WASTE AND SOCIETY

War on Waste?: The Politics of Waste and Recycling in Post-War Britain, 1950-1975*

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Introduction

The history and sociology of waste has recently been the focus of serious critical attention. John Scanlan, in his influential book *On Garbage*, has examined the role of the idea of waste in the making of modernity. In particular he has identified the material and intellectual productions of waste as a product of enlightenment conceptions of efficiency, productivity, and "right use"—a moral economy of waste that lies at the heart of modernity. Scanlan shows that waste has been a central category in the operation of modernity, where the useful is constantly (re)valorized by its distinction from the useless. He places waste at the heart of the ideological operation of modernity, as the means by which value is both produced and contested.

Another crucial insight comes from the work of Zsuzsa Gille, who in *From the Cult of Waste to the Trash Heap of History* has developed a "sociology of waste" that suggests the possibility of a systematic study of the relations between the material reality of waste and its socio-cultural construction. Gille has theorized the existence of "waste regimes," particular modes of valorizing waste and of disciplining subjects in relation to waste. For Gille, waste is as much a social process as a material object, a process in which social relations determine how waste acquires or loses value. Gille proposes a tripartite approach to the study of "waste regimes":

> Waste regimes differ from each other according to the production, representation, and politics of waste. In studying the productions of waste we are asking questions such as what social relations determine waste production and what [are] the material compositions of wastes. When we inquire into the representation of waste, we are asking which side of key dichotomies waste has been identified with, how and why waste's materiality has been misunderstood, and with what consequences. Also to be investigated here are the key bodies of knowledge and expertise that are mobilized in dealing with wastes. In researching the politics of waste, we are first of all asking whether or to what extent waste issues are a subject of public discourse, what is a taboo, what are the tools of policy, who is mobilized to deal with waste issues, and what non waste goals do such political instruments serve. Finally, no waste regime is static, thus we must study them dynamically, as they unfold, as they develop unintended consequences and crises.

It is the final line here which particularly catches the historian's eye. The ideological structure of "waste regimes" are to be seen as *historically constituted.*

The Throwaway Society

Recent sociological and anthropological study has challenged the utility and conceptual importance of the term "throwaway society," a leftist environmental critique

which found particular resonance within the left wing of the British Labour Party. Gregson, Metcalfe, and Crewe, for example, have suggested that the term obscures both the circulation of objects and the ways in which waste is subjected to processes of social revaluation. Others have challenged the assumption that it was technically impossible to deal with the vast amounts of waste created in the 20th century. However, while these insights suggest the need to employ terms like the "throwaway society" and the "waste crisis" with more care, the idea of the "throwaway society" still maintains some critical utility.

The throwaway society, for example, should not be seen simply as any society that generates more waste, but one that makes certain conceptions of disposal central to its identity. This was apparent in the transformation of the British waste regime in the century following the Public Health Act of 1875, which inaugurated a period of professionalization and municipalization of waste disposal services that Luckin terms the "Refuse Revolution." The fetishization of hygiene and its embodiment in new modes of disciplinary and "biopolitical" governance popularized the idea that urban sanitation and waste disposal were essential characteristics of civilized living. By the 1920s, the "litter nuisance" was already an established topic of public discourse, reflecting the increasing cleanliness of cities, which ironically made the presence of disposable packaging waste ever more apparent.

Nonetheless, in the 1920s and 1930s, the British waste regime still retained certain characteristics that were distinctive survivals from an earlier, utilitarian view of the uses of waste. Perhaps the most important of these was the continuance of recycling as a significant mode of municipal refuse disposal. Even as late as the 1950s, domestic refuse was still composed primarily of dust and cinders from household fires, both of which had their uses in either brick-making or land reclamation. Refuse also contained rags, paper, and metals, which could be salvaged. During the Second World War, an effective salvage and recycling system was established, which ensured that varied techniques of waste disposal remained. Post-war shortages ensured the survival of this officially sponsored culture of reuse and thrift into the fifties.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Britain's waste regime was decisively altered, reflecting changes in the social and economic relations of waste production. Between 1939 and 1968, the estimated weight of household waste collected by English municipalities rose by 36 percent, about half of which was due to changes in the standard of living rather than natural growth. However, the most important change was the composition of municipal waste. New packaging materials, which were lighter and more resistant to decomposition, transformed municipal waste. Their influence can be detected in the professional discourses which constructed the "waste problem." Flintoff observed in 1969, for instance, that changing consumption patterns had reduced the density of refuse, and that the increasing volume of municipal waste was the main issue. Some households, he observed, already required two bins for their household refuse, and municipal disposal costs were growing at a rate of 10 percent per annum. The growth in household waste prompted calls for households to "reduce their intake of disposable refuse."

Changes in the waste stream were not only multifactored but also well known. Writing in 1964, Sumner, observed that besides increases in standards of living along with considerably more pre-packaging of foods and other consumer goods, "the extended use of gas, electric and oil heating, the effect of increased flat-dwelling (many flats are heated solely

by electricity or some form of central heating), and the restrictions on the burning of refuse, particularly trade refuse, imposed by Smoke Control Orders" were also significant. The cleansing, or municipal sanitation, superintendent for South Shields noted the impact of modern heating systems on changes in the waste stream:

> The fall in the production of ash is a very noticeable feature. There is no conceivable doubt that the coming into force of the "Smoke Abatement Act" and the creation of smokeless zones will see this decline further accentuated. In addition, the trend of the purveyors of food, whether in tins or packages of cellophane, polythene, Kraft or cartons, has its own impact upon the dustbin content.

Professional public sanitation discourses at the time increasingly emphasized volume as a key problem, citing packaging, rather than ash as an increasing characteristic of household refuse, even though dust and ashes remained the dominant component of household wastes. However, there was also a sense that changing social and economic processes were being made visible in municipal wastes. And it was this visibility that constituted the "throwaway society," a concept that made it possible to read the impact of social and economic changes in the changing material character of waste. Municipal waste thus brought the nascent affluent society and its benefits into the realm of public discussion and critique.

Discourses surrounding pre-packed food products highlighted the relations between the material nature of waste and the changing character of modern capitalist production. Packaging was presented by industry as a desirable innovation that was both modern and hygienic. But packaging was also an absolutely essential factor in overcoming the established taboos of a hygiene-obsessed society, an obsession which made the development and spread of the supermarket distribution system possible. By providing a boundary between the clean and the unclean and allowing customers to individually select and assess items without risk of contamination, packaging enabled the self-service supermarket to function. In 1957 the *Times* noted this relationship between packaged goods and the supermarket:

> The introduction and growth of self-service stores have had a marked impact on packaging ideas. By the nature of this change in retailing methods, goods which were previously delivered in bulk to the retailer have to be pre-packed into individual purchasing units. This has made for more hygienic handling of foodstuffs and has called for a greater degree of attention to package design. It is essential for the commodity to be packed in a manner that makes for easy handling, efficient stacking and ready identification; the brand name must also be easily discernable and the decoration of the container such as will have a competitive eye appeal.

In 1964, Monsanto Chemicals announced large increases in the production of polystyrene, causing the *Times* to observe that

> the announcement spotlights the developments taking place in all forms of the main packaging materials, a section of the economy which is growing faster than manufacturing as a whole. This is not surprising in view of the increasing popularity of packaged and convenience foods and the spread of the supermarket's influence.

By 1970, it was estimated that 7 billion bottles and 6 billion cans were being discarded each year.

As Gille has demonstrated, waste regimes always exist in political contexts, and the choice of ways of "wasting" reflect political priorities and objectives. In post-war Britain, the main political priority affecting the shape of the "waste regime was the commitment of both major political parties to the politics of affluence." Zweiniger-Bargielowska has demonstrated that the Conservative Party successfully challenged Labour's electoral advantage by exploiting dissatisfaction with austerity.

> The condemnation of austerity and promise of consumer freedom and affluence enabled the Conservatives to recapture the middle ground by forging a broad coalition of consumer interests... Labour's vision of democratic socialism remained popular among the party's core constituency, above all male manual workers, but extensive dissatisfaction with austerity, especially among women and middle-class voters, initially deprived Labour of its landslide majority and subsequently of its hold on power.

Between 1951 and 1964, the Conservatives decisively reshaped British political debate around the politics of consumption and economic growth. Within the Labour Party, ideas of fair shares and economic planning were marginalized by the so-called "revisionist" amalgam of Keynesianism and commitments to economic growth and welfare.

This was also the period in which "controlled tipping," or sanitary landfill—the cheapest mode of urban refuse disposal—became dominant. Municipal salvage schemes did not long survive the end of the austerity period. By 1968, 834 out of 1,226 local authorities in England and Wales disposed of their domestic waste primarily through controlled tipping. The "waste regime" established in the post-war era embedded new forms of consumption and new types of waste, and increasingly marginalized use in favor of disposal. The dominance of landfills thus arose in, and supported, a political commitment to high levels of consumption, and this close relationship of the ways of managing waste with the politics of affluence would ensure that when later critics came to attack the "throwaway society," they were attacking not just waste but also affluence and the political system in which it was embedded.

Environmentalism Against the "Waste Regime"

It is important to recognize that the structure of the post-war waste regime was never universally accepted. There were always a few contrary voices, complaints from consumers, for instance, about the cost and inconveniences associated with excessive packaging. A minority like J.C. Wylie and other advocates of waste composting were concerned with waste as a lost resource. Nonetheless, the "throwaway society" only came to face a sustained challenge on environmental grounds from the early 1970s when, as Melosi argues, "scarcity replaced abundance" as the dominant subject of popular and political discourse. The energy crisis combined with the fears of future environmental catastrophe propounded in Malthusian narratives such as *Limits to Growth* gave brief popular resonance to predictions of the impending collapse of civilization. OPEC's restriction of oil production provided a prescient experience of what a world of real resource scarcity might look like, including energy rationing, shorter working times, unemployment, and economic stagnation. The energy crisis apparently vindicated precisely what so-called "doomwatch" futurologists had been saying since the end of the sixties: resources were finite, and economic and population growth could not be sustained indefinitely.

Cotgrove and Duff argued that for environmentalists, "the [environmental] problem requires more than simply a shift in priorities, and…fundamental changes are essential if we are to survive the growing threats to the environment and the exhaustion of materials which result from a high-growth, energy-consuming, and environmentally damaging way of life." Within this critical framework, the idea of waste and the concept of the "throwaway society" were connected to fears of the exhaustion of finite resources and critiques of consumption and growth. Indeed, an attack on the British waste regime provided British environmentalists with their highest profile campaign of the early period. On the foundation of its British arm, Friends of the Earth (FOE) began a campaign against the use of non-returnable glass bottles by Cadbury-Schweppes, a campaign that "did more than any other to establish Friends of the Earth as a force in Britain." The campaign began in April 1971 with the "return" of thousands of "non-returnable" bottles outside of Cadbury-Schweppes U.K. headquarters and was carried on intermittently throughout the year through the press, public advertising, and demonstrations. Cadbury-Schweppes initially dismissed the campaign's concerns with scarcity, as illustrated by a company spokesman's use of the well-practiced defense that "Litter is not caused by manufacturers; it is caused by litterbugs." This response reflected a profound misunderstanding of the nature of early environmentalism, confusing it with the aesthetic concerns of amenity organizations such as the National Trust or Campaign to Protect Rural England. Environmentalists had to work hard to make explicit the distinctions between the old and the new critiques of waste.

The campaign against non-returnable bottles established waste as one of the main concerns of British environmentalism. Environmentalists emphasized the connection between the waste and pollution and the idea of waste as the irrational, uncontrolled exploitation of resources. The connection of scarcity, waste, and pollution produced powerful imagery of a world drained of resources, but drowning in waste.

> Beyond question then it is clear that in our latest and worst revolutions we are raping the earth, and in the process contaminating it with wastes in a wide variety solid, liquid and gaseous—coal tips, refuse tips, industrial effluents, crude oil, smoke, sulphur-dioxide, to mention only a few. These few, together with the rest of their kind, have one thing in common. They are all waste-products of a kind which our natural environment refuses to recognize, wastes which we don't want and don't know what to do with. Unlike natural wastes, they are incapable of joining some fresh process, of recycling themselves.

These kinds of post-Carsonian concerns with inorganic wastes accumulating in an environment which threatened ultimately to return to them in the form of health hazards demoted the discourse of waste as an aesthetic problem in place of more catastrophist imagery. The discourse of scarcity provided environmentalists with a critique of the affluent society and its abuse of natural resources. Waste was no longer to be seen just as a blight on the landscape but as a sign of the unethical misallocation of resources. This view provided the basis of an argument for the radical reorientation of society and economy.

Environmentalists not only attacked the "throwaway society" for its profligacy with scarce resources, but also represented it as a profound civic failure. One of their key claims paralleled the arguments of the New Left and Frankfurt School: that consumers were trapped by a system that compelled them to waste resources. The "non-returnables"

campaign welded narratives of waste with those of the arrogance of corporate power. Peter Jackson complained that it was

> arrant nonsense for the company [Schweppes] to claim that this is what the public want. The public are given no choice. Personally, I have spent much fruitless time attempting to buy tonic water, etc., in non-disposable bottles and have returned home empty handed.

Observing the cost to the consumer of "the ever-increasing cost of refuse disposal," he added: "Given the fact that manufacturers create the problem, they should be required to meet the costs which the community incur." The possibilities for action against this system of waste were restricted by the inadequacy of mechanisms of consumer "choice." Christine Thomas observed that:

> The role of the individual in reducing resource waste is not easy to define. It is often said by the manufacturer of disposable packaging, for example, that he sells what the consumer wants—expanding sales justify this story. However, this attitude merely undermines the plight of the individual in a society whose tastes are determined by negatives rather than positives. What option has the consumer to one trip bottles?… In many ways, our position is invidious. We either accept what we can get and thereby justify the continued provision of it, or we do without.

It is in the context of this political critique of the waste regime that the environmentalist practice of recycling needs to be understood. In his investigation of American environmentalism, Hays has associated recycling with narrowly consumerist impulses: "Waste recycling entered into the [American] nation's environmental consciousness early in the environmental era; it was especially popular as a consumer venture, becoming a part of many a household ethic, fostered by young people as well as adults." However in Britain, recycling, while clearly a consumer activity, also presented the possibility for the type of radical practice identified by Robert Gottlieb when he observed the relationship between the New Left and early recycling initiatives. Manuals for aspiring environmentalists, such as FOE's 1971 book *Consumer's Guide to the Protection of the Environment*, emphasized the possibility of energizing local environmental campaigning by organizing recycling clubs. *The Environmental Handbook*, which was published in Britain by Friends of the Earth, suggested that "both legislation and citizens in their private lives can stress maintenance and repair of existing products rather than planned obsolescence. This will create less jobs on the assembly line, but more jobs for repairmen and renovators." The handbook encourages consumers to return their waste packaging as a means of putting pressure on supermarkets. Recycling demonstrated that individuals could make a difference, even in the "totally administered" society where the power of corporations might otherwise provoke apathy. Arguing that local councils should establish waste paper collection schemes, Camden Friends of the Earth made a case for the civic possibilities of recycling:

> However, perhaps the most important reason why a recycling scheme should be introduced is that there is a deep-seated willingness in the community to do something constructive to alleviate a situation that seems so far out of reach yet affects each personally…By a change in the way each member of the community lives, conditions at the borough and national level can be altered for the better. This we feel is a very important consideration in an age when the majority of the population feel they have no influence on factors outside their own personal lives.

The Left and the "Throwaway Society"

Carter has argued that the limited politicization of the environment in 20th-century Britain was partly the consequence of the non-partisan forms in which "the environment" was addressed; in particular, he argues that the environment was "not strongly associated with the Left." No doubt there is a good deal of truth in this view, particularly in its understanding of environmental policy-making and governance since the 1970s. However, its minimization of the role of the Left in the early genesis of British environmentalism neglects the close connections between the anti-affluence ideals of both environmentalists and socialists, particularly those on the left of the Labour Party.

Environmentalism presented a coherent intellectual challenge to the politics of affluence in which both major parties had invested after 1945. However, this challenge was particularly pertinent for the Labour Party. It challenged the commitment to modernization, growth, and consumption that had been the basis of Labour's electoral success under Harold Wilson, who served two non-consecutive terms as Prime Minister, the first beginning in 1964. Despite continuing problems of industrial competitiveness, Britain had been able to maintain historically high levels of economic growth during the immediate post-war decades. Concern with industrial performance and economic decline, which became prominent in the 1960s, reinforced the revisionist commitment to growth and consumption. However, as Lawrence Black has demonstrated, significant elements of the Labour Left continued to define the party's purpose in opposition to affluence. R.H.S. Crossman's *Labour in the Affluent Society*, *revealed the opposition of democratic-socialists to uncontrolled consumption and* growth without redistribution. The New Left also defined itself against consumerism. As Black convincingly demonstrates, waste attained a place in the New Left's critique of affluence, largely through the work of American commentators such as John Kenneth Galbraith and Vance Packard. Domestically, E.J. Mishan's 1967 book, *The Costs of Economic Growth*, introduced into academic economics and popular debate a concern with the diseconomies of economic expansion. Mishan's "anti-growth" economics focused specifically on the negative effects of consumption and "rapid obsolescence." It was into this context of pre-existing undercurrents of concern with the throwaway society and Britain's waste regime that the new environmentalism arose and influenced Labour Party politics.

Patrick N. Edmunds was perhaps exaggerating when he called *A Blueprint for Survival* "comparable in significance to Marx's Communist Manifesto," but his view reflected the impact of the publication of *Blueprint* during January 1972. As post-war growth and full employment gave way to stagnation and unemployment, Malthusian "limits-to-growth" ideas such as those propounded by the *Blueprint* briefly gained a degree of popular credence on the Left. Things went so far that in 1975 Mishan felt it necessary to complain that it had become possible to "rail indiscriminately against the spread of industry and the depredations of technology without being taken to task."

Publication of the *Blueprint* certainly caused the nature of environmental debate within the Labour Party to shift. In February and March of 1972, the letter pages of the London *Tribune* saw extensive discussion of the relationship between environmentalism and socialism. Existing concerns with pollution and amenity, while remaining important, were increasingly refracted through the image of environmental apocalypse. Many on the left

responded positively to the new environmentalism and to its critique of the throwaway society. As Jackson argued in a review of the *Blueprint*,

> We must eschew growth; there must be an end to what is styled the "through-put" economy; cars must be built to last; there must be an end to such criminally irresponsible practices as the manufacture of non-returnable bottles. We must husband, conserve and recycle our resources.

Democratic-socialist theorists like Michael Barrett Brown found in the environmental crisis the "limits of capitalism:" "The growing threat to the environment" was a consequence of "the uncontrolled competitive struggle for private profit, with built-in obsolescence, along growth paths determined by the giant trans-national corporations."

In 1972, the environmental crisis was debated at length for the first time at a Labour Party conference. One of the leading figures arguing for an amalgamation of socialist politics with the new environmentalism was Ken Coates. In a resolution (Composite 29), he asked for the "inauguration of a widely based discussion throughout the Labour Movement" and the constitution of a special sub-committee of the National Executive to develop environmental policy. Influenced by the ongoing campaign against Cadbury-Schweppes, Coates argued that "the consumption of beer has gone up in the last 20 years in all advanced countries scarcely at all. But in the 17 years between 1950 and 1967, the production of non-returnable beer bottles went up by 595 percent." The conference also demonstrated that concern with environmental issues was not confined to the New Left. The traditional concerns of the "old left" with planning and redistribution could be reconciled with the critical implications of environmentalism. Douglas Eden, from the Hornsey constituency Labour Party, defended the "need for planned economic growth" and argued that the main environmental problem was poverty: "We cannot begin to solve the problems of pollution without a commitment to planned economic growth and redistribution of wealth." It encouraged a future Labour government to exercise "strict controls of all industrial pollution" through a new national environmental protection board, and to "research with the utmost urgency into techniques of recycling."

Thus, by the early 1970s, environmentalism had an important influence on the left of the Labour Party, which reflected the survival of anti-affluence ideas within the party as a whole. As Fielding has demonstrated, many post-war Labour Party activists had matured politically in the era of austerity amid the culture of democratic socialism with its emphasis on fair shares. Theirs was an experience of life under a different kind of waste regime, one they associated with a profoundly more ethical state of social organization. A significant minority of local Labour Party members consequently held on to an essentially anti-affluence ideology. Fielding argues that these anti-affluence activists were struggling against the electoral tide. However, in the early 1970s, anti-affluence ideas briefly coincided with radical environmental concerns, challenging the centrality of growth to labor politics as well as the throwaway society. For Christopher Harvie:

> Since Keynes published his "General Theory" in the thirties, we have taken growth as an enduring goal of left-wing political activity, and it has come to outweigh redistribution as a tenet of socialism in Britain, It has now become patently obvious that survival is going to require the ditching of growth; that we're going to have to accept that, in average terms, our standards of living are not going to rise.

Those who had always opposed prioritizing growth over redistribution found their ideas legitimated by this brief fluorescence of the politics of scarcity. There was no purpose in waiting for growth to deliver higher standards of living if the only result was environmental collapse. Only socialism could overcome the problems of planned obsolescence and profit. Planning and fair shares were the obvious response to scarcity and environmental crisis. As Louise Cobill argued in *Labour Weekly*, "We rightly reject rationing by the purse, but we ought to ration finite and scarce resources, and the sooner we find substitutes or better ways of doing things the better." There was, of course, a strong element of technological rationality buried within this response to environmentalism. Environmental problems were still assumed to be susceptible to techniques of environmental control and government policy. Nonetheless, the alliance between environmentalism and the Labour Left challenged the Labour Party's leadership to demonstrate that it had answers to environmental problems, and to the problem of waste in particular.

The Labour Party Recycles the Waste Regime

In the early 1970s, both major parties attempted to harness environmental issues for political advantage through the development of environmental policy. In early 1970, the Labour government published a white paper, "The Protection of the Environment," which highlighted the problems of pollution, and they established the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution. The Royal Commission's "First Report" included the problem of domestic consumer waste disposal among the issues it believed required immediate action. Its language reflected the influence of critical discourses on the official mind: "Modern industrial society is very wasteful. We extract, refine and fabricate materials at great cost only to use the products once and then discard them"; recycling would "avoid needless waste of resources and reduce the demand for land on which to dump rubbish." In October 1970, the newly elected Conservative Prime Minister, Edward Heath, established the Department of Environment and gave to Peter Walker the newly created cabinet post of Secretary of State for the Environment. This "first wave" of environmental policy took place in the context of rising international concern with environmental problems, demonstrated by events such as the first Earth Day and the European Conservation Year, both in 1970.

For those on the revisionist wing of the Labour Party, issues of pollution were initially seen as simply another way of reframing concerns with the standard of living. Former Labour Member of Parliament, Jeremy Bray, for instance, argued that Prime Minister Harold Wilson's decision to make pollution an issue in the wake of the disastrous March 1967 oil spill from the supertanker "Torrey Canyon" was sound politics:

> The instinct of the Prime Minister is right in seeking to make an issue out of pollution and wider urban problems. As an issue in the 1970s, pollution may hardly stir the masses, and urban problems are too vague: when these are defined as slums, discrimination and lack of opportunity in education and jobs, there is too great uncertainty as to whether the Government can do anything about them. But the very feeling after an issue here is to share the mood of the electors.

However, the environment as an issue in its own right increasingly gained ground among the grass-roots of the Labour Party. In 1972, Bray observed that "the environment is already a subject that crops up at local Labour Party meetings." Amid growing political

divisions within Labour on other issues, those on the left invoked the environment as a direct challenge to the party leadership. In August 1974 in the left-wing *Labour Weekly*, parliamentary candidate, Bryn Jones, challenged what he believed was the prevailing notion among Labour leaders "that pollution is a middle-class concern." His criticism of Labour's timidity on environmental issues drew a sharp response from Anthony Crosland, Labour's new Secretary of State for the Environment, who defended the leadership's reputation on environmental protection. Reaffirming the necessity of growth as the basis of social-democratic policy, Crosland admitted that "Working-class people are becoming more and more concerned [with the environment]" and that there is "growing interest of local Labour parties in questions of the environment." Crosland then articulated what would become the familiar refrain of the "ecological modernizers," that "growth does not inevitably mean a worse environment; more often it is a condition of a better one." As Labour's first Secretary of State for the Environment, Crosland argued for what he called "sensitive and sensible environmental policies" as opposed to the "all-or-nothing approach favored by the Doomwatch school." For Crosland, technology would come to the rescue: "Most economists are highly skeptical [of the neo-Malthusian case], believing that new discoveries, recycling and the use of substitutes will keep us supplied for the foreseeable future." Thus, he argued that no fundamental change was necessary to the basic economic tenets of revisionism that Labour had long adopted if society could feed off its own wastes.

The search for technological solutions to waste and resource scarcity in order to negate environmentalist arguments for fundamental social and economic change were the political basis of the National Anti-Waste Programme, which was formally instituted by a re-elected Labour government in 1975. In February 1974, Labour's general election manifesto had boldly proclaimed that "the oil crisis is only one example of the problems which confront all nations in connection with the exploitation of finite natural resources of raw materials on the earth," and it promised to address resource scarcity. The resulting green paper, "War on Waste: A Policy for Reclamation," published in September 1974, reflected the permeation of environmentalist ideas about waste and scarcity into mainstream political discourse:

> We all instinctively feel that there is something wrong in a society which wastes and discards resources on the scale which we do today. More and more products are thrown away as rubbish, often after the briefest of use, and too often with no attempt to salvage and reutilize the materials. This squandering of resources will become more and more serious for us as consumption rises and with increasing uncertainty about world raw materials supplies.

The green paper promised measures to increase levels of industrial and municipal recycling through an "integrated approach to the whole recycling chain." Rhetorically at least, this marked a return to the idea of government-sponsored recycling, of the sort that had occurred during the Second World War: "We shall have to organize on a national basis to mobilize all the enthusiasm which exists in the community to do more about recycling."

Some historians have argued that during the 20th century, the market in secondary materials was relatively successful in recycling industrial waste. To the extent that this is true, it must also be recognized that the market in recycled materials was unstable, and its priorities were dominated by commercial rather than environmental considerations.

To establish a truly effective recycling system, as the government's green paper "War on Waste" recognized, required ironing out these inadequacies in the market for waste. In the context of scarcity, the idea that "there are materials which, although not worth recycling from a commercial point of view, may still be worth recycling from a social point of view" suggested the need for government intervention in the operation of the market for waste. H.F. Wallis in a volume suggestively entitled *The New Battle of Britain* argued for government regulation of packaging materials to ensure biodegradability and a "national reclamation agency" that would vet new packaging materials for their use of resources. "If society is to be called upon to accept a mountain of packaging—much of it of doubtful utility—then society should demand that it be in a form that can be dealt with."

The promotion of recycling, therefore, apparently indicated a need for government planning of the waste industry. In September 1974, Michael Meacher, then a junior minister in the Department of Industry (which co-sponsored the program with the Department of Environment), argued that emergency measures like the wartime salvage efforts were needed, along with recognition that social and environmental needs did not always coincide with economic rationality. There was a "growing reluctance to accept that, merely because it may be economically cheaper to throw something away than to reuse, this justifies disposal without regard to the social or environmental costs." Meacher further argued that government intervention was necessary to obtain environmental ends: "by itself the market cannot bring reclamation to the optimum level. There are too many interests involved and too little communication between them."

In reality, however, the green paper represented a compromise between the political needs of the Labour government and the economic imperatives of industry. It contained no substantive proposals for regulating the prices of waste products, and the packaging industry emerged largely unscathed:

> The Government does not believe that [this] wholesale criticism of the packaging industry can be sustained. Most packaging serves a useful purpose in the protection, preservation and display of goods, and the examples of real extravagance in this field form a small proportion of the whole.

The *Times* wryly observed the effective defeat of environmentalist demands that industry be made to bear the cost of disposable packaging. "Industry fares quite well in the Government's new policy on waste reclamation," it stated, "and will be gratified that it does not emerge, as some would have hoped, as the ogre responsible for Britain's heading towards the 'Throwaway Society.'" The failure of the green paper to tackle the manufacturers of non-returnable packaging was a defeat for "the more ardent conservationists."

The refusal to challenge the fundamentals of high consumption exhibited in "War on Waste" became even more apparent with the establishment of the Waste Management Advisory Council in 1975. Designed to advise the government on the best means of waste reduction and recycling, the Waste Management Advisory Council recognized that it was working within a new set of expectations: "It is only within the last four or five years that there has been a growth in the public awareness of the need to conserve material resources, combined with a concern over the environmental aspects of the 'throw-away' society."

However, the membership of the Waste Management Advisory Council primarily represented the interests of local government and the industrial waste trades. The chairman, Dr. Robert Berry, was from the aluminium recycling industry. Inevitably, the ideas and values of the Waste Management Advisory Council were technocratic and focused on portraying consumption as indefinitely sustainable through technological adaptations.

Limited from the outset by the government's insistence that recycling must be self-financing, the Waste Management Advisory Council did not even adopt environmental outcomes as a measure of the viability of recycling. Plans for recycling household waste were abandoned at an early stage on the grounds that "In general it must be accepted that recovery from domestic refuse will almost certainly never be profitable as an activity in its own right when assessed on a strictly commercial basis of recovery costs and revenue on sales; where sites are readily available landfill is likely to remain the cheapest disposal method." Skepticism about the environmental significance of the "War on Waste" quickly developed among the few public representatives on the Waste Management Advisory Council. Janet Graham, a representative of the Housewives Trust, was already arguing by 1976 that "politically it [the War on Waste] is a dead duck. Industry doesn't want to have any further restraints—like being directed to do more recycling—placed on it." The reality was made profoundly clear by Berry: "It is fine for pressure groups to worry about the Earth's resources, but we have to look at economics." Despite worthy efforts to promote voluntary and charitable recycling schemes, when the British environmentalist journal *The Vole* looked back at the "War on Waste" in 1981, it concluded that the whole effort "went down the drain."

Conclusion

One of the major concerns of recent studies of waste has been the irony that a political economy founded on the aim of reclaiming spatial and temporal "waste" by means of the rationalizing order of private property and free markets has resulted in a self-sustaining system of "creative-destruction" dependant upon the capacity to waste. This irony has become increasingly apparent in the post-war era. However, waste presents more than just the technical problem of disposal. Indeed, the question of whether Britain became quantitatively a "throwaway society" in this period may be seriously misleading. The key problem is intellectual. Waste not only underpins but also offers a negation of existing systems of thought and rationality; it provides potent material for a critique of the social and economic order. Arguably, it was because of the inherent instability and contradictoriness of waste as a socio-cultural category that it came to play such an important role in environmentalist discourse.

Waste as a negative idea was a key concept in the emergence of environmentalism in British political argument. From the 1970s, the fear of scarcity brought the idea of waste into the framework of a wide-ranging challenge to a waste regime that supported high affluence and the political interests that had invested in it. The environmentalist critique of waste could not simply be ignored because it challenged the ideological as well as the environmental sustainability of consumer society. Ironically, this challenge was partly met by the appropriation of environmentalist political practice. Initially a part of radical environmental practice, recycling presented a convenient means of responding to environmentalist argument. During the 1970s, the Labour government's "War on Waste"

provided a way of meeting political demands for a response to resource depletion and the global environmental crisis without challenging continuing high levels of consumption. Thus, the "War on Waste" represented a cooptation that would become a crucial political tactic in neutering the radicalism of political environmentalism.