

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

1. 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.¹ 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 lay at the heart of modernity. Scanlan shows that waste has been a central category in 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 critical 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

¹ Susan Strasser, *Waste and want: A Social History of Trash* (New York: Owl Books, 1999); (1997) John Scanlan, *On Garbage* (London, Reaktion, 2005); William Cohen and Ryan Johnson, *Filth: Dirt, Disgust and Modern Life* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2005); Richard Girling, *Rubbish: Dirt on Our Hands and Crisis Ahead* (London: Random House, 2005); Heather Rogers, *Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage* (London, The New Press, 2005).

regimes', particular modes of valorizing waste and of disciplining subjects in relation to waste.² For Gille waste is as much as social process as 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 is 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 mobilised 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 nonwaste 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.³

² Zsuzsa Gille, *From the Cult of Waste to the Trash Heap of History: The Politics of Waste in Socialist and Post-socialist Hungary* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2007).

³ *Ibid*, p. 34.

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 rest of this article is concerned to take up this appeal for attention to the historicity of 'waste regimes'. It is particularly concerned to address the politics of waste and the ways in which waste, as a central category of modernity, was contested in the production and reproduction of twentieth-century Britain's waste regime. In what follows, both Scanlan's and Gille's critical perspectives on waste will be employed to interrogate the nexus of economic, social, political and ideological factors which determined the politics of waste in Britain between 1945 and 1975. It is argued that the politics of affluence established in the 1950s required the establishment of a particular type of 'waste regime', and that the sustainability of this regime was increasingly challenged in the 1960s and 1970s by a nascent environmentalism. The environmentalist critique of the 'throwaway society' found particular resonance within the left-wing of the Labour Party, whose pre-existing antipathy towards affluence provided fertile soil for the reception of new environmental ideas. By the early 1970s, the emerging challenges to the established 'waste regime' and to affluence were powerful enough to demand a response in defence of the *status quo*. In 1974, the Labour government began the first national anti-waste programme known as the 'War on Waste' whose purpose was to respond to criticisms of the 'throwaway society' and to articulate the idea that technological innovation possessed the power to indefinitely sustain the affluence. The core of this initiative was the idea of recycling, which was employed to negate a left-environmentalist critique emerging from both within and without the Labour Party.

2. The Throwaway Society

Recent sociological and anthropological study has challenged the utility of the term ‘throwaway society’ as a critical concept. N. Gregson, A. Metcalfe and L. Crewe, for example, have suggested that the term obscures both the circulation of objects and the processes by which they are subjected to social revaluation; they emphasize the affective qualities of material objects.⁴ Others have challenged the assumption that there were any insuperable technical problems facing twentieth-century waste disposal.⁵ These insights suggest the need to employ terms like ‘throwaway society’ and ‘waste crisis’ with care, and that critical study should increasingly focus on the discursive purposes of such ideas. Nonetheless, historical studies have revealed important changes in the material and social characteristics of twentieth-century urban waste production and disposal such that the idea of the ‘throwaway society’ may not yet have lost all critical utility.

⁴ Nicky Gregson, Alan Metcalfe and Louise Crewe, “Identity, Mobility and the Throwaway Society”, *Environment and Planning D, Society and Space*, 25, 2007, pp. 682-700; Martin O’Brien, *A Crisis of Waste: Understanding the Rubbish Society* (London, Routledge, 2008).

⁵ Martin Melosi, ‘Down in the Dumps: is there a Garbage Crisis in America?’, in M. Melosi, *Effluent America: Cities, Industry, Energy and the Environment* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), pp. 68-91. For other sceptical views on the ‘waste crisis’ see B. Lomborg, *The Sceptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 206-209; Judd Alexander, *In Defense of Garbage* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993), pp. 7-10.

The throwaway society, for example, should not be seen simply as a society that generated more waste, but also as one that had made certain conceptions of disposal central to its identity. This is apparent in the transformation of the British waste regime in the century following the Public Health Act 1875, which inaugurated a period of professionalization and municipalization of waste disposal services which B. Luckin has aptly termed the ‘Refuse Revolution’.⁶ The fetishization of hygiene, and its embodiment in new modes of disciplinary and ‘biopolitical’ governance popularized the idea that perfect urban cleansing and waste disposal were essential characteristics of civilized living.⁷ By the 1920s, the ‘litter nuisance’ was already an established topic of public

⁶ Bill Luckin “Pollution in the city”, in M. J. Daunton, ed., *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, Vol 3: 1840-1950* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 220-1. For more on the transformation of refuse disposal since 1875 see: Andrea Tanner, “Dust-O! Rubbish in Victorian London, 1860-1900”, *London Journal*, 31, 2, 2006, pp. 157-178; John Clark, “‘The Incineration of Refuse is Beautiful’: Torquay and the Introduction of Municipal Refuse Destructors”, *Urban History*, 34, 2, 2007, pp. 255-277.

⁷ Chris Otter, “Making Liberalism Durable; Vision and Civility in the late-Victorian City”, *Journal of Social History*, 27, 1, 2002, pp. 1-15; “Cleansing and Clarifying: Technology and Perception in Nineteenth-Century London”, *Journal of British Studies*, 43, 1, 2004, pp. 40-64.

discourse reflecting the increasing cleanliness of cities which made the presence of new disposable packaging waste more the more apparent.⁸

Nonetheless, in the 1920s and 1930s the British waste regime still retained certain characteristics that were distinctive survivals from an earlier more utilitarian view of the uses of waste. Perhaps the most important of these was the continuance of recycling as an important 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 the available techniques of waste disposal remained varied.⁹ Post-war shortages ensured the survival of this officially sponsored culture of reuse and thrift into the fifties.¹⁰

⁸ Peter Scott, 'Did Owner-occupation lead to Smaller Families for Interwar Working-class Households?', *Economic History Review*, 61, 1, 2008, pp. 99-124; David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion, 1999), pp. 67-70; Timothy Cooper, "The Litter Nuisance in Twentieth-century Britain", in J.F.M. Clark and J. Scanlan, eds., *The World Turned Inside Out: Waste in History and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009).

⁹ Timothy Cooper, "Challenging the 'Refuse Revolution': War, Waste and the Rediscovery of Recycling, 1900-50", *Historical Research*, 81, 214, 2007, pp. 710-731.

¹⁰ Mark Riley, "From Salvage to Recycling – New Agendas or Same Old Rubbish?", *Area*, 40, 1, 2008, pp. 1-11.

During the 1950s and 1960s, however, Britain's waste regime was decisively altered, and it is at this point that it is important to pay attention to the social and economic relations of waste production. To understand the changes taking place at this time it *is* necessary to look at the changing nature of the waste stream in this period. Between 1939 and 1968, the estimated *weight* of household waste collected by English municipalities rose by 36 percent, about half of this increase was due to changes in the standard of living rather than natural growth.¹¹ However, the most important change was a question of the material quality of municipal waste. New packaging materials, which were lighter and more resistant to decomposition, were crucial to the transformation of waste. Their influence can be detected in the professional discourses which constructed the 'waste problem'.¹² Frank Flintoff observed in 1969, for instance, that changing

¹¹ Frank Flintoff, "Refuse, Scrap and Litter", *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 1968, pp. 750-70. Between 1931 and 1971, the English population rose from 37,359,000 to 45,870,100 (a 19% increase), suggesting that probably about 50 percent of the increase can be accounted for by changing consumption patterns. The *density* of household waste fell over the same period.

¹² These changes were apparent even before the 1950s. In 1948, East Ham's cleansing superintendent, W. Price, observed that 'In more recent times the nature of the paper placed out for collection has changed; the proportion of flat news is considerably less and a much larger quantity of cardboard cartons and similar bulky material has taken its place, [and] cause the baskets to become quickly filled'. W. Price, "House Refuse:

consumption patterns were reducing the density of refuse and increasingly making the *volume* of municipal waste the main issue.¹³ Some households, he observed, already required two bins for their household refuse and municipal disposal costs were growing at the rate of 10 percent per annum. The growth in household waste prompted calls for households to ‘reduce their intake of disposable refuse’.¹⁴

The causes of these changes were multifarious. J. Sumner, observed in 1964 that ‘the reasons for these changes are well known’:

They are due to several factors including the changed standards of living, 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

Improved Methods of Collection and Disposal”, *Journal of the Royal Sanitary Institute*, 3, 1948, p. 171.

¹³ As Frank Flintoff argued: ‘We are now entering a period of very dramatic change in the character and quantity of refuse, and it is very important that we should think, and express ourselves, in terms which will avoid self-complacency, and also bring home to others, especially the policy formers, the true nature of the problem. Volume, not density, is the real issue’. Frank Flintoff, “Refuse – The Volume Explosion”, *Public Cleansing*, July, 1969, p. 309.

¹⁴ William Darling, “Future Possibilities in Public Cleansing”, *Public Cleansing and Salvage*, August, 1954, p. 393.

the restrictions on the burning of refuse, particularly trade refuse, imposed by Smoke Control Orders.¹⁵

It was axiomatic that the ‘Modern Design of Living’ was responsible for the changing character of municipal waste. C. Peacock (cleansing superintendent for South Shields) for instance enumerated the changes affecting the material composition of waste:

The new housing estates with their up-to-date methods of heating are everyday features of our present life. 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. Where putrescible matter is concerned, the advent of school meals and the growing practice of a large percentage of the whole of the adult population engaging in business, has presaged another material change.

However, these changing responses to the materiality of waste were not simply tied to changes in its quantitative presence. Professional public cleansing discourses also reflect an affective response municipal waste. There was a clear sense of volume as a key problem, and a recognition that packaging, rather than ash was increasingly characteristic of household refuse, even though it was not (and is not) quantitatively dominant. There

¹⁵ J. Sumner, “Technical Developments in Refuse Collection and Disposal”, *Chartered Municipal Engineer*, 91, March, 1964, p. 95: “Smokeless Zones Change the Nature of House Refuse”, *Municipal Journal*, May 11, 1956. P. Thorsheim, *Inventing Pollution: Coal, Smoke and Culture in Britain Since 1800* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006).

was also a sense of changing social and economic processes being made visible in municipal wastes. This visibility was what constituted the ‘throwaway society’. It was 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.

The visibility of social change in waste was most commonly manifested in discourses surrounding pre-packed food products, where the relations between the material nature of waste and the changing character of modern capitalist production became apparent. Packaging was presented by industry as a desirable innovation because modern and hygienic.¹⁶ But it was also absolutely essential to overcoming the established taboos of a hygiene obsessed society, which was essential to the spread of the supermarket distribution system. By providing a boundary between the clean and the unclean, and allowing customers to individually select and assess items without risk of

¹⁶ In 1957, the president of the Food Manufacturers’ Federation, R.S. Worth, confidently associated packaging with the banishment of austerity and claimed that, along with the end of rationing, it had increased the diversity and nutritional quality of the British diet. See ‘Survey of Food in Britain’, *The Times*, suppl., January 21, 1957, x. Packaging was presented as a means of revitalizing the waning sale of fresh foods: ‘potatoes were undoubtedly one of the most unattractive articles sold in the greengrocers store; but, offered in unit packs, well cleaned and graded, and packaged in printed transparent film bags, they are now attractive and have sales appeal’. “Supplement on Britain’s Food”, *The Times*, suppl., March 9, 1959, vii.

contamination, packaging enabled supermarket self-service to function.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

In 1964, Monsanto Chemicals announced increases in the production of polystyrene of between 50 and 120 percent, 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

¹⁷ W. G. McClelland, “Economics of the Supermarket”, *Economic Journal*, 72, 285, 1962, pp. 154-170; G. Shaw, L. Curth, A. Alexander, “Selling Self-Service and the Supermarket: The Americanisation of Food Retailing in Britain, 1945-60”, *Business History*, 46, 4, 2004, pp. 568-582.

¹⁸ “Survey of Food”, xix.

and the spread of the supermarket's influence'.¹⁹ By 1970, it was estimated that 7 billion bottles and 6 billion cans were being discarded each year.²⁰

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. I. Zweiniger-Bargielowska has demonstrated that the Conservative Party successfully challenged Labour's electoral advantage by exploiting dissatisfaction with austerity.²¹

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

¹⁹ *The Times*, January 24, 1964, p. 19e.

²⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, April 20, 1971, p. 14.

²¹ Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls and Consumption, 1939-1955* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 255; "Consensus and Consumptions: Rationing, Austerity and Controls after the War", in H. Jones and M. Kandiah, eds., *The Myth of Consensus: New Views on British History, 1945-64* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 79-96; "Rationing, Austerity and the Conservative Party Recovery after 1945", *Historical Journal*, 37, 1, 1994, p. 180.

and middle-class voters, initially deprived Labour of its landslide majority and subsequently of its hold on power'.²²

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 marginalised by the so-called 'revisionist' amalgam of Keynesianism and commitments to economic growth and welfare.²³

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.²⁴ By 1968, 834 out of 1,226 local authorities in England and Wales disposed of their domestic waste primarily through

²² Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *op cit*, pp. 263-4.

²³ Catherine Ellis, 'Total Abstinence and a Good Filing System? Anthony Crosland and the Affluent Society' in L. Black and H. Pemberton, eds., *An Affluent Society: Britain's Post-War Golden Age Revisited* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 69-84; Jim Tomlinson, "'Inventing 'Decline': The Falling Behind of the British Economy in the Post-war Years", *Economic History Review*, 49, 4, November 1996, pp. 731-757.

²⁴ M.J.C. Kennett, "The disposal of household refuse", *Town and Country Planning*, 1967, p. 158; A. Mann, "War-time Cleansing Problems", *Public Cleansing and Salvage*, May (1943), pp. 315-331; J. Forton, "Future of the Public Cleansing Service", *Public Cleansing and Salvage*, June 1943, pp. 355-359; G.C. McArthur, "Refuse Disposal in the Light of Present Experience", *Public Cleansing and Salvage*, September 1945, pp. 44-50; A.L.T., "What is Waste?", *Public Cleansing and Salvage*, July 1945, pp. 462-463.

‘controlled tipping’.²⁵ The ‘waste regime’ established in the post-war era embedded new forms of consumption and new types of waste, and increasingly marginalized use in favour of disposal.²⁶ The dominance of controlled tipping thus arose in, and supported, a political commitment to high levels of consumption, and this close relationship of the ways of wasting 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.

3. Environmentalism against the ‘Waste Regime’

It is important to recognise 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.²⁷ A minority, like J.C. Wylie and other advocates of waste composting, concerned themselves with waste as lost resource.²⁸ Nonetheless, the ‘throwaway society’

²⁵ Frank Flintoff, “Refuse, Scrap and Litter”, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, August 1968, p. 756.

²⁶ Jeremy Black, *Britain Since the Seventies: Politics and Society in the Consumer Age* (London, Reaktion, 2004).

²⁷ “Expensive Packaging”, *The Times*, October 18, 1957, p. 11g; “Expensive Packaging”, *The Times* October 22, 1957, p. 11g; “Expensive Packaging”, *The Times*, October 23, 1957, p. 11g; “The Positive Joys of Frugality”, *The Times*, April 7, 1966, p. 14g.

²⁸ In 1957 Wylie observed that: ‘[w]ith rising living standards the value of refuse also rises and the natural resources of the world cannot keep pace indefinitely with destruction

only came to face a sustained challenge on environmental grounds from the early 1970s, when, as M. Melosi argues, ‘scarcity replaced abundance’ as the dominant subject of popular and political discourse.²⁹ 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 narratives of the impending collapse of civilization.³⁰ OPEC’s restriction of oil production provided a prescient experience of what a world of real resource scarcity might look like, including energy rationing, short-time working, unemployment and economic stagnation. The energy crisis apparently vindicated precisely what ‘doomwatch’ futurologists had been saying since the end of the sixties: resources were finite, and economic and population growth could not be sustained indefinitely.³¹

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

on such a scale’ J.C. Wylie, “The disposal and utilization of refuse”, *Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers.*, 8, December 1957, p. 413.

²⁹ Martin Melosi, *Coping with Abundance: Energy and Environment in Industrial America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), p. 295.

³⁰ Mauricio Schoijet, “Limits to Growth and the Rise of Catastrophism”, *Environmental History*, 4, 1999, pp. 515-30. Fiona Venn, *The Oil Crisis* (London: Pearson, 2002).

³¹ Björn-Ola Linnér, *The Return of Malthus: Environmentalism and Post-war Population-Resource Crises* (Isle of Harris: White Horse Press, 2003), pp. 93-116.

of materials which result from a high-growth, energy consuming, and environmentally damaging way of life'.³² 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'.³³ The campaign began in April 1971 with the 'return' of thousands of 'non-returnable' bottles outside of Cadbury-Schweppes UK headquarters, and was carried on intermittently throughout the year through the press, public advertising and demonstrations. Cadbury-Schweppes, were initially wrong-footed by the campaign's concerns with scarcity and viewed the campaign as of a traditional amenity type, a spokesman for the company issued the well practiced defence that 'Litter is not caused by manufacturers; it is caused by litterbugs'.³⁴ This response reflected a profound misunderstanding of the nature of early environmentalism, confusing it with the aesthetic

³² Stephen Cotgrove and Andrew Duff, 'Environmentalism, Values and Social Change', *British Journal of Sociology*, 32, 1, March 1981, p. 93.

³³ "Shh! - They're Returning the Non-Returnable", *Observer*, April 4, 1971, p. 8; Robert. Lamb, *Promising the Earth* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 39.

³⁴ *Observer*, December 5, 1971, p. 14.

concerns of amenity organisations such as the National Trust or CPRE.³⁵

Environmentalists had to work hard to make explicit the distinctions between the old and the new critiques of waste.³⁶

The campaign against non-returnable bottles established waste as one of the main concerns of British environmentalism. Environmentalists worked to emphasize the connection between the waste and pollution and the idea of waste as the irrational,

³⁵ “Differences of approach between the various lobbying organisations have also become apparent...the town and country preservation bodies of the past have little in common with the more analytical environmental groups that have been created...a class division has again appeared between the more action oriented Friends of the Earth and the more sedate Conservation Society...Unlike the more traditional environmental bodies, the Friends of the Earth are mounting a broad challenge to the way we run our economy” See “Down to Earth”, *Guardian*, August 6, 1975, p. 11; “The Law of Conservation of Energy”, *Your Environment*, 3, 2, 1972, pp. 47-50.

³⁶ “The problem of litter, while significant, must not be allowed to distort the overall perspective when considering packaging and its problems. The packaging industry is fond of focusing attention exclusively on litter as ‘the number one environmental problem’, to quote one advertisement. It is, of course, nothing of the kind. Litter is unaesthetic, a nuisance and from time to time locally dangerous. But the use of resources in packaging is a much more serious problem.” *Packaging in Britain: A Policy for Containment*, (London: Friends of the Earth, 1972), p. 55.

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 recognise, 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.³⁷

These kinds of post-Carsonian concerns with inorganic wastes accumulating in an environment which threatened ultimately to return them in the form of health hazards demoted the discourse of waste as aesthetic problem in preference for 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.³⁸

³⁷ L. Reid, "Our Earth". *Contemporary Review*, 221, 1972 p. 99.

³⁸ "We live in an era of shortages... This may sound more than obvious to those who have queued many hours for a gallon of petrol, or who have donated money after the failure of a harvest in some remote part of the world, or who have seen their newspaper shrink to the size of a brief handout...[c]onservation means more a redirection of our

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 which 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’.³⁹ Observing the cost to the consumer of ‘the ever increasing cost of refuse disposal’ he continued ‘Given the fact that manufacturers create the problem, they should be required to meet the costs which the community incur’.⁴⁰ The possibilities for action against this system of waste were restricted by the inadequacy of mechanisms of consumer ‘choice’. Christine Thomas observed that:

society than a device for enabling it to creak along for a little longer. It involves doing away with waste, organizing industry and commerce to meet the real needs of people such as food, shelter, health and employment (globally, not just for the favoured few.”

Waste Not: A Report Prepared for Camden Council on the Feasibility of Recycling Waste Paper (Camden, Friends of the Earth, 1974), p.2-3.

³⁹ *The Times*, May 27, 1971, p. 17e.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

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.⁴¹

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, S.P. 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’.⁴² 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 observes the relationship between the New Left and early recycling

⁴¹ Christine Thomas, *Material Gains: Reclamation, Recycling, and Reuse* (London: Friends of the Earth, 1975), p. 84.

⁴² Samuel Hays, *A History of Environmental Politics Since 1945* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press 2000), p. 204.

initiatives.⁴³ Manuals for aspiring environmentalists such as FOE's *Consumer's Guide to the Protection of the Environment* (1971), emphasized the possibility of energizing local environmental campaigning by organising recycling clubs.⁴⁴ 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'.⁴⁵ Consumers were encouraged to return their waste packaging as a means of putting pressure on supermarkets.⁴⁶ 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 affect each personally...By a change in the way each member of the community

⁴³ Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington, 2005 edn.), p. 138.

⁴⁴ John Holliman, *Consumer's Guide to the Protection of the Environment* (London: Ballantine Books, 1971), pp. 153-175.

⁴⁵ Garrett De Bell, "Recycling", in J. Barr, ed., *The Environmental Handbook* (1970), p. 217.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

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 lives⁴⁷

4. The Left and the ‘Throwaway Society’

N. Carter has argued that the limited politicization of the environment in twentieth-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’.⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹

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

⁴⁷ Friends of the Earth, *Waste Not*, p. 8.

⁴⁸ Neil Carter, ‘Party Politicisation of the Environment in Britain’, *Party Politics*, 12, 6, 2006, pp. 747-767.

⁴⁹ Stephen Brooke, “Revisionists and Fundamentalists: The Labour Party and Economic Policy during the Second World War”, *Historical Journal*, 32, 1, 1989, pp. 157-75.

modernisation, growth and consumption that had been the basis of Labour's electoral success under Harold Wilson. Despite continuing problems of industrial competitiveness, Britain had been able to maintain historically high levels of economic growth during the immediate post-war decades.⁵⁰ Concern with industrial performance and economic decline, which became prominent in the 1960s, reinforced the revisionist commitment to growth and consumption.⁵¹ However, as Lawrence Black has demonstrated, significant elements of the Labour left continued to define the party's purpose in opposition to affluence.⁵² Crossman's *Labour in the Affluent Society* (1956) 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 J.K. Galbraith or V. Packard.⁵³ Domestically, E.J. Mishan's *The Costs of Economic Growth* (1967) 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

⁵⁰ Sean Glynn and Alan Booth, *Modern Britain: An Economic and Social History* (London, Routledge, 1996), pp. 192-6.

⁵¹ Jim Tomlinson, "Inventing 'Decline': the Falling behind of the British Economy in the Postwar Years", *Economic History Review*, 49, 4, 1996, pp. 752.

⁵² Lawrence Black, *The Political Culture of the Left in Affluent Britain, 1951-64: Old Labour, New Britain?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 92.

‘rapid obsolescence’.⁵⁴ 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 influence Labour party politics.

Patrick N. Edmunds was perhaps exaggerating when he called the *Blueprint for Survival* ‘comparable in significance to Marx’s Communist Manifesto’, but his view reflected the impact of the serialisation of *Blueprint* during January 1972.⁵⁵ 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’.⁵⁶

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

⁵⁴ Ezra Mishan, “Economic Priority: Growth or Welfare?”, *Political Quarterly*, 40, 1, 1969, pp. 79-89, p. 83; John Davis, “‘Simple solutions to complex problems’: the Greater London Council and the Greater London Development Plan, 1965-1973”, in J. Harris, ed., *Civil Society in British History: Ideas, Identities, Institutions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 249-74.

⁵⁵ P. N. Edmunds, “Growth or Survival”, *Contemporary Review*, 220, 1972, pp. 184.

⁵⁶ Ezra Mishan, “The No-Growth Society – Postscript to an Epilogue”, *Contemporary Review*, 227, 1975, pp. 169.

Tribune saw extensive discussion of the relationship between environmentalism and socialism.⁵⁷ Existing concerns with pollution and amenity, while remaining important, was 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 on non-returnable bottles. We must husband conserve and recycle our resources’.⁵⁸ 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’.⁵⁹

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

⁵⁷ “Ecology and Socialism: the Argument Grows”, *Tribune*, March 3, 1972, p. 8.

⁵⁸ Peter Jackson, “This Over-populated, Polluted Planet”, *Tribune*, January 21, 1972, p. 10.

⁵⁹ Michael Barrett Brown, *Tribune*, February 4, 1972, p. 9.

Executive to develop environmental policy.⁶⁰ Influenced by the ongoing campaign against Schweppes-Cadbury, 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 per cent’.⁶¹ 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’.⁶² 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’.⁶³

In the early 1970s, therefore, environmentalism found had an important influence on the left of the Labour party, which reflected the survival of anti-affluence ideas within

⁶⁰ *Report of the Seventy-first Annual Conference of the Labour Party* (London: The Labour Party, 1972), pp. 328-337.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, pp. 329-330.

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 331.

⁶³ *Ibid*.

the Labour party.⁶⁴ As S. 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. Their was an experience of life unde a different kind of waste regime, one they associated with a profoundly more ethical state of social organisation. A significant minority of local Labour party members consequently held on to an essentially anti-affluence ideology.⁶⁵ Fielding argues that these anti-affluence activists were struggling against the electoral tide.⁶⁶ However, in the early 1970s, anti-affluence ideas briefly coincided with radical environmental concerns, challenging the centrality of growth to labour 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

⁶⁴ It must be acknowledged that the environment remained a minority concern within the Labour party as a whole. A survey of one local labour party showed that only 15 per cent of its members thought that the environment was an issue of ‘national concern’ whereas 34 per cent believed that ‘socialism’ meant ‘raising the standard of living’ three percent more than those who believed it meant ‘greater social equality’. See T. Forrester, “Anatomy of a Local Labour Party”, *New Statesman*, September 28, 1973, pp. 416.

⁶⁵ Steven Fielding “‘Activists against “Affluence’: Labour Party Culture during the “Golden Age,” circa 1950-1970”, *Journal of British Studies*, 40, 2, 2001, pp. 241-267.

⁶⁶ Steven Fielding and Duncan Tanner, “The ‘Rise of the Left’ Revisited: Labour Party Culture in Post-war Manchester and Salford”, *Labour History Review*, 71, 3, 2006, pp. 211-233.

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.⁶⁷

Those who had always opposed prioritising 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'.⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹ 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.

⁶⁷ C. Harvie, "Letters", *Tribune*, January 28, 1972, p.8.

⁶⁸ *Labour Weekly*, September 20, 1974, p. 12.

⁶⁹ "Control of the Environment", *Tribune*, February 25, 1972.

5. 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.⁷⁰ 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'.⁷¹ 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 (1970).⁷²

⁷⁰ *The Protection of the Environment: the Fight against Pollution* (HMSO: Cmnd 4373, 1969-70).

⁷¹ *Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, First Report* (1971), p. 14.

⁷² Derek Osborn, "Some Reflections on UK Environment Policy, 1970-1995", *Journal of Environmental Law*, 9, 1, 1997, pp. 3-22, 4.

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. Jeremy Bray, for instance, argued that Harold Wilson's concern to make an issue out of pollution in the wake of the *Torrey Canyon* disaster 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.⁷³

However, the environment was increasingly exercising a vocal minority 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'.⁷⁴ Amid growing political divisions within Labour on other issues, the environment was invoked as a direct challenge by the left to the party leadership. In August 1974, the left-wing *Labour Weekly* carried a review in which parliamentary candidate, Bryn Jones, challenged what he believed was the prevailing notion among Labour leaders 'that pollution is a middle-class concern'.⁷⁵ 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

⁷³ Jeremy Bray, "Tools for the Seventies", *Political Quarterly*, 41, 2, 1970, pp. 155.

⁷⁴ Jeremy Bray, "The Politics of the Environment", *Fabian Tracts*, 412, 1972.

⁷⁵ *Labour Weekly*, August 30, 1974, p. 19.

the leadership's reputation on environmental protection.⁷⁶ Defending 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]' as well as 'the growing interest of local Labour parties in questions of the environment'.⁷⁷ In his defence of revisionism, Crosland 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'.⁷⁸ 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 favoured by the Doomwatch school'.⁷⁹ For Crosland technology would come to the rescue: 'Most economists are highly sceptical [of the neo-Malthusian case], believing that new discoveries, recycling and the use of substitutes will keep us supplied for the foreseeable future'.⁸⁰ Recycling was appropriate by Crosland to defend of the sustainability of high levels of consumption and growth. No fundamental change was necessary to the basic economic tenets of revisionism, if society could feed off its own wastes.

The search for technological solutions to waste and resource scarcity which could negate environmentalist arguments for fundamental social and economic change, were

⁷⁶ *Labour Weekly*, September 6, 1974, p. 12.

⁷⁷ Anthony Crosland, "A Social Democratic Britain", *Fabian Tracts*, 404 (1971).

⁷⁸ Anthony Crosland, *Socialism Now* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1974), p. 152.

⁷⁹ *Guardian*, September 12, 1974, p. 24

⁸⁰ Crosland, *Socialism*, p. 154.

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 promised to address resource scarcity.⁸¹ The resulting green paper, published in September 1974, *War on Waste: A Policy for Reclamation*, 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.⁸²

The green paper promised measures to increase levels of industrial and municipal recycling through an 'integrated approach to the whole recycling chain'.⁸³ 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 organise on a national

⁸¹ *Labour Party Election Manifesto*, February 1974,

<http://www.psr.keele.ac.uk/area/uk/man/lab74feb.html>

⁸² *War on Waste: A Policy for Reclamation* (HMSO: Cmnd 5727, 1974), p. 1.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

basis to mobilise all the enthusiasm which exists in the community to do more about recycling'.⁸⁴

Some historians have argued that during the twentieth century the market in secondary materials was relatively successful in recycling industrial waste.⁸⁵ To the extent that this is true, it must also be recognised that the market in recycled materials was unstable, and its priorities dominated by commercial rather than environmental considerations.⁸⁶ To establish a truly effective recycling system, as *War on Waste* recognised, required the ironing out these inadequacies in the market for waste.⁸⁷ 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.⁸⁸ H.F. Wallis in a volume suggestively entitled *The New Battle of Britain* argued for government regulation of packaging materials to ensure bio-degradability, and a 'national reclamation agency' that would vet new packaging materials for their use of

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Brian Clapp, *An Environmental History of Britain* (London: Longmans 1994), pp. 189-216; See also Carl Zimring, *Cash for Your Trash: Scrap Recycling in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

⁸⁶ Hays, *op. cit.*, p. 204; Martin Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities: Refuse, Reform and the Environment, 1880-1980* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981), p. 223.

⁸⁷ *War on Waste*, p. 5.

⁸⁸ "Pessimism over resources", *Guardian*, September 14, 1971, p. 13.

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’.⁸⁹

The promotion of recycling, therefore, apparently indicated a need for government planning of the waste industry. In September 1974, Michael Meacher, junior minister in the Department of Industry (co-sponsor of 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’.⁹⁰ Meacher further argued that government intervention was a necessity if environmental ends were to be obtained: ‘by itself the market cannot bring reclamation to the optimum level. There are too many interests involved and too little communication between them’.⁹¹

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

⁸⁹ H.F. Wallis, *The New Battle of Britain: A Conservation Handbook and Directory* (London: Charles Knight, 1972), p. 59-65.

⁹⁰ *Guardian*, September 12, 1974, p. 13.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

packaging industry emerged largely unscathed: ‘The Government do 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’.⁹² 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”’.⁹³ 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 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’.⁹⁴ But the membership of the Waste Management Advisory

⁹² *War on Waste*, p. 26.

⁹³ *The Times*, September 12, 1974, p. 25.

⁹⁴ *Working Group on Recycling and Re-use of Materials Research Sub-group*, National Archives, WD/982/27, p. 3

Council represented the interests of local government and the industrial waste trades; there was little representation of the general public. The chairman, Dr 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'.⁹⁵ Scepticism about the environmental significance of the 'War on Waste' quickly developed among the few public representatives on 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'.⁹⁶ 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

⁹⁵ *Working Group on Recycling and Re-use of Materials Research Sub-group*, National Archives, WD/982/27, p. 12.

⁹⁶ *Observer*, December 12, 1976, p. 13.

economics'.⁹⁷ Despite worthy efforts to promote voluntary and charitable recycling schemes, when the environmentalist journal the *Vole* looked back at the 'War on Waste' in 1981 it concluded that the whole effort 'went down the drain'.⁹⁸

6. 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 rationalising order of private property and free markets has resulted in a self-sustaining system of 'creative-destruction' dependant upon the capacity to waste.⁹⁹ 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.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*

⁹⁸ *The Vole*, 4, 3, 1981, p. 5.

⁹⁹ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 15-19.

Waste as a negative idea played a crucial role 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 conceding continuing high levels of consumption. The 'War on Waste' thus represented what would become a crucial political tactic in neutering the radicalism of political environmentalism.