

Commodifying Dustbin

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In his 1968 science fiction novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* Philip K Dick imagined a postapocalyptic world disappearing under the combined impacts of chemical and radioactive pollution, and the inescapable invasion of personal detritus into every nook and cranny of urban existence. Set in San Francisco in 2021, this bleak novel portends a ruined, rubbish-covered world that has been largely abandoned in favour of space colonisation; a world where one of the most important industries is waste management.

Not everything that Dick predicted has come to pass, but, as with all good science fiction, the most illuminating parts of Dick's story concern his reflections on the present rather than the accuracy of his divinations. In Dick's world of 2012, waste management is a central, rather than peripheral, dimension of urban and rural existence; something that affects every individual on the planet in the most direct and immediate way imaginable. In the world of 2008, this is already a reality.

Of course, there are different ways in which Dick's waste management prophecy might have played out. "Ownership" of waste management might have been placed with its producers; with local or central government; regions or communities; with families or individuals; with co-operatives. The economic consequences of waste management might have been shared on principles of social equity, so that the poorest constituencies do not face the highest costs. The technological and operational characteristics of waste management might have been devised to emphasise useful employment, local control, community renewal and/or energy and resource efficiency.

What people have, in fact, are massive contracts with multinational conglomerates that tie waste management to private sector profits for decades - 25 years being the contractual norm. By the early 2000s, three-quarters of all refuse collection contracts were held by just four companies: Onyx, Sita, Serviceteam and Cleanaway. Six more held the remaining quarter.

The top four have global turn-overs measured in billions of pounds, while the remainder manage turn-overs of mere hundreds of millions. These contractual arrangements do indeed confer political responsibility for waste management on Local Authorities (LAs), but without any direct operational control. Instead, those authorities are left trailing in the wake of private sector responses to national and transnational regulatory arrangements.

It is private sector responses to policies (on which they have already lobbied vigorously) that determine what is and is not allowed to happen to one's waste.

Some people think of this situation as an instance of the "privatization" of public functions, but one should be careful about the terminology. Privatisation, to be sure, is certainly happening, but in relation to the giant contracts with conglomerates it is more accurate to say that waste management is being subjected to processes of marketisation, and waste itself to commodification.

The direction of waste management policy since the early 1990s has been to open up markets for municipal wastes; to make those wastes into tradeable,

exploitable, profitable commodities. Even the titles of consultations and draft strategy documents give the game away with more or less commendable clarity: "Making Waste Work" (1995), "Less Waste, More Value" (1998), and the marvellously cryptic "A Way With Waste" (1999) all proposed to "inform" consumers, reach "voluntary agreements" with producers and retailers, and "incentivise" producers, consumers and disposers.

Rhetoric aside, none of them promised (or showed how) to prevent waste from arising. Indeed, their aim and purpose was quite different: not to prevent or reduce waste in the first place but to organise its profitability in an economy of rubbish values.

In order to marketise waste it has been necessary to develop a bewildering array of instruments, rules, regulations, stipulations, subsidies, permissions and exemptions. From the Local Government Act of 1988, with its extension of compulsory competitive tendering from infrastructure projects to public services (and exemption clauses enabling LAs to hold equity in public service ventures), through the waste disposal "companies" provisions of the 1990 Environmental Protection Act, to the "best value" requirements of the 1999 Local Government Act, the legislative carousel has consistently spun on the axis of markets, profits and contracts, rather than accountability, involvement and control.

In turn, the new milieu of waste management has seen the emergence of amazingly complicated trading and fiscal arrangements for ensuring that the cash flows from the public streets to the corporate elites—such as the packaging reclamation notes, regional price weights to compensate for "rubbish miles" and—my personal favourite—the "Lipworth Modified Converter Levy" devised to raise funds from the waste-packaging chain.

None of these has anything to do with "privatization" as commonly understood, the wholesale transfer of public services to private hands. They are all about the intensely political process of turning waste management into a commodities market rather than an environmental responsibility. In order to privatise anything one must create a market in which private interests can predominate over public ones, and this is what is happening to rubbish.

In these circumstances, if the market says electronic waste can release profits by being shipped to India then shipped to India it will be. If the market says "recycled" glass can release profits by being crushed and sold as fish-tank bedding then crushed and sold as fish-tank bedding it will be. If the market says that—a private individual in a private household—must do the (unremune-rated) work of sifting, sorting, storing and delivering waste commodities for global corporations to exploit then this is what one will have to do.

When the market says there is no more profit to be had out of any of these things, electronic waste and glass will be dumped.

Perhaps it's time for a different arrangement, one that puts people as citizens—not consumers or disposers—at the heart of any future waste management policy. In 1905, in the London Borough of Hackney alone, some 5,000 to 6,000 households every week refused to hand over their waste for collection precisely because of a suspicion that others were profiting from the valuable resources contained in their dustbins.

The marketisation of waste means that commercial organisations have a vested interest not only in the continued production of detritus, but also in exploiting the sorting, sifting and storing labours that householders are increasingly compelled to provide for free by the legal regime surrounding the commodity of waste.□□□