

THE WASTE OF THE WORLD

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

The Waste of the World was a five-year programme of work (2006–11) funded by the ESRC. It involved geographers and anthropologists working at the University of Sheffield, Durham University, University College London and Goldsmiths.

Much has been made of consumer-generated wastes – and there have been major programmes rolled out across the UK that have worked to increase household recycling rates. But wastes are also generated by, and integral to, industrial production.

Waste is central to understanding economies, and to economic activity – and it is this that our programme of work has focused on.

The programme pursued its concern with wastes and economies through six projects.

The projects were positioned at various points in relation to waste, recycling, energy recovery and primary commodity production.

This exhibition features our work on two recycling industries – textiles and ship breaking.

Other projects have focused on waste management, and its connection to energy recovery. They looked at nuclear waste and the municipal waste management industries of landfill and incineration, together with a then newly emerging technology, anaerobic digestion.

A further set of projects were concerned with primary commodity production. They focused on steel and the food and drink industry respectively.

More details of these projects are available via our programme website - <http://www.thewasteoftheworld.org>

What the research did

Our research sought to investigate three key aspects of global waste economies.

Our work on textiles and ships looked at the global flows in end-of-life, or spent, goods; their connection to global recycling networks and the articulation of those networks through South Asia, with an emphasis on India and Bangladesh. You can see a lot about this work in various parts of this exhibition.

We examined developments within the EU, which – on the basis of very real concerns about waste dumping, and its effects on people and the environment – have sought to create markets from end-of-life goods and materials recovery in the EU. These new recycling industries pose a challenge to established global markets but also have to compete with them.

We also researched waste economies in the UK – specifically, the burgeoning business of waste management, and its reimagining as resources and as (renewable) energy-from-waste.

What the research shows

Our research on textiles and ships turns attention from thinking about new commodity production, to emphasise that commodities are never done, and that the old becomes the basis for the new – but only via destruction and recovery processes.

Our work shows how value is created through recycling economies. This occurs through sequential and iterative sorting and segregation, based on categories and grading of materials/things.

Through a focus on the work of recycling in different parts of the EU and South Asia, we have examined the type of work that lies behind the recycling industry's self-narrative as clean and green. The exhibition provides graphic details of the type of work that recycling activities creates.

What the research draws attention to

Our focus on global recycling provides a corrective to economic accounts of globalisation which see the relation of Global South to Global North as one in which goods move inexorably from South to North, and then disappear – either at the point of sale, or in their consumption.

Instead, the reality is grittier – as this exhibition shows. And it is not as simple as accounts based on environmental (in)justice frameworks suggest – which is the dumping of wastes on the Global South.

As the exhibition demonstrates, our work has gone to the end-of-the-line with secondary processing, to show what happens to end-of-life things. It shows where and how end-of-life textiles and ships are rekindled, reused, recycled and re-valued; what kinds of goods this work produces; and the jobs that this kind of work creates.

Key issues raised by the research

Our work on global recycling raises a number of issues and questions for current waste debates.

These include:

Recycling work is often dirty and potentially dangerous work, wherever this occurs in the world – and needs to be recognised as such.

Design needs to attend closely to how the things we make and build might come apart – and what things might become.

Secondary materials recovered for recycling are vulnerable to contamination and struggle with issues of quality control.

Interventions that promote recycling work against those that promote re-use and/or waste minimisation.

There is no such thing as a Zero Waste Economy. Rather, many new technologies demand that we generate more waste.

These points are the focus for a set of short presentations by Nicky Gregson, Lucy Norris, Mike Crang, and Catherine Alexander – at 6pm, 20th January 2012 in the Bargehouse.

Key points from each of these talks are attached here s press releases.

ESRC, DURHAM, SHEFFIELD, UCL, GOLDSMITHS

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