Waste, Immiseration, and the Lure of Profitability in Late Capitalism

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This paper intends to explore a relatively overlooked yet historically-specific form of garbage, what I call pre-consumer waste. In the course of examining pre-consumer waste, I will also discuss three other related forms of waste – production waste, nature-as-waste, and the human-as-waste – as well as consider capitalism’s crisis state.

Garbage is traditionally studied as something that is discarded or expelled after consumption. But, in the contemporary moment, there is an ever-increasing amount of material waste discarded after production but prior to consumption. For example, the United States government estimates that supermarkets throw away 2.5 million tons of food each year, much of which is still edible. Regardless of whether food can be consumed, products that are (almost) past their expiration date are commonly discarded as un-salable. It is also common practice for retail stores to throw away commodity goods such as clothing or holiday products that are no longer “in season” as newer lines become available for sale. Even cars and electronics end up as pre-consumer waste. Some scholars, such as Norbert Trenkle and Ernst Lohoff, argue that this waste could add up to as much as 1 billion tons each year in the United States and Western Europe. These are usable items discarded as waste.

Discourses of convenience and an increase in disposable products are often used to account for an increase in garbage in the United States in the post-World War II era. While convenience, in part, accounts for a rise in post-consumer waste, what accounts for a rise in pre-consumer waste? Why would corporations and businesses throw away usable items?

This paper intends to account for this phenomenon by situating pre-consumer waste in an era of late capitalism where production functions as a treadmill producing an explosion of material wealth,
all in order to procure the most amount of monetary wealth possible, what I’m going to call here the ‘the lure of profitability.’ In order to understand the ‘lure of profitability’ as an accounting for the production of pre-consumer waste in the contemporary moment, we must consider an analysis of contemporary society’s mode of production: capitalism. This paper understands the concept of mode of production as not merely material or technical processes of production, but rather as the configuration of dominant social relations in any given society. In the contemporary United States, as with elsewhere in an increasingly globalized society, the social categories of monetary value and capital, alongside the commodity form and abstract labor, constitute the dominant social relations that configure the mode of production. Thereby, I examine and interrogate these social categories at the level of the mode of production, or social totality, in order describe the historically specific and systematic character of pre-consumer waste, and ultimately to account for this form of waste by the ‘lure of profitability’.

So, let me briefly explain what I mean by these categories of monetary value and capital, and the associated processes of valorization and capital accumulation. The key to think about here is that capitalist production is oriented toward monetary value, valorization, and capital accumulation.

Value is capitalism’s historically unique form of social wealth. It is produced by human labor power, which is the crux of Karl Marx’s labor theory of value. Value is only dominant where the commodity form is universal as in, for example, capitalism in the United States. When the products of different particular kinds of labor are placed into a relationship of commensurability through the process of exchange, value is what each product has in common (the measure of value is abstract labor-time). Value is not something that can be seen explicitly; it is hidden within the product of labor, so that what is visible is the product itself (i.e. the commodity form). Because value cannot be seen but the commodity form can be, value appears to be inherent to the commodity, rather than transferred and embedded into the commodity through the labor process. This latter point is what Marx referred to as the commodity fetish. The most explicit form of appearance of value is money (or, another way of thinking about this is, money symbolizes value). Thereby, an important way of thinking about value for the purposes of this paper is as monetary wealth, especially in contradistinction to the idea of merely material wealth.

Valorization is the production and extraction of ever-greater quantities of (surplus) value (or monetary wealth). Capital accumulation is valorization in a continual cycle, the perpetual extraction of ever-greater quantities of (surplus) value in order to continue to extract ever-increasing quantities of (surplus) value. Valorization for the purposes of capital accumulation is the primary goal of capitalist production.

However, in order for value to be realized and, thus, valorized (for capital accumulation), it requires embodiment in a use-value, material wealth. Capitalist production creates material wealth in the commodity form for the primary purpose of being exchanged in order to function as the bearer of monetary value. Thus, providing subsistence is not the primary goal of capitalist production nor is the production of goods that make our lives better, though these are secondary, almost coincidental, outcomes. The primary goal of capitalist production is the production of value, specifically for the purposes of valorization and capital accumulation. In short, the goal of capitalist production is the creation of ever increasing amounts of monetary wealth, just for its own sake. Simply put, profit-making. This is what Karl Marx means when he writes, “production for production’s sake.”
Because the primary goal of capitalist production is the valorization of value for the purpose of capital accumulation, i.e. profit-making, the production of material wealth in the commodity form is subsumed within and determined by the process of valorization. In this way, capitalist society takes on a dual-dimensionality: the appearance of capitalist society as concrete marked by material wealth (use-value) mediated and determined by the abstract underlying logic constituted by monetary value and capital.

Waste in capitalism is situated at the nexus of the concrete and abstract dimensions. Waste is traditionally defined as material objects discarded after consumption, e.g. garbage, trash, or refuse. But, because material objects in capitalism take on the form of the commodity, waste is not merely material. Like the secret concealed within the commodity itself, waste has an abstract dimension determined by the value form that must be uncovered to grasp its historically specific form and systematic character, and the specific way in which it – waste - is accumulated in the contemporary moment.

Because capitalism’s primary purpose is to strive toward extracting ever-greater quantities of monetary wealth, capitalism functions as what Moishe Postone calls a “treadmill of production.” The treadmill of capitalist production contains a significant contradiction: extracting ever-greater quantities of monetary wealth is dependent upon the production of exponential increases in the quantity of material wealth. The key point here to remember is that monetary value is embedded in commodities that must be produced, distributed, and sold in order for the monetary value to be realized. And, despite this explosion of material wealth in the contemporary moment, monetary value still remains the dominant form of social wealth in capitalism.

Pre-consumer waste is a direct result of this treadmill of production, and the way in which production is oriented toward (monetary) value (money), valorization, and capital accumulation. The treadmill of capitalist production is such that an explosion of material wealth is produced in order to procure the most amount of monetary wealth possible, i.e. profitability. Yet, the overproduction of material wealth has created a glut of commodities on the market, some of which is un-able to be sold, un-able to have the monetary value embodied in the material form realized. In not fulfilling their primary objective for the purposes of profit-making, these commodities are discarded as waste.

In theory, this waste could be cycled back into the production process. However, in both the United States and the European Union, only 1/3 of garbage is recycled or composted. The remaining 2/3 is incinerated or disposed of in landfills. One of the main reasons recycling is not successful as a practice is that recycling is not driven by individual consumer habits and what consumers put in their recycling bins, but rather by production and the market. As noted in The Economist’s 2009 article, ‘A Special Report on Waste’ recycling is often more expensive than natural resource extraction. Most importantly, even if products are recycled, they are re-made into commodities that increasingly cannot be sold on the market, or that will be discarded shortly after consumption. In short, recycled products still end up as waste.

Exponential increases in material wealth via the treadmill of production also increase the amount of waste generated as a byproduct in the production process, what I call production waste. For example, the Environmental Protection Agency estimates that the United States produces 7.6 billion tons of industrial solid waste each year.5
The treadmill of capitalist production also requires ever greater increases in natural resource extraction as the material foundation required for the process of realizing ever greater quantities of monetary wealth. Many natural resources that capitalists and corporations rely on to maintain and expand capitalist production are not renewable, e.g. fossil fuels and minerals. These resources have formed over an extended geological-historical period, and once used up, are irreplaceable in the contemporary moment. Renewable resources are seemingly more easily replenished, e.g. sunlight, air, wind, water, agricultural crops, and forests. Yet, the massive quantity of waste—including pre-consumer, post-consumer, and production wastes—that are produced as a result of capitalist production increasingly pollute these resources, making them un-useable as the material foundation for capitalist production, as well as basic human survival.

Furthermore, as capitalist production continues to generate an explosion of material wealth, natural resources are extracted to become the raw materials for commodities that are increasingly unsalable on the market. These commodities cannot be un-done into their component parts as raw materials and natural resources, and put back into the earth. Produced in the commodity form as the bearer of monetary value that increasingly cannot be realized, nature in late capitalism is increasingly extracted and produced as waste, what I call 'nature-as-waste'.

There are several Marxian scholars, such as Robert Kurz, Norbert Trenkle, and Neil Larsen who argue that capitalism has reached a state of permanent crisis, an historical moment of the dis-accumulation of capital, where levels of productivity have been reached at which valorization and capital accumulation are no longer possible, though these processes still dominantly mediate and determine the production process. This is not to argue that certain industries or individual capitals are not profitable, but at the level of the social totality, or mode of production, capital has reached an absolute crisis state. With rapidly increasing levels of productivity, individual capitals can extract increasing amounts of surplus value, but realizing this value through capital’s continued accumulation as a whole is difficult or very likely impossible. The dis-accumulation of capital translates into a form of capitalist production that is still mediated and determined by value and the valorization process, even if, increasingly, there are obstacles to valorization.

My own contribution to this theory of capitalism’s crisis state is this: While quite possibly no longer accumulating capital, what valorization is accumulating, then, is an ever-increasing quantity (and ecologically destructive composition) of waste. From the standpoint of the mode of production, waste, in material form, reveals the excess (surplus) of valorization that, in the contemporary historical moment of late capitalism, has reached a tipping point. Capitalism, which strives toward valorization, has produced too much surplus value for it to all to be (re)incorporated into the valorization process. That which is not able to be (re)incorporated into that process is waste. Waste, then, functions as a historically specific social category for delineating the ecological limits of capitalism’s drive for valorization and seemingly limitless capital accumulation.

I’ll end my paper today by pointing out what I think of as one of the greatest contradictions of capitalism that waste reveals – immiseration – on the one hand, the immiseration of nature, or nature-as-waste that I’ve already mentioned, and, on the other hand, the immiseration of human life, what I’ve written about as ‘the human-as-waste.’ In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, we are seeing the rise of an absolute surplus population, a population of people who will never be formally employed as labor by capital, thereby expelled and excreted from the capitalist system of labor and wages. Without access to labor and wages, these surplus populations are left without the means to access subsistence, and often end up attempting to survive through temporary and informal labor, including
the black market and trash picking, which, by the way, cannot support the ever increasing growth of the absolute surplus population. While perfectly usable material items are discarded as waste, millions, quite possibly billions, of people in the world starve, lacking access to the basic products necessary for subsistence and survival.\textsuperscript{10}

\begin{itemize}
  \item[1] In part, post-consumer waste is studied because we Americans produce quite a lot of it. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (2011a), in 2009, American households produced about 243 million tons of garbage, (technically known as ‘municipal solid waste’), which averages out to approximately four pounds per person per day. [This is slightly better than our European counterparts.] According to the European Commission’s Environmental Data Centre on Waste (2010), in 2010, households in the European Union generated approximately 3 billion tons of garbage, averaging out to approximately six pounds per person per day.
  \item[2] As Susan Strasser writes in her book \textit{Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash}, “the lure of convenience” means that individual households, especially the women of any household, buy disposable products in order to save on labor time, namely household labor. It is also more convenient and cheaper for service industries to employ single use and disposable items than it is to pay wages to workers.
  \item[3] In her essay “History of Waste,” Verena Winiwarter argues that waste can be understood through an analysis of the form and character of a society’s mode of production. She writes that: The amount and composition of wastes are characteristic of the specific mode of production of a society. The type of input from nature into society determines what is leftover at the end, i.e. determines output. In understanding waste, societies need to be described not only in terms of their cultural or political systems, but also as material entities that channel material and energy flows. They can be described as having a metabolism, just like individual organisms. Using the concept of social metabolism, and coupling this idea with the notion of modes of production (or subsistence), gives a useful concept to describe waste systematically and to understand its change over time. (2002:40)
  \item[4] Following Winiwarter’s observation, this paper intends to understand the meaning of pre-consumer waste systematically via an analysis of contemporary society’s mode of production: capitalism.
  \item[5] A side note: Moishe Postone, following Karl Marx, uses the term “self-valorize” here rather than “be valorized,” as a way of pointing to the character of capitalism as a system that is constituted by people but also seemingly functions outside of our control; that the capitalist system controls and dominates us rather than the other way around. In this sense, value, along with labor, the commodity form, and capital seemingly have a life of their own.
  \item[6] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (2011b); This estimate was generated in the 1980s, and could now be low. Many industries illegally dump sludges and other production wastes; thereby, these wastes are not recorded in production waste statistics.
  \item[7] See, for example, Brenner (2009)
  \item[8] Arguably, surplus value is only constituted as surplus value through the valorization process. Thus, that which is designated as surplus value here is not as such, hence my designation of this as waste. However, following Marx, I still use the term surplus value in this context to distinguish material wealth production in capitalism for the purpose of valorization and not as material wealth in itself. In other words, the usage of surplus value here explains why this is waste in an historically specific capitalist context.
  \item[9] While capitalist production generates useful items as waste and consumers are compelled to discard commodities, natural resources are extracted at ever-greater quantities, eroding the material foundation for continued capitalist production.
  \item[10] Several scholars beside myself have written about this in various ways in the past decade or so, including Mike Davis and Aaron Benanav. Though absolute surplus populations are outside
the scope of labor – in the sense that they lack access to it - their lives are nonetheless mediated and defined by it making of them what German scholar Robert Kurz calls “monetary subjects without money” (cited in Larsen 1997: on-line).

10 Two questions to consider: How much waste marks the tipping point for which capital can no longer sustain its necessary material foundation, causing the collapse of the capitalist mode of production? Will the ecological limits of capitalist production also mark the limits to humanity’s ability to survive on planet earth?

References


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