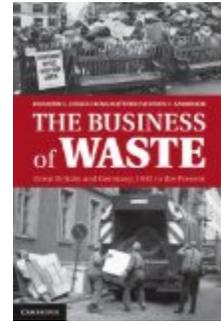


Raymond G. Stokes, Roman Köster, Stephen C. Sambrook. *The Business of Waste: Great Britain and Germany, 1945 to the Present*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. XIII, 331 S. ISBN 978-1-107-02721-3.

Reviewed by Sebastian Teupe
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R. Stokes u.a.: The Business of Waste

Trash is something that most people rather ignore unless the garbage bin in front of the house spills over, a street is covered in waste or a disposal site produces an unpleasant smell. The same has applied to business historians who have studied the various ways in which modern societies have produced and consumed the flood of consumer goods of the twentieth century but missed the fact that there is another aspect to this development worth studying. Raymond G. Stokes, Roman Köster and Stephen C. Sambrook have now published a book that looks at this “overlooked concomitant” (p. 2). They not only add a much needed business historical perspective to a debate that is picking up speed in European history. See for example the literature survey in Heike Weber, “Entschaffen”. Reste und das Ausrangieren, Zerlegen und Beseitigen des Gemachten, in: *Technikgeschichte* 81 (2014), pp. 3–32 which is part of a special issue on the history of trash and other remains. In the United States, an already established academic interest in the topic reflects the earlier start of a mass consumption society there. See for example, Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want. A Social History of Trash*, New York, NY 1999 and Martin V. Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities. Refuse, Reform, and the Environment*, Rev. ed., Pittsburgh 2005 (First Ed. 1981). They also deliver a valuable and exciting study that spans two countries and their histories of handling the problem of waste from the end of the Second World War until today.

Analyzing the “waste regimes” (p. 14) of Great Britain and (West) Germany, Stokes, Köster and Sambrook dis-

cuss a wide range of themes in the context of larger economic and social developments. The concept of “waste regimes” was developed by the sociologist Zsuzsa Gille and although not uncontested by historians seems to provide a valuable analytical reference point for an international discussion. See: Zsuzsa Gille, *From the Cult of Waste to the Trash Heap of History. The Politics of Waste in Socialist and Postsocialist Hungary*, Bloomington 2007. The tension between financial strains and the preservation of public health as well as the question of turning to the public or the private sector for solutions act as two running threads throughout the book that is divided into three (chronological) parts and eight (thematic) chapters. Although the comparative dimension focuses on the two nation states, Stokes, Köster and Sambrook admit that there was great regional variation in practice as well as in legal regulation at least until the 1970s. A city-based case study approach is intended to allow striking a balance between local particularity and the national “waste regimes” of Germany and Great Britain which also means, however, that the countryside is not integrated into the analysis.

While part one covers the time from 1945 to the 1960s, chapter one also provides a historical background of the period stretching back to the late nineteenth century. Differences between Germany and Great Britain can be found in the structure of legislative power as well as in the financing of the business. Although the transition to peace was accompanied by some hopes for more professionalization and rationalization, the late 1940s were

characterized by pragmatism and path dependency. As analyzed in the second chapter, this changed with the 1950s. Rightly, Stokes, Köster and Sambrook describe rationalization as a highly contested process that involved different interest groups who tried to push through what they perceived and framed as “best practice”. This is exemplified by the three cases of the evolution of garbage bins, vehicles and machinery and land-fill versus incineration as two different systems of disposal. In Great Britain, for reasons of space, the more expensive strategy of incineration was pursued earlier than in West Germany where waste “had a reputation for simply not burning” (p. 85). A third option is discussed in more detail in chapter three. Until it was absorbed by the much broader concept of “recycling”, the practice of “salvaging”, i.e. recovering valuable materials like glass, textiles, metals or paper from the waste stream was dependent on (global) market forces. It thus ceased to exist by the 1960s when it lost economic sense as exemplified by a discussion of the markets for composting, scrap metal and waste paper.

Part two which ranges from the 1960s to around 1980 focuses on the impact of an emergent mass consumption society. Chapter four looks at the evolution of the waste stream that was not only characterized by a quantitative growth but also by a change in qualitative composition. Plastics was one of the most important new components that could not easily be incinerated without setting free toxic substances. Health and environmental problems thus came into the focus and chapter five looks at the interaction of the dimensions that related to this “politicization of waste” (p. 157). The key factor for bringing the streams of waste on the political agenda was toxic waste scandals. In the early 1970s, the national government in both countries passed legislation to show its political will. Chapter six looks at the practitioners’ responses to this changing environment. Implementation of the Control of Pollution Act of 1974 in Britain faced difficulties with city and county councils fighting over operational procedures and economic restraints. In Germany there was less financial strain, more cooperation, and even more privatization. This was especially true with respect to recycling. While in Great Britain waste disposal authorities remained reluctant, in Germany people and city councils were willing to back a system that did not pay for itself. Private contractors were encouraged to move in by means of guaranteed prices. Many problems remained, however, and the Federal Republic exported a good deal of the trash it could not handle to the German Democratic Republic thus contributing to the country’s environmental problems. For the development in the GDR

that is barely touched upon in the analysis, see: Christian Möller, *Der Traum vom ewigen Kreislauf. Abprodukte, Sekundärrohstoffe und Stoffkreisläufe im “Abfall-Regime” der DDR (1945–1990)*, in: *Technikgeschichte* 81 (2014), pp. 61–89.

The third part of the book ranges from 1980 to the present. Chapter seven discusses the developments in relation to statistical problems. It is remarkable how little contemporary actors knew in detail about the dimensions of the waste problem. There was nevertheless a real sense of crisis facing a lack of space for disposal, toxic material and an ever more complex stream of waste. Although Great Britain and Germany were faced with essentially similar problems, their approaches for tackling them differed as they perceived the underlying reasons in different ways. In Britain, the conservative government saw the public sector as the problem and aimed for an organizational solution. In Germany, the problem was perceived as an environmental one that needed to be approached by a re-conceptualization of waste in general. The effects of new legislation were long-term rather than immediate as chapter eight illustrates. The introduction of the “Duales System” in Germany ensured that the private sector was obliged for taking care of and financing the recycling of its packaging and the problem of space was overcome by a “triumph of incineration over land-filling” (p. 279). In Great Britain, the Environmental Protection Act of 1990 recognized the safeguarding of the environment in a broader sense. However, land-filling remained the central solution as it was relatively cheap and thus went well with the fiscal considerations that still stood at the center.

The different development of “waste regimes” in Germany and Great Britain until today acts as a constant reminder that for all the materiality of trash there was (and is) no single “best practice” of handling it. What is striking in this respect is that the “privatization” of the industry was much more pronounced in Germany since the 1970s where there was much less ideologically based facilitation for it. “The Business of Waste” provides an analysis that lays bare the complexity every discussion about waste management needs to account for. At some points the analysis loses the more problem-oriented perspective that is usually pursued. In chapter six, for example, there is a somewhat lengthy discussion of measuring and comparing household income levels but what remains under-explored is the question of the costs to the households for the disposal of their trash. Also, it is apparent that as the analysis approaches the present and archival material becomes restricted the perspective shifts towards

regulatory frameworks and general developments.

Overall, however, Stokes, Köster and Sambrook succeed in providing a coherent and analytical narrative of a complex development. They also succeed in writing the history of the business of waste in the two countries as something that can be seen in a nationally compara-

tive light without losing sight of the fact that there was great regional variation in both countries. It is obvious that not all of the questions that suddenly come to mind when reading the roughly 300 pages of the book can be answered. "The Business of Waste" invites for further research, and by being analytical rather than descriptive it provides an excellent starting point for doing so.

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