound together to form the shape of a couch.






Additionally, aluminium cans are often saved from the fire and/or collected at households. They are shipped to the mainland to be sold to middlepersons who often transport materials further abroad, for instance, to Vietnam, for recycling.






The beach seems clear now. Flourishing plants have distributed their branches around it, immersing the surface with a green paradisiacal bed. They invite one to lie down for a moment and listen to the whispering waves rippling around the stones: the mediators between what is called land and ocean. On the horizon, a fishing boat follows its route in the rhythm of the clouds, and the paradise unfolds its beauty, embracing everything.





Taking a closer look, tiny whitewashed plastic particles flashing through the green bed break the elusive picture. The picture bursts and shows that waste is part of nature now, too.





The view wanders to the ocean, where a multiplicity of these materials in even more fragmented sizes pervade marine cultures. They merge, assemble, fight, and kill. In different forms and sizes, off- and onshore, plastic shows us that it is hybrid, dynamic and vibrant – it changes its forms and its material, fuses with other agents and separates again. Out of the human perspective, it is still within something's perspective, as it has been shown that fish may consider plastic debris as food (visible), whereas inhabitants of the island don't recognise it as something anymore (invisible).

Even though we cannot always trace and follow it, it is clear: no one is excluded from these effects, not even the humans who once created this material. And it is also clear: that there are different inequalities and underlying power regimes helping to carry waste to certain places, where it is supposed to stay. The residents of the island have to deal with externalities, and it is only due to the fact that they count the waste they collect and are quite active publicly in regards to the conservation of marine culture, that 'their' waste problem hasn't become entirely out of control, yet.

- 1 Ocean Conservancy (2019): Fighting for Trash Free Seas. <https://oceanconservancy.org/trash-free-seas/>, 10.01.2019.

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