

## **Waste as a Political Material**

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This talk explores the idea of waste as a 'political material'. Rather than simply see waste as a political or environmental problem that needs human regulation – the aim is to investigate how waste becomes implicated in shaping political processes as both a problem and a participant. In acknowledging the disturbing impacts of waste on the planet, it is easy to lapse into discourses about the 'waste crisis' and the global environmental burden of discarded matter. This familiar framing represents waste as the passive object of human concerns and political deliberations. More seriously, it denies the complexity and contingency of the relations between waste materials and political processes. In many accounts of the 'waste crisis' waste is already politicized via the logics of environmental critique. This makes it difficult to understand *how* waste becomes political, how conflicts and controversies emerge around waste and how waste might be implicated in shaping these processes.

Understanding how waste becomes a political material is much more than a question of inclusion, of letting non-human elements have political recognition alongside humans. Putting materiality and politics together changes what we understand by *both* categories. Materials are recognized as having the capacity to become political actants in some situations. And understandings of politics shift from an excessive focus on competing human interests, policy discourse, and the institutions of the state - big P politics - to a concern with the processual dynamics whereby materials provoke various political situations and influence how they unfold.

Waste, then, is not the stable object or problem from which politics proceeds. Its ontological status and material impacts are not fixed or given. What counts as waste has to be enacted and the analytic and empirical challenge is to understand how those enactments might - or might not - become political.

To develop my argument, I examine two examples: the rise of recycling and a controversy over banning Styrofoam in NYC in 2013. In both of these examples it is possible to see how the diverse political capacities of waste emerge and provoke a range of processes from mundane governance to infrastructural change and governmental regulation in the form of bans on using a material. These two examples show that waste does not have fixed impacts or moral or political effects. When it comes to waste what counts as 'politics' is far from straightforward or self-evident: waste can productively shape new habits and ethics, as in the case of recycling, and it can provoke controversies that realize different futures, as the Styrofoam example shows. All very different forms of politics.