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**Zsuzsa Gille. *From the Cult of Waste to the Trash Heap of History: The Politics of Waste in Socialist and Postsocialist Hungary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. x+250 p. ISBN 978-0-2531-1692-5.**

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Zsuzsa Gille's book is based on PhD research conducted at the University of California more than a decade ago. The approach is inspired primarily by the ethnographic methods, as well as by the history and sociology of the environment. Gille argues that the traditional image of socialist countries as territories full of pollution—the idea “that state socialism was wasteful, in the sense of squandering resources and in the sense of being full of wastes” (3)—should be reassessed. Let us be clear about this claim: Gille is not denying that there was pollution in former communist countries. But she stresses the complexity of socioeconomic (and cultural) systems in which waste was not ignored either by the population or by the authorities but, on the contrary, was at the center of public thought and action. Thus her topic is “the changing concept of waste” (35) in Hungary from 1948 to 2004, in a from-below perspective constructed through archival material, personal observation, press articles, and interviews. She describes three stages of Hungary's “socialist” approach to waste: the accumulation of metal in the 1940s and 1950s, tentative steps towards recycling from 1968 through the 1980s, and widespread incineration since the 1990s. In the short but stimulating introduction, Gille proposes to “advance a sociological theory of waste.” Waste, she argues, is a “hybrid, simultaneously social and material” (27) product of human activity and politics, a “liminal, boundary object” (23) worthy of study.

The main thesis of the first part can be summarized as follows: Hungary would not have produced so much chemical waste if the party-state had not been so focused on a metallic waste management model. This “metallic regime” considered waste to be a by-product that could be reused (but not recycled) in the same way it was produced (which can be the case in metallurgy). The state's hidden motivations were political control and discipline of the workers, as well as the cooperatives (a sector which coexisted with state enterprises in the 1950s), through mobilization campaigns. Gille emphasizes the fundamental role of scrap metal in the development of socialist policy and economy in Hungary: the cult of waste became “a new ethos” (63) by which socialist society aimed to show its superiority to capitalist society. “Making new out of old by mobilizing the genius of workers became the encapsulation of what socialism was about” (64); this may also have been true for political trials and purges.

From the 1960s onward, a new waste regime emerged that focused on economic efficiency, and representations of waste changed considerably with waste being

reconceptualized as “a cost of production” (116). At this time, enterprises were free to decide which forms of waste they wanted to reuse, sell, treat, or dump, and they were motivated by financial incentives. Gille observes a professionalization of the waste problem in Hungary: scientific institutes and engineers played a dominant role in this “efficiency regime.” At the beginning of the 1980s, Hungary seemed to follow the same path as some other countries in the West (especially the Netherlands and Japan) with an “ecological modernization” based on “industrial ecology,” a new cost-benefit approach to the problem: “now the intention is to keep the problem of emissions and wastes within the sphere of production, and solve it there” (123). This could be referred to as the technocratic age of waste policy in Hungary; ecological claims began appearing in public discourse at this time.

The second part of the book appears to be more sociological and intuitive and is based on a number of personal interviews conducted in the 1990s. It is based on a particular case study carried out in the south of the country, in a rural village called Garé. In 1968, a disposal site for tetrachlorobenzene (TCB), a pesticide by-product, was established next to the village, which became famous at the end of the 1980s. In the introductory chapter, Gille stresses the Cold War paradoxical background to this affair: the Budapest Chemical Works (BCW), one of the biggest firms in this sector, produced TCB for Hungary’s western neighbor, Austria. TCB was an intermediary designed to make Agent Orange, which the U.S. Army used in Vietnam. Yet Gille’s point is not merely to show the complexity of the environmental situation in socialist Hungary—she also wants to explain why the previous “efficiency regime” did not succeed in dealing with waste production and led to the legitimization of landfilling. Gille argues that this regime had counterproductive effects in chemical production because by-products could simply not be reduced without substantial investment. Thus, “waste-conscious modernization failed to materialize” (129), and dumping became a consequence of “ecological modernization”—it “emerged as “emerged as a legitimate way to deal with nonreusable wastes” (131). More convincing is the explanation for why Garé was chosen for BCW’s hazardous wastes storage: this was a “valueless” territory both in an economic (as a backward rural area) and in a political (far from major cities and tourist areas) sense. That Garé was chosen was, therefore, the result of “social and spatial inequalities in environmental claims making” (137).

The final waste regime, the “chemical” one (from 1985 to at least 2004), is much more familiar to westerners: it focuses on hazardous wastes as harmful and unwanted and recommends eliminating them by technical means. In a new political context marked, until 1990, by the “successes of fledgling civil society in environmental politics” (150), this led to an incinerator project in Garé. Here, Gille points to the paradox in the consequences of the socialist state’s collapse and its accession to membership of the European Union in 2004: although the first proclaimed principle in EU waste policy was prevention, its main impact in Hungary was an increase in incinerator capacity. The reason for this is that capitalist firms at that time were looking for new markets in Europe: “this new neoliberal agenda led to the uncritical and little-regulated admission of Western incinerator companies into Hungary” (159). A product of Western prejudices toward the planned economy and the

privatization of BCW, no alternative was offered to the people of Garé (many of whom were members of Croatian, Gypsy, and German minorities): either incinerate or continue to live with the dump. As it turned out, after a decade of opinion battles, the incinerator was not built in Garé—unlike the fate of other localities that had to follow the “National Waste Management Plan” adopted for 2003–2008, which was “hardly more negotiable than the five-year plans under state socialism” (192). For Gille, the Hungarian authorities abandoned their ambitious waste reduction targets because the state was “kicked out of regulating waste production, which in turn led to the abandonment of preventative policies” (196). Although this statement may be intellectually stimulating, it is lacking in scientific evidence.

Gille acknowledges the limitations of her own analysis in the book’s conclusion: does it apply to other socialist countries in more or less the same way? Does this mean that state socialism was not really wasteful and environmentally disastrous and that a production-centered, preventative approach to waste is inherently alien to capitalism (209)? In a brief answer to these essential questions, Gille seems to rediscover the virtues of social history as applied to environmental studies by distinguishing the actors (institutions and individuals), their goals, and their evolutions. Further direct empirical investigations are needed to close the debate, if it has to be closed. Among the questions that remain unanswered at the end of the book, one could stress the connections with the rest of the COMECON and the USSR in the creation and evolution of waste policy in Hungary. Some formulations seem too abrupt: was chemical pollution really a “blind spot” for the authorities before the 1970s? As the author states in the conclusion, “what was lacking was the kind of discursive environment in which these data (on chemical pollution) were meaningful” (212). Some contextualization is also lacking with regard to the change inspired by the Soviet Union’s politics after 1985, when a public opinion emerged in the USSR and at a transnational level (the glasnost period, which is not named here, is only referred to through the mention of Chernobyl). Furthermore, some key terms such as “voluntarism” (64) are not precisely defined. One surprising blind spot is nuclear waste: a site has existed since 1976, according to a Hungarian governmental source, but the issue is barely mentioned in Gille’s book, probably due to a lack of evidence; nor does nuclear waste have an entry in the general index.

These remarks do not deprive the book of its heuristic value. Gille’s monograph is not only a case study of waste politics in Hungary under different political and social conditions, it is also a call for further works in this very promising area. Wastes “modified human intentions, and so themselves were formative of social relations and organizations” (78), and not just in Eastern Europe. Waste and society “constitute each other” (13) and therefore should be studied together in a broader perspective: this single affirmation opens new horizons for transdisciplinary studies of the waste problem in many different places and times.