

## The Accumulation of Waste

# Studies in the Political Economy of Global Labor and Work

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# The Accumulation of Waste

*A Political Economy of Systemic Destruction*

*By*

Ali Kadri



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# Preface

In 2011, the US army estimated that at any one-time Navy SEALs, Army Green Berets, and other special operations forces undertook 116 missions across the globe (US Army 2011).<sup>1</sup> In 2016, US army special operations were conducting 96 activities in twenty countries of Africa (SOSAFRICA 2016).<sup>2</sup> This is but one face of capital's social activity. Under capitalism, people and nature prematurely perish. This book analyses the resulting structural genocide of humans and surrounding nature.

Despite this radical reality, Western Marxist theory is anything but radical. It tinkers with liberal politics whose undertone is Eurocentric, or justifies aggression against the developing world in terms of Northern class-based moral standards. Western Marxism has compromised the premise of abolishing private property central to theoretical Marxism and the necessity of eliminating the value relation. It has overlooked the truth that capital's profits derive far less from nine-to-five jobs in the Western hemisphere than from the *wasted* lives in the developing world. This book examines the phenomenon of waste since the onset of capitalism. It posits that waste is essential to surplus value.

In material form, waste is manifest in the excessive death of people and nature. By means of war or cost-cutting measures, capital shortens lives and undermines nature. Waste expresses capital: greater profits require more waste, and capital reaps more as it sells the waste. This study, however, is not about reified nature. It is not about the residues of metabolic reproduction, or the substantive waste or trash and the green bonds poured into engineering techniques to recycle trash. There are production and consumption residues, the material form of waste, in any society across history. Capital however defines the meaning of what is useful and what is waste and forces society to accept its definition. After all, waste as residue is a thing and not a dialectical concept of object inseparable from its social subject. Waste as theorised here is created by the social subject capital, the fundamental social relation.

Capital abuses nature in the process of undermining the working class. The resultant waste demolishes the potential of labour as historical agent. In the self-reinforcing domain of waste accumulation, a nature exponentially sickened becomes a machine for which capital has not paid, but which uproots, socialises labour, and reduces longevity. To be sure, polluted nature, just like a

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1 US Army (2011), Army special ops continues to grow, increase optempo, <https://www.army.mil/article/52042/army-special-ops-continues-to-grow-increase-optempo>

2 US Special Operations in Africa (2016), Sub-unified command of USSOCOM – Unclassified, <https://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/3723613/2016-SOSAFRICA.pdf>



machine, does not produce surplus value. As an intermediary created by living labour, however, it catalyses the waste of people before their due time. It thus reduces the cost of social reproduction leaving more of the social product to capital over the lifecycle of society. And to boot, when one considers that pollutants, sickness and death are items traded on the market, capital buoys by the amount of waste it unleashes upon society. At such ontological level, shorter lives and degraded nature leave more of society's surplus labour to turn into capital.

With everything being commodified under capitalism, the prematurely wasted lives are reconstructed as use-value destined to be exchanged. They are implicitly or explicitly priced at a capital-determined gestation period and, of late, financialised. Higher future prices attendant upon a bleak future, reconstruct scarcity, raise current prices, and secure capital's monopolistic profits. Organic foods may cost more at present, but all commodities comprise a risk premium arising from the difficulty associated with future production conditions. Accordingly, capital's concern for the environment is a scare tactic to mark-up prices.

With profits rising, not only by backgrounding the social costs of waste but also by the production and sale of waste, the de-reproduction of society becomes the principal industry of capital. In the idiom 'capital drips with blood from head to toe,' blood has literally gone on sale. Wasted lives array against a time-asymmetric price matrix to be traded and, conversely, these death-commodities *become* fetishes that command the reproduction of social life. That death determines life is no longer a rhetorical statement. For surplus value to rise, the industries of ethno-genocides that laid the foundation of early industrial capitalism, the scalping of the Native Indian for a dollar, immanently mature into the evident wider structural genocide and the daily unnoticed casualties of capital. The process of thinning down what capital concocts as 'excess population' in the permanent crisis of overproduction auctions shortened lives relative to historically achievable longevity for a price. The rate of waste mirrors the rate of surplus value.

Theoretically, the historical subject in charge of wasting social nature is capital. Social nature as substance is labour as subject in nature. Structurally, the Western formation that cannibalises the masses of the South sits atop the international class order. In social production, capital condenses the labour time of production in a factory to get more out of labour. It deploys technology to lower the cost of essentials such that it pays lower wages and, all in all, strips labour of its autonomy. Yet, the idea that technology is Western and socially funded by the Western working classes and then grabbed by capital is a misconception of historical subject. Western social funds flowing into Research and Development (R&D) are constituents of the circuit of capital

reconstituted by imperialist rents. Northern taxes that contribute to R&D are investments that generate imperial rents proportionate to how they boost the technological *rapport de force* against the South. Technology is an element of the productive forces, a sub-division of capital and integral to the imperialist relation that excludes the South from development. Hence, the historical relation of excluding the South is the historical subject, while knowledge-derived scientific and industrial development gathers in the North.

Seen from the vantage point of social reproduction, however, the world has been a single factory that economises peoples' livelihoods, and for which the waste of life is a primal commodity. The rate of the expiry of life before its historically determined time, or social de-reproduction, defines the rate of exploitation. Situating waste in social reproduction, dying social nature as dead labour obtained gratis by capital, in addition to the labour robbed from the prematurely extinguished people, which also transmutes into dead labour, these push capital more and more to retain surplus-value producing living labour in order to produce itself as dead labour. When in social reproduction all of living labour or society is responsible for the social product and, therefore, productive, and with dead labour unable to create surplus value, the activity of social auto-destruction becomes the cornerstone of capitalist expansion. More living labour short-changed in wages over shorter lifespans, creates more surplus value and leaves more of surplus labour to transmute into capital. Capital not only crams the lives of people into short chronological intervals of time to capture more of the social product, it makes a lucrative industry from the sale of social natural death. As Northern working classes secure imperialist dividends, and as the relation of exploitation structurally centres in the South, lower pension age in the North, for instance, implies a lower life expectancy in the South, altogether to maintain rising rates accumulation. With the rent-laden social product of the North rising by imperial rents, its redivision between Northern capital and Northern classes becomes a redivision between two circles of capital living off the avails of imperialism. The cycle of engaging the living in their own saleable death is a surplus value making activity that attenuates the inherent contradictions of capital.

In a world structured as a two-tier class system of consuming and consumed classes, the increasing cannibalisation of the lower tier offsets the declining rates of growth associated with the run of the mill declining effective demand of the upper tier. The demand of militarism, which generates imperialist rents, counters the declining rates of demand associated with civilian-end use commodities. The debts that prop up Northern consumption are underwritten by current and future imperialist rents. With production holding primacy over consumption, that is with capital submitting labour to its desired patterns of consumption, or with its drive to depress wages rather than increase wages

to raise demand, wasted social nature, of which militarism is a principal constituent, will more and more constitute the substance of wealth.

*A fortiori*, the ominous rates of social-natural decline or, premature deaths, reveal that forms of waste-exploitation exceed commercial or slave-like conditions of exploitation. In commercial exploitation the chattel slave was kept alive to produce, while in waste exploitation, the premature death of the wage-slave becomes the business end of capital. A capitalist mode of production becomes a waste mode of production. And, with the preponderance of destruction, one can no longer partition the creation of value by analysing a production process emerging from fractional exploitation conditions; rather, the world forms a single domain of exploitation and unit of analysis. Although the rise of China and other forms of class resistance in the South militate against the waste system, capital '*to gain in profits what global society loses in years of life.*'

Mainstream economics does not examine capital as the historical subject of waste and restricts analysis of social production within sectarian or national boundaries. It abstracts from separate constructed facts omitting the interconnectedness of class relations, and then presumes its one-sided abstraction defines the changes in inherently processual facts – all facts are processes governed by laws of development. Marx (1867) derided such method of crude empiricism by noting that when 'an abstraction is made from a fact; then it is declared that the fact is based upon the abstraction.' This dominant approach to reasoning is characteristic of positivist methodology applied to social science. It splits an undividable reality in the mind, selects observations that support its thesis that the capitalist system is non-explosive, and isolates any activity from its determining social class context, only to highlight the rosy achievements of Western-led capitalism. Apart from struggle against US imperialism, in the pile of waste masquerading as wealth, nothing is rosy. What develops in thought about the partitioned social condition would sound logical by use of supply and demand equations, but it would also be divorced from the holistic waste 'fact' in ways that cater to the inclinations of the dominant class. To say that individuals enjoy consuming a commodity and pay a price for that commodity valued against the relative utility it imparts, as mainstream economics argues, follows an intricate math-maximisation procedure whose formulaic eloquence neglects the broader class-system of waste. It ignores the fact that commodities effectively consume individuals depending on their position in the social class system. The top tier consumes organic foods, while others consume namely deleterious substances contained in staple items. The bomb, for instance, is the perfect waste commodity *cum* machine whose productivity is determined by the rate at which it consumes human lives. Meanwhile, every other pollution-laced commodity is in lesser part a bomb.

At the present stage of global integration, an adequate abstraction of fact must be referenced against the totality of social reproduction, or rather de-reproduction. At this juncture in time, the data with which one works reflect whether the planet is one minute or thirty seconds to midnight. Although science is concerned with questions of degree and scale, the scale of the present social-natural disaster represents a structural phenomenon to which such gradation is superfluous. The imposing structure of waste necessitates a confrontation with the pervasive methods of reasoning, especially the corruption injected into revolutionary thought by Western Marxism, which dislodge social being from social consciousness. Asking will the planet sustain life for the next 50 or 100 years is secondary once one recognises that capital's reason governs social reproduction. Superficially, such a question may be scientifically evinced, however, science kowtows power. For the cannibalistic class whose consciousness evolves with the death of the South, mainstream science will recommend the building of walls and the shooting of refugee boats. Although questioning the obvious is science, questioning whether the colour white is white, or whether phenomenal waste materialises in the death of social nature, is absurd. To query whether the planet warms in 50 or 100 years ends up being a vacuous question since those who adopt the reason of the commodity, capital and labour as a form of capital, self-destruct for profits. However, as the Southern masses sink into misery and find it difficult to manage their survival from day to day, such question turns out to reek of chauvinism. Despite overcapacity, which is a characteristic of the capitalist system, life expectancy in the South has been gun-shortened to way below that of the North since the onset of capitalism. Still, evidence from Cuba and similar social models show that when man and nature become socially organised, as opposed to production anarchy serving private ends, there is enough to go around, and life expectancy rises. Yet, for much of the planet under capital, social being remains autophagic, with the prevailing forms of social consciousness addressing only techniques of trash removal. Thence, the auto-consumption of social nature, once an abstraction reductive of the complexity of capital, has become a concrete representation of social auto-destruction destined for sale at some point in socially determined time. To deliver meaning without sounding ludicrous or absurd, that is adding too much detail or overly generalised statements respectively, it is no longer sufficient to report that some capitalists overconsume some workers and nature in some garment factory of the South. The degree of the social disaster is so complete that the organising principle of the system becomes the policy of waste integral to dominant ideology.

As the world turns into a single social reproduction unit, the auto-consuming social totality, a higher abstraction of complex and multi-layered

social relations represented in observations constituted as facts, becomes a concrete social totality of production. Consequently, an abstraction about the garment factory without reference to imperialism as a state of continual aggression aimed at the waste of social nature is partial truth, and therefore, an inadequate tool to deliver meaning. To say that some people are repressed somewhere, without mentioning that these people must have been beaten time and again into submission by US imperialism, is meaningless. The consciousness that people form to accept being wasted, or to consume waste, is imposed by the guns of the US and NATO synergising with the dominant ideology. The transference between military and ideological powers lays the foundation for capital to further transform social reproduction into social de-reproduction. The fact *become* abstraction, is the overly self-consuming social nature. That the planet is a global factory eroding at higher than sane entropic rates implies that the absurd is real. People are forced, persuaded, or paid to excessively self-consume. And although waste is a necessary result of any metabolic social-natural reproduction order across time, under capital, a rising rate of waste is a rising rate of surplus value. Cheaper more dispensable social nature is requisite to boost profits. What would under a planned economy be a sane rate of social natural erosion emerges under capital as the waste relation that crushes socially appropriate levels of obsolescence.

With the absence of labour as historical agent, the fact collapses into the abstraction. The abstraction, 'overly auto-consuming nature,' is no longer the meaningless and too-general philosophical sophistry of the past times, it is the concrete fact imbued with meaning. The hypotheses proposed herein are first, the fact *become* waste phenomenon is driven by capital's omnipresent relation of waste, and secondly, social nature wasted, as against replenished, creates surplus value, and thirdly, waste as a form of value is value. The phenomenal waste is *ex-post facto* proof that the logical end of capital has collapsed into its historical end. The rational is in complete unity with the historical. Capital incarnate in the commodity self-expands by the reason attendant upon the dynamic of the commodity as self-expanding value. The value contradiction between value proper, the socially necessary labour time, and use value mediated in exchange, turns into value proper contra dis-use value mediated in exchange.

This book provides a theorisation of capitalism's path of auto-destruction. It is based on my previous writings and lectures. It is also structured in terms of propositions that are defined and redefined for the purpose of elucidation and to flush out new meaning situated in different tackled contexts. It includes seven chapters. Chapter one is a cursory review of the concepts to be developed, while the concluding chapter arrives at the point made by Frederick Engels (1877) in *Anti-Dühring*, which is under unfettered capitalism, the irrational

becomes rational. The defeat of labour has heralded the most barbaric period in history. Thence, capitalism should not have been posited as a progressive stage in history. Value is waste as of day one of the capitalist era, and to arrest waste, value must be arrested.

The book accords analytical centrality to imperialism, the historical stage in which militarism as perfect waste leads the mediatory measures that momentarily resolve capital's crises. Chapter six re-reads the rationale of capitalist history as a history of waste from the start of capital. Naturally, to have written this I am indebted to many people. I am, however, most thankful to Matteo Capasso, Roland Boer, Martha Mundy, Ray Bush and Vincent Cama for their comments. All errors and omissions remain my sole responsibility.

*Ali Kadri*

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