Rachel Carson Center
Perspectives

How to cite:

Gille, Zsuzsa. "Waste Utopias: Lessons from Socialist Europe for the Twenty-First Century." In: "A Future without Waste? Zero Waste in Theory and Practice," edited by Christof Mauch, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 2016, no. 3, 39–44. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/7543.

Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society
Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN (print) 2190-5088
ISSN (online) 2190-8087

SPONSORED BY THE

Federal Ministry of Education and Research

Deutsches Museum

LMU LUDWIG-MAXIMILIANS-UNIVERSITÄT MÜNCHEN

Zsuzsa Gille

Waste Utopias: Lessons from Socialist Europe for the Twenty-First Century

Many corporations and governments—at all scales, local, regional, national, and supranational—have agreed on implementing or have already implemented a zero-waste plan. What they mean by a goal of zero waste varies. What unifies them, however, is an implicit assumption that this is an objective never tried before. Even if these zero-waste plans or other analyses of them acknowledge the wartime recycling efforts of national governments, they claim that current projects are novel due to their much broader scope. However, not only is there in fact a historical antecedent to contemporary zero-waste programs, but experiences of their implementation can offer lessons for us today.

The historical analogy to zero-waste programs proffered in contemporary societies of the Global North I have in mind is the centrally planned economies of mid-twentieth century Europe; in this case, the specific example of socialist Hungary from the early 1950s to the 1970s. That social experiment, while not flawless and originally not framed in environmental terms, did share some of the progressive elements of contemporary zero-waste efforts.

It has long been argued that centrally planned economies were systemically wasteful. This is well documented by their records of material and energy intensities and their waste/GDP quotas, which were significantly higher than equivalent Western indicators. Despite this reputation, there is overwhelming evidence that an elaborate system of waste registration, collection, distribution, and reuse—and, to a lesser extent, reduction—had already taken root during the Stalinist years of state socialism. A piece of Hungarian propaganda material in 1951, according to which "there's no such thing as waste," aptly captures the mentality underlying these efforts, and will sound familiar to us today in the midst of our proliferating zero-waste programs.

In central planning, each individual and even each and every nail was accounted for and could be utilized only according to its function as prescribed by the plans. Production wastes were no exception and thus quotas were also introduced for by-products. Other waste-reduction tasks, however, emanated from conditions of scarcity. Planners

designed and established several institutions dealing with waste. Extensive legislation prescribed to state enterprises how to record industrial by-products and what do with them, and the various organs of the state made sure that these were then redistributed and reused or recycled in a way that helped plan fulfillment the most. (Between 1950 and 1959, 34 central regulations on the collection, storage, delivery, and price of waste materials were issued.) Material conservation and waste recuperation were, however, not left only to institutions, administrators, and laws. Waste also became a key issue around which the public was mobilized. Numerous campaigns, organized either by the main waste collection company (MEH) or various party organs, aimed at collecting wastes and/or reusing them in factories, in agricultural co-operatives, in schools, and in districts of cities and villages. Metal-collecting weeks were organized; brigades dedicating themselves to waste reduction and reuse, waste-collecting stewards, and youth and female troops mushroomed and busied themselves, mostly after regular working hours. The culmination of these campaigns was the Gazda movement, which, unlike recycling, gave priority to reusing waste materials in their original materiality without chemical or substantial mechanical transformation.

Claims about the movement, such as "there are thousands of ways and possibilities to reuse wastes" and "here ingenuity and creativity are given a free rein," indicate not just the expectations encouraging this apparently "from-below" initiative, but also the perceived lack of limits to waste reuse. Clearly, the early socialist waste discourse treated waste as a useful material—what's more, a multi-purpose, pliable material—and as something not to be displaced from the sphere of production but rather to be reintegrated into it again and again. Anthropologist Mary Douglas defines dirt (and by implication trash) as "matter out of place"—that is, for her it is not the material but where it is that causes us to see something as dirty or useless. In contrast, in socialist Hungary waste was seen as always useful and valuable, and as such as a material that must be meticulously registered, collected, redistributed, and reused.

Such waste collection and waste reuse campaigns were much more popular than the other movements the party devised for (over)fulfilling the plan because they resonated with people's own experiences of scarcity during the war and thus their appreciation of thriftiness and reusing practices. However, like other party initiatives, these campaigns and efforts still suffered from problems that were partly rooted in systemic features of central planning. At the same time, some of the shortcomings of waste reuse campaigns express

more general difficulties that go beyond the specificity of a country or even socialist societies as a whole. Four of them appear to plague currently existing zero-waste policies and projects as well.

First, there is in any zero-waste project, or really in any alternative production, an assumed but largely invisible "Other," a shadow side without which the program could not work at all. In state socialism, while state-owned industrial enterprises comprised the key arena for waste collection, they were not always the primary locus of reuse or recycling. They mostly maintained control over the recycling of valuable wastes, such as metal. However, in the case of waste materials that were harder to reintegrate into production, the Party designated the residual private and cooperative sector, i.e., the sectors with no significant role in industrial production, to find possible reuses. In today's zero-waste projects I see two similar shadow sides emerging. One is a reliance on subcontractors, often in other countries, that "take care" of the part of the production process that just cannot be made zero waste, either because of the technological difficulties or the costs. Another Other is the vast sector of the economy that has not implemented or even declared the necessity of a zero-waste plan. Its presence is relevant especially for corporations that see the main benefit of going zero-waste in the marketing advantage that is earned by an improvement in their image, or what a CEO calls the goodwill of the public. Once everyone crosses over to the zero-waste side, this advantage will disappear, and the profitability of such schemes will be undermined.

Second, just like in state socialism where metal scrap in particular was treated as always and infinitely recyclable, there is a tendency today to promise full recyclability, hence the term "zero waste." The key obstacle to zero-waste technologies, as current examples suggest and as most experts admit, is the mixing of different materialities and the increasing complexity of waste materials. Since full reuse and recyclability depends on the ability to select and separate different materials, zero-waste projects are exceedingly difficult and costly. In such cases prevention is the best course of action; that is, avoiding using compounds or certain combinations of them that require such implausible recycling technologies. Prevention, however, is currently barely mentioned in the zero-waste plans. Furthermore, the stories told about companies that have found new uses for waste perpetuate a belief in an eventual technical fix, which, in turn, may produce the same unintended negative consequences that the metallic waste model did in state socialist Hungary. There, within a year of the implementation of waste quotas and requirements to reuse waste, a

counterproductive attitude emerged—in the words of the worker hero of the waste reuse movement: "It does not matter if I produce rejects, since the spoiled product after some modification can still be reused."

A third negative aspect of the Hungarian waste reuse and recycling campaigns was the Party's instrumental use of them as yet another disciplinary regime in the factory. Although waste reuse campaigns were relatively popular, the waste quotas meant yet another requirement employees had to meet; the pressure to work after hours to collect waste and to come up with innovative ways to reuse it ultimately added up to more burden on workers with little or no compensation. Industries that used irreversible processes to produce materials (rather than products in the form of discrete items or units) were less able to implement waste reuse programs, and employees resisted the pressure to pledge such savings through material conservation and reuse. In my review of various industrial ecology programs implemented in multinational corporations in the 1980s and 1990s I noticed a similar mobilization of employees: just like workers in central planning, workers in many corporations were compelled to participate in different competitions. Little is said about employees for whom such participation is not a matter of choice (for example because of the particular job description, shift, or post they have) or about whether they will share in the profits resulting from the savings their company makes from reducing its wastes. In a video tutorial for construction and demolition companies, workers are asked to tell the foreman if they notice that wastes have not been placed in the bins designated for selective waste collection. This presumes that workers actually feel comfortable to point out a problem to their supervisors—which, as studies in the sociology of labor suggest, is rarely the case.

Municipal zero-waste programs, just like the 1950s Communist Party, rely on the volunteer and unpaid work of citizens to selectively collect waste and carry it to the proper facilities. At the municipal level, another concern is with the increased burden recycling means for female members of the household and for domestic servants, who also tend to be female. Valeria Bonatti, for example, finds that her informants, immigrant maids in Italy, take the recycling out of the homes where they work, but the selective waste collection stations are so out of their way (and they have no cars) that they just throw it out in the trash bins. Let us notice the similarities of the ideological effects of such mass mobilization in state socialism and in today's most developed countries: it perpetuates the idea that a small individual act can add up and make a difference and gives people the impression that a lot is already

being done to deal with a serious problem. This is what Samantha MacBride calls "busyness" in her discussion of waste policies and recycling practices in the US.

Finally, we need to ask what distribution or redistribution is implied in zero-waste plans. In state socialism, where there was no nominal market, the state assumed the role of waste collector and redistributor; however, the oversupply of by-products did create bottlenecks, for example, in paper, so the state ended up exporting paper waste without ever stopping or slowing down its paper waste collection rhetoric and campaigns (which primarily mobilized school children). Catherine Alexander also mentions the problem of recycling textiles into unneeded and low-quality blankets, and we have ample evidence that market prices for recyclates strongly influence sustainability policy outcomes. This suggests the need for a macro-level coordination of waste reuse and recycling, especially for overproduced by-products or overproduced recycled goods, and for industry-to-industry exchange of by-products. In the absence of such a coordinating body, connecting waste producers to waste reusers is haphazard, bordering on the illegal, and energy intensive.. Furthermore, the dirty and unsafe labor of getting wastes where they are needed is obscured.

Conclusion

As with all utopias, we need to ask what is bracketed out of the main frame of an ideal situation or society and what unseen and unseemly infrastructure is necessary for making that utopia a reality. As we deliberate on how not to have any waste at all, we must also ask: who decides what social cost is not too high for achieving zero-waste cities and companies, or indeed whether these costs are even admissible in the first place? As I showed, in socialist Hungary the materiality and the additional burden imposed on workers and the cooperative sector were ignored, and as a result not only were the utopian goals unfulfilled but reuse and recycling also came to be discredited in the eyes of the public.

Further Reading:

Alexander, Catherine, and Joshua Reno. *Economies of Recycling*. New York: Zed Books, 2012.

Bonatti, Valeria. "Relations of Water: Gender, Domestic Labor and Environmental Protests in the EU." PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2016.

Gille, Zsuzsa. *From the Cult of Waste to the Trash Heap of History: The Politics of Waste in Socialist and Postsocialist Hungary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007.

Gregson, Nicky, Mike Crang, Julie Botticello, Melania Calestani, and Anna Krzywoszynska. "Doing the 'Dirty Work' of the Green Economy: Resource Recovery and Migrant Labour in the EU." *European Urban and Regional Studies*. Published online before print, 30 October 2014, doi: 10.1177/0969776414554489.

Gregson, Nicky, Mike Crang, Sara Fuller, and Helen Holmes. "Interrogating the Circular Economy: The Moral Economy of Resource Recovery in the EU." *Economy and Society* 44, no. 2 (2015): 218–43.

MacBride, Samantha. *Recycling Reconsidered*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011.