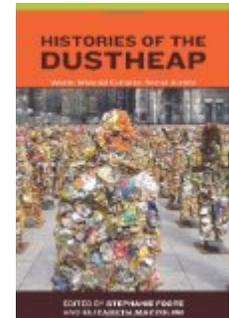




Stephanie Foote, Elizabeth Mazzolini, eds.. *Histories of the Dustheap: Waste, Material Cultures, Social Justice*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012. vi + 291 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-262-51782-9.



Reviewed by Tim Cooper

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Despite its title, *Histories of the Dustheap* is fortunately not limited to the historical. At least, it is not limited to the reflexive cultural historicism that now dominates historical research to the exclusion of larger social and political questions. This is undoubtedly one merit of the interdisciplinary character of this collection of essays. It is rare to find a text where the espousal of interdisciplinary working (these days so common) actually clearly leads to a magnification of critical insights, but this is one of them.

The key question of this collection is political. It asks what the analysis of garbage, of the materiality of the dustheap, contributes to our understanding of human social relations and political aspirations. In a series of tightly argued and admirably empirical chapters, it raises a series of questions and develops a range of analytical models that historians would themselves do well to respond to.

Three key themes structure this text: subjectivity, place and cultural contradiction. Each is de-

veloped in such a way as to demonstrate the political tensions and struggles that are embodied in efforts to dispose of waste. Of these, the last is perhaps the most well developed through the volume as a whole, providing a point of unity for the other essays.

The question of subjectivity is perhaps relatively weakly pursued here, although Richard Newman, William Gleason, and Stephanie Foote all provide stimulating interrogations of environmental subjectivities in historical and contemporary perspective. Each investigates what might be seen as subaltern narratives of environmentalism in such marginal forms of expression such as popular autobiography, sanitary movements, and environmental blogging. While each essay provides an interesting insight in itself, what is missing is the sense of the connection between these concrete examples. Nonetheless, as a whole, these authors seem to be pointing towards the need for an account of environmental politics that extends beyond big ideas or scientific narratives into the realm of everyday life. In so doing they connect

well, as does the volume as a whole, with the aims of Alex Loftus's recent book *Everyday Environmentalism* and his imperative to analyze the political forms of environmentalism through everyday practice and lived experience. This is especially so considering that the second key theme of this volume, place, provides for Loftus the locus of real experiences of the environment in the widest and most politicized meaning of the term.

The theme of place is crucial to this volume, so much so that it is surprising to find it drawn out, and categorized in a separate section. Almost all of the essays deal with place, and one of the main strengths of the volume is the way in which its problematic is generally very specifically located in particular locales or spaces. Scott Fricke, Phaedra Pezullo, and Elizabeth Mazzolini analyze in turn the post-Katrina geographies of New Orleans; toxic e-waste, and garbage on Mount Everest. The themes here are closely, but critically allied to the questions of environmental justice, yet are developed with particular regard to the historicity and cultural complexity of the ways in which environmental struggles evolve. Pezullo provides a particularly compelling historical case study of the development of quotidian concern with, and resistance to, the manufacture and distribution of PCBs in Bloomington, Indiana. This carefully interweaves the antinomies of capital, labor, and environment. It is an essay that environmental historians working on wastes in other contexts would do well to read for it reveals the centrality of quotidian struggles to the very visibility of "environmental" issues.

Finally, Daniel Schneider, Jennifer Clapp, and Marisol Cortez provide three chapters remarkable for their attention to the question of antagonism and contradiction at the heart of modern environmental practices and politics. Here capitalism is an absolutely central theme, and Schneider and Clapp produce two important pieces of empirically grounded research that, again, would make excellent reading, particularly among those

historians who have recently been so keen to find a "green capitalism" in past contexts. Schneider's analysis of the ecological antinomies and market failures of sewage sludge purification in Milwaukee is a much-overdue historical engagement with the real obstacles to the generation of environmental "goods" under capitalist social relations. Clapp's global analysis of the frankly heroic role of popular environmental movements against plastics resisting the forces of darkness of capitalist industrial self-interest is worth reading just for the sense of hope it inspires. However, it might be said that Cortez's analysis of *The Brave Little Toaster* gets to the core of this theme, as well as to the relationship of this book as a whole to history: "Dominant social relations to waste as garbage are thus marked by a central contradiction or problematic, in which waste either disappears from consciousness altogether, or where it appears, evokes such intense negativity that it also disappears from consideration the historical and social forces that have shaped how we relate to it, and hence the question of whether other, less ecologically destructive relations might exist" (p. 227).

The manner in which our desire to be rid of waste, so modern an attitude, actually effaces and erases the historical and social conditions for wasting is the key question underlying the logic of this volume. It is also a key political question in the anthropocene, when appeals to policy and technological fixes to problems such as climate change enact the same effacement. In taking seriously the social and political structures of wasting, and environmental politics, this volume, while not primarily written by historians, shows fidelity to history as a critical project. In many respects it is superior to much of what would now call itself environmental history, but which is often far too quick to ally itself with that neoliberal reduction of politics to "policy." In demonstrating the key role of everyday life and the resistances of subaltern groups to the efforts of capitalists and technocrats to exclude them from environmental

decision making, this volume makes genuine progress towards a critical environmental history relevant to the problems and agendas of the present.

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