

Waste and ‘Everyday Environmentalism’ in Modern Britain

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Abstract

Following recent work among social historians and geographers on the concept of 'everyday life', I argue that current historical uses of the term are problematic, at least for environmental historians, in that they lack a sufficiently disciplined or coherent conceptual basis. Henri Lefebvre's approach to the everyday offers one productive way of rethinking the significance of the environment for social history. Through an empirical study of the politics of urban waste disposal in twentieth-century Britain, I deploy some of the key categories of Lefebvre's 'critique of everyday life' to rethinking the social history of environmentalism. In particular, I seek to explore what Alex Loftus has called an 'everyday environmentalism'. I argue that the concept of 'everyday environmentalism', with its attention to dialectics, antinomy and contradiction, can transform the ways in which we study the social history of the human relation to nature, which has too often been viewed through reified notions of environmental change. The paper concludes that the history of environmental politics should focus far more on environmentalism as a concrete social phenomenon emerging from lived experience.

Keywords: Environmentalism, Everyday Life, Waste, Society, Nature

Social History and Everyday Environmentalism

Historians have been seeking to bring environmental history into conversation with the traditional interests of social historians.¹ Several key interventions have demonstrated the possibilities of a social history of the environment. Chad Montrie has pursued the idea of a ‘people’s history’ of environmentalism.² Malcolm McLaughlin has introduced the question of environmental justice into the urban and social history of the modern United States.³ Richard Rodger, Geneviève Massard-Guilbaud, and their collaborators have extended this to the analysis of urban environmental change to the European city.⁴ Although the connection is rarely explicitly drawn, this attempt by historians to delineate the social context of environmental concerns mirrors the efforts of some critical geographers to rethink the relationship between social and environmental transformations.⁷ Some critical geographers have begun to attempt to situate the environmental even more radically *within* the social, to transcend the notion of the social and natural as inhabiting separate ontological positions. One of the key claims of this article is that there is much that environmental historians broadly interested in the social and political can learn from critical geography. Alex Loftus’s work on ‘everyday environmentalism’ offers a useful example. Loftus has investigated the ways in which the needs of social reproduction bind together ‘socio-natures’ in everyday environmental practices and political struggles creating connections between social life, the environment, and politics.⁸

In this article, I take up Loftus’s idea of an ‘everyday environmentalism’, and seek to apply it to a specific empirical historical problem. I also engage critically with certain recent historical uses of the category of ‘everyday life’, which have addressed ‘socio-natures’ in historical contexts, but which have neglected to address the normative political and critical project implied by an analysis of the ‘everyday’.⁹ Specifically, I wish to apply the possibilities of ‘critique of everyday life’ developed by Henri Lefebvre, with its insights on time, space and the everyday, to an understanding environmental politics in twentieth-century Britain. I seek to apply the Lefebvrian apparatus, and its attention to rhythm and temporality, to a reading of material on the politics of refuse disposal. Such an approach, I argue, reveals a great deal about the character of modern environmental concern expressed in everyday forms. The notion of ‘everyday environmentalism’, when understood through a Lefebvrian lens, offers resources for a critique of NIMBYism as an analysis of environmental activism in the twentieth-century.¹⁰ It also forces us to reconsider the ways in which the reproduction of capitalism enforces a state of permanent environmental revolution on society, and the ways in which this is encountered in everyday life. In conclusion, I argue that while everyday

environmentalism is not necessarily self-consciously radical, it points to a tense environmental politics lingering under the surface of everyday social life.

Lefebvre and the History of Everyday Life

In the *Production of Space* and the three volumes of the *Critique of Everyday Life*, Henri Lefebvre developed an ambitious critical project that sought to read space, time and the everyday together in what he would subsequently term, following Gaston Bachelard, a ‘rhythmanalysis’.¹¹ Lefebvre’s temporal approach to the study of everyday life involved a close attention to the relations between ‘abstract’ space, which is produced by capitalist dynamics, and ‘concrete’ (lived) space and time, which is experienced in everyday life.¹²

“The critique of everyday life studies the persistence of rhythmic timescales within the linear time of modern industrial society. It studies the interactions between cyclic time (natural, in a sense irrational, and still concrete) and linear time (acquired, rational, and in a sense abstract and anti-natural). It examines the defects and disquiet this as yet unknown and poorly understood interaction produces. Finally, it considers what metamorphoses are possible in the everyday as a result of this interaction.”¹³

For Lefebvre, the ‘everyday’ designates a very specific level of the social totality, one critical to guaranteeing social reproduction which must be transformed as part of any authentic emancipatory project.¹⁴ As Lefebvre put it, ‘The object of our study is everyday life, with the idea, or rather the project (the programme), of transforming it’.¹⁵

Lefebvre’s approach to the study of everyday life has not proven popular among social historians, who have eschewed his theoretical claims. The great social historian, E.P. Thompson, himself an early reader of Lefebvre, was unconvinced by the value of his approach.¹⁶ Historians interested in the study of everyday life have tended to follow Thompson in underestimating Lefebvre. Ludtke’s key collection on the history of everyday life, whilst drawing on many of the questions of cyclicity and repetition that inform Lefebvre’s work, barely acknowledges his influence.¹⁷ Jon Lawrence’s discussion of affluence and everyday life does not engage with the theoretical literature at all.¹⁸ Frank Trentmann does so, but rather airily dismisses what he calls Lefebvre’s, “debatable” observations on twentieth-century consumer culture: “such as a reduction in tourism and travel, the erosion of cooking, and a ‘backwardness’ in terms of sex and family planning – at the very moment when most people started to fly for the first time, discovered new tastes and cuisines, and experimented with new forms of sexual pleasure”.¹⁹

Such criticisms reveal significant misunderstandings of the conceptual basis of such contributions. If we turn to the pages of the *Critique of Everyday Life* which Trentmann criticizes, for example, we find that the context for Lefebvre's claims is a discussion of the category of 'underdevelopment' in Marxist thought. Lefebvre's object is to extend this category to the everyday by relating it to the *totality* of capitalist social reproduction. He argues that one of the criteria for underdevelopment in everyday life might be "the backwardness of 'services' essential to everyday life *compared with* [my italics] production in general (production of means of production or production of 'privately produced goods')".²⁰ In other words what Trentmann regards as a straightforward empirical claim, easily dismissed, is in fact a relational, dialectical, normative claim. Lefebvre's point is not that everyday life is backward absolutely speaking, but rather that under capitalist conditions of social reproduction it is not (and can never be) the designated aim of society to develop the quality of lived experience. This is simply not capitalism's project.

There are ironies in this rejection of Lefebvre's approach among historians. In a recent article in *Past and Present*, Vanessa Taylor and Frank Trentmann deploy the category of the everyday to restore the role of political agency to the politics of water-use in late nineteenth-century London. They rightly critique the limits of both the linguistic turn and neo-materialism in urban history.²¹ Approaches which threaten, they argue, to erase human agency in shaping the creation and management of new systems of urban governance.²² They are particularly critical of the tendency of such analyses to suggest that techno-disciplinary systems can simply be imposed from above without resistance or response, and they conclude that the field of 'everyday life' offers a means of restoring agency to the analysis of consumers through practices of 'anti-discipline'.²³ Yet, Taylor's and Trentmann's rejection of 'governmental' analyses depends in, the final analysis, on an unexplained faith in 'agency'. They frame their intervention as a "plea to connect the study of politics with that of everyday life as a variegated field of practice, agency and creativity, rather than of control, alienation and reproduction", an implicit criticism of Lefebvrian priorities.²⁴

It is surprising that Taylor and Trentmann reject the potential of a Lefebvrian contribution to their own critique. As a firm critic of various forms of structuralism, Lefebvre rejected giving analytical priority to either semiological or phenomenological analysis; agency or alienation.²⁵ He simply did not see things in the starkly binary terms. Indeed, a sympathetic reader of Lefebvre would likely concur with the idea that 'governmentality' too freely conflates the 'concrete' with the narrowly material, resulting in a diminution of the importance of social relations as the core of all socio-technical ensembles. In identifying

everyday life as a key site wherein the central social antagonism between capitalist social relations and ‘lived’ experience is played out, the Lefebvrian critique offers, as a minimum, a suggestion of what is missing in the linguistic or neo-materialist accounts of the political.²⁶ Lefebvre’s work also puts *social reproduction* back at the centre of analysis, and this is crucial to historians who wish to explore the relationship between the environment and society in modernity. By putting the history of social relations back into the processes of producing space, time and the everyday (a triumvirate that arguably offers a definition of the vague term ‘environment’), it becomes clearer how and why the environmental become a site of social struggle. In the rest of this article, I seek to explore this empirically and to reveal the utility of certain Lefebvrian perspectives on society, the environment and the process of how and when the environment becomes political.

Wasting and Everyday Life

One may conceive of a sociology of the reversed images of society and its duplicates, sacred or cursed. A social group is characterized just as much by what it rejects as by what it assumes and assimilates. The more economically developed a country is, the more gets thrown away. People are wasteful. In New York, in the promised land of free enterprise, the dustbins are enormous, and the more visible they are the more inefficiently public services operate. In underdeveloped countries, nothing is thrown away. The smallest piece of paper or string, the smallest tin is of use, and even excrement is gathered. What we are outlining here is a sociology of the dustbin.²⁷

As Lefebvre suggests in this passage, waste runs deep within the logic of modernity. Many social theorists and critics have noted this. John Scanlan writes of waste as the necessary productive obverse of modernity.²⁸ Slavoj Žižek sees waste as ‘the capitalist drive at rest’, the materialization of the permanent state of crisis that drives capital’s progressive self-transformation.²⁹ Jacques Derrida named the dustman as one of the “most devoted and indispensable workers, the least well-treated workers in society, the most invisible ones as well”.³⁰

Where social theory has given a central place to waste in its many guises, history has, until recently, been more reluctant to follow. Nonetheless, over the past few years there have emerged an historical literature treating the themes of waste and modernity seriously.³¹ The production of material effluents and the ‘search for the ultimate sink’ has long been recognized by historians of technology and the environment as a consequence of the modern ‘urban metabolism’.³² For environmental historians, waste and pollution reveal the ways in

which the inhabitants of urban societies experience their relationship to nature.³³ Social historians have taken up the theme of waste and social inequality in analyses of the modern city.³⁴ Susan Strasser and Zsuzsa Gille have demonstrated how technologies of waste disposal played a role in producing both modern consumerism and the political economy of actually-existing socialism.³⁵ Gille's notion of the 'waste regime', as the materialization of the discursive politics of wasting, has been particularly influential on subsequent work in the field of environmental studies.³⁶ What none of these historical studies engage with, however, are the ways in which waste can reveal specific everyday spatial and temporal antagonisms within the social reproduction of capitalism.

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre argued that, "The spatial practice of a society secretes that society's space; it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction; it produces it as slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it."³⁷ In capitalism the production of waste is a key element of the production of space. One that has unevenly grown in magnitude as capital accumulates and technology is transformed. The cleansing of streets, filling and emptying of bins, performs the basic cyclical process of social, spatial and metabolic reproduction.³⁸ Wasting embodies precisely the two temporalities that Lefebvre viewed as constitutive of an antagonistic struggle over everyday life. In wasting the linear temporality of capitalist bureaucratic time, which seeks to accumulate value and accelerate production and consumption, encounters the cyclical requirements of the biological and bodily reproduction of everyday life. As a point of overlap between human needs and capitalist accumulation, wasting played a crucial role in reproducing the time and space of capitalist social relations.³⁹ It also became a potential site of conflict between the capitalist drive to appropriate space and time, and the human needs of everyday reproduction: i.e. between a capitalist nature and a human one.

In the modern era, state apparatuses interceded to ameliorate such tensions. The evolution of modern systems of waste disposal incorporated the reproduction requirements of capitalist social space into discourses of liberal governmentality, bureaucratic 'expertise', and environmental risk.⁴⁰ Simultaneously, processes of wasting and waste disposal were key points of potential contradiction for capital's spatial project.⁴¹ The presence of everyday counter-projects and counter-spaces composed in 'everyday' life, ensured that the antagonism between capitalist and everyday environments was enacted in concrete struggles over material phenomena, such as waste. An object apparently abject and marginal, thus embodied tensions of much greater political significance than may at first appear to be the case.

Waste, Technology and Social Space

Technology played a crucial role for Lefebvre in the transformation of social space and everyday life.⁴² Late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Britain, along with other industrialized nations, experienced a transformation in the everyday practices and technologies of refuse disposal.⁴³ At the same time, everyday practices became the subject of intense disputes between experts and a wider populace over the health risks and environmental impacts of refuse disposal. In an era before the popular terminology of 'environmentalism' such contests prefigured modern environmental politics.⁴⁴ More than this, they point to the ways in which environmental politics are often deeply located in the lived, and embodied, experiences and practices of people situated in particular places. Hence, while waste disposal might appear to be of marginal historical concern, its study offers an opportunity to rethink the constitution of environmental politics beyond the discourse of environmentalism within the sphere of everyday life itself.⁴⁵ In so doing it is possible to throw new light on the relationship between the making of modern environmentalism, and the reproduction of urban capitalism, in the twentieth-century.

Changing technologies of refuse disposal contributed to the recomposition of urban space; and the transformation of relations between the rural and the urban. As the engineer and surveyor, Horace Gilby, recognized in the 1950s, technologies of refuse disposal sustained urban growth.⁴⁶ They united urban and rural areas in consideration of the common problem of the proper use of scarce land; agricultural land in particular.⁴⁷ Increasingly powerful demands for urban environmental hygiene pressed for a transformation of urban space through more regular household and trade refuse collections, smokeless fuels, anti-litter campaigns and food hygiene.⁴⁸ Urban areas were becoming 'hygienic' spaces, whose metabolisms were regulated by rapid removal of waste products. Such tendencies were far from new, of course. The development of new technological networks of cleansing was characteristic of Victorian urbanization.⁴⁹ But the twentieth century saw these socio-technical systems of urban hygiene expand their reach through suburbanization and the rise of motor transport. It also saw technologies of wasting, and their accompanying bureaucratic apparatuses, become increasingly contentious everyday political questions.⁵⁰

As historians have observed elsewhere, during the twentieth century the technology of urban refuse disposal underwent a series of transformations.⁵¹ Wasting was both rationalized, and transformed. Two technologies enabled and encompassed this process, the incinerator (dust-destroyer) and the controlled tip (landfill). During the nineteenth-century urban refuse disposal had largely been conducted *ad hoc*, sub-contracted out to small scale contractors for

whom armies of women and child workers sifted the refuse for valuables.⁵² Much of this ‘dust’ was used in brickmaking, so that the production of Victorian urban space was intimately dependent upon the urban metabolism itself.⁵³ During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century these relations were transformed. The growth of cities, particularly the metropolis, created new suburban areas.⁵⁴ Dust-yards were increasingly viewed as blights on urban centers keen to improve their environmental reputation.

Incineration enabled a reorganization of the rhythms of wasting and the ‘urbanization’ of refuse disposal. Incinerators concentrated disposal sites at points in cities; they reduced the volumes of urban refuse requiring transportation and disposal; and, vitally, they were believed to reduce epidemiological risk through the cleansing effects of fire and created a socio-technical apparatus that could be surveyed and controlled by an emerging professional cadre of cleansing superintendents and medical officers of health.⁵⁵ They also transformed urban time and space by changing and sustaining new patterns of wasting, such as regular municipal collection of waste, and, in the process, they introduced new expectations regarding everyday rhythms of life. Most compellingly of all, they offered a means of valorizing refuse through energy recovery. The recovery of the value of refuse through raising steam for municipal purposes, such as the generation of electricity, was central to the legitimization of this new technology.⁵⁶ As William Francis Goodrich, argued in *The Economic Disposal of Towns Refuse* in 1901:

Towns’ refuse is undoubtedly a mixture of all that is filthy, deleterious and objectionable, and the very nature of the material demands burning as the only effective means of disposal...Modern destructor practice serves to show that while refuse can be thoroughly destroyed the high temperature gases of combustion are of much value for the raising of steam. There can be no doubt that for the most part all over the kingdom towns’ refuse contains much that is of real value for the raising of steam’⁵⁷

After the First World War, incineration was increasingly displaced as the technology of choice for urban waste disposal by controlled tipping. Expense, health concerns, and a lack of suitable urban space for dust-destructors led to increasing professional adoption of controlled tipping. By 1950, a survey of space available in the Greater London Area concluded that “there is virtually no available space within the London County Council area for the tipping of refuse from the Inner London Boroughs. This applies to all forms of refuse—whether it has been passed through an incinerator, or been screened in its raw form”.⁵⁹

Controlled-tipping enabled experts to reconcile the reproduction of hygienic urban space with the health and environmental objections of suburban and rural areas by claiming that sealed tips posed no risk to health, and moreover could be valorized by being turned into parks or sites for building. The technology was so successful that by 1955, the surveyor of Hertford Rural District Council could write that some sixty percent of British refuse was disposed of by controlled tipping.⁶⁰ The method would remain predominant until the end of the century.⁶¹

Yet, the smooth functioning of these technological transformations can easily be exaggerated. Both the technology and political economy of wasting constantly came into conflict with the rhythms of everyday life. As John Clark and Stephane Frioux have demonstrated, there were considerable environmental justice concerns with the impact of destructors upon the, often impoverished, districts in which they were placed.⁶² Refuse disposal sites became arenas for struggle between the demands of bureaucracy and the demands of everyday life. For example, the siting of a proposed dust destructor in Aberdeen in 1910 proved contentious when the local authority chose the site of the old poorhouse in the East End of the city. One local woman attacked the decision taken “on account of the cheapness of the ground” as “most unfair”.⁶³ “The councillors who supported the site would not have it in their own wards”, she argued. Her solution was to “have houses erected all-round the destructor, and compel the councilors to live in them, in order that they might have the first and best samples of what they were to give to those who resided in the district.”⁶⁴ Twenty years later, following a meeting of Stepney residents, the Warden of Toynbee Hall wrote to the Ministry of Health complaining of “smells from the destructor” in Gunthorpe Street, run by the Stepney Metropolitan Borough. J.J. Mullen wrote that “When the wind is in a certain quarter [it] makes it impossible for those living near the destructor to open their windows...the nuisance of the Destructor is a very grave one which seriously interferes with the happiness and comfort of all who live within its range”.⁶⁵ Brecon Council’s decision to build a refuse destructor close to a local slaughterhouse in 1935, no doubt in the belief that this area had already been sacrificed, still led to considerable local opposition and a petition of 410 signatures against the proposal.⁶⁶

The technical organization of waste disposal was, therefore, more politically contingent than might appear on the surface. Experts did not simply impose technologies, and thereafter govern through them, they also sought to adapt and legitimate them in challenging political, economic and cultural circumstances. Technologies of waste disposal and their associated time-spaces were the continually contested products of an unequal social struggle.

Locally, there were numerous moments of significant opposition to technical change, and it is in these moments that we see the historical emergence of ‘everyday environmentalism’.

Waste, Value and Bureaucratic Space

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre noted that space itself was subject to hegemonic struggle. “Is it conceivable that the exercise of hegemony might leave space untouched?”, he asked, posing the possibility that space was *produced* “on the basis of an underlying logic and with the help of knowledge and technical expertise, of a “system””.⁶⁷ This system was contested by divisions within those forces seeking to adapt space to support their hegemony, and by forces external to these interests, i.e. by forms of class struggle.⁶⁸ Similarly, in the *Critique of Everyday Life*, Lefebvre writes of the attempt by bureaucracy to organize the everyday along rational, technological lines, and to convince people, discursively, of the logic and necessity of such an organization:

“Bureaucracy tends to operate for and by itself. By establishing itself as a ‘system’, it becomes its own goal and its own end; at the same time, in a given society, it has real functions, which it executes more or less effectively. Thus it modifies the everyday, and this too is its goal and aim. However, it never succeeds in ‘organizing’ the everyday completely; something always escapes it, as bureaucrats themselves ruefully admit. The everyday protests; it rebels in the name of innumerable particular cases and unforeseen situations. Beyond the zone bureaucracy can reach, or, rather, in its margins, the unformed and the spontaneous live on.”⁶⁹

The reception of controlled tipping is illustrative of precisely these kinds of antinomies, though it may be that at this point we can start to talk about the limits or failure of expertise to achieve discursive closure over the meaning of technological interventions designed to find ultimate solutions to the problem of waste.⁷⁰ One of the characteristics of the politics of wasting in the twentieth century was the difficulty faced by public officials in predicting, comprehending, and managing opposition to disposal technologies.⁷¹

Offered as an improvement on crude tipping, controlled tipping was itself vehemently contested. As A.L. Thompson observed, there were plenty of ‘uncompromising opponents of non-mechanical means of refuse disposal in any form’.⁷² The contradictory nature of controlled tipping is illustrated by events in Romford, Essex. In May 1935, a new park, which had recently been in-filled with refuse using the ‘Bradford Method’ of controlled tipping, was opened at Jutsums Lane, Romford. The result was recommended as an instance of the ‘transformations to Mother Nature which can be planned years and years ahead.’⁷³

Apparently, everyone was agreed that the park represented the benefits of rational wasting, with refuse applied by experts to social benefit. Within weeks another nearby 'open space' at Colliers Row was being proposed for controlled tipping. Yet, this time the proposal was opposed by local residents, who argued that the site was a 'natural playground for children', and that exposure to the tipping process would be detrimental to health.⁷⁴

What do such contrasting fortunes demonstrate? It is important to place technological choices in their proper political economic context, both at a narrow level (expense was a constant factor limiting technical choices), and at the scale of capitalistic reproduction as a whole. Technical decisions were legitimated both in the context of particular, sometimes competing, scientific paradigms and ideological conceptions of value. These were often characterized by claims that a particular disposal technology, rather than being a simple means for the annihilation of waste, was actually a method of recycling.⁷⁵ Well before the era of 'ecology', waste disposal had already become its own opposite, a means of accumulation.

Bureaucratic representations of waste were, therefore, structured by a capitalist ideology of value. In the case of controlled tipping this involved carefully articulated claims about its capacity to recuperate or 'improve' waste land.

One popular professional manual, *Thompson's Modern Cleansing Practice* (1951), made much of the uses of controlled-tipping in land reclamation to legitimate the new technique. It suggested that 'typical cases for reclamation were: Marshy low-lying land; large, "useless ponds"; Ravines; disused quarries and pits; land broken up by mineral subsidence; sand wastes; foreshore and tidal lands; moorland.'⁷⁶ This utilization of waste took different forms, and was circumscribed in places by costs, but was a key principle underlying the claims behind most methods of disposal. For Jesse Cooper Dawes, controlled tipping demonstrated its superiority by ensuring the utilization of refuse left over from salvage operations and having recovered "much useless land".⁷⁷ For others composting was the preferable technique.⁷⁸ John Capie Wylie's *Fertility from Town Wastes* and *The Wastes of Civilization* explored the combination of organic household waste and sewage in the production of compost for agricultural uses, reuniting the metabolism of town and country.⁷⁹

Whatever the technology proposed, underlying its justification there was a claim for some sort of ecological recombination of the urban and the rural, or for the recovery of the 'value' of waste products. As 'green' as such claims may now sound, they remained bureaucratic dreams of socio-ecological or economic balance. In practice, as Lefebvre suggested and the Essex example illustrates, the technical means by which such effects were

to be produced were often in direct conflict with everyday conceptions of environmental well-being.

Wasting and Everyday Space

Historians of modern environmentalism have noted that the key passage towards the idea of the 'environment' involved the articulation of a concept of communal property, the right of usufruct of which belonged to the national community.⁸⁰ But what is this 'communal' character of the environment? Why should such claims be made at all? The politics of refuse disposal similarly came to focus upon contested notions of the value of land and landscape. *Thompson's* advised cleansing superintendents to be aware of the potential resistance this could engender, and to "first envisage all objections, sentimental and real" before proposing a site for disposal.⁸¹

The antinomy between the valorization of waste and everyday life was illustrated in 1932. Dagenham, with its new working-class housing estates, had long suffered from being one of the main suburban sites where London's refuse was dumped. The opening of the new Ford Factory, partly on the site of these old dumps, was a welcome improvement. The *Dagenham Post* published a laudatory article on the 'marvels' of the Dagenham factory where cars were 'made in a minute', and miracles were performed by machines.⁸² The power for the new factory was supplied by a power-house burning 1000 tons a day of London's refuse. The reporter wrote of this as a 'welcome idea, for as I came up the river I was greeted with the sight of rubbish strewn over the marshes next to the factory...the vexed problem of refuse disposal may have been solved at last'.⁸³ 'And yet', the correspondent concluded,

I thought, as I re-embarked for the homeward trip from the gently swaying pontoon, those marshes held a particular charm of their own in the days before Mr Henry Ford had heard of Dagenham. The reedy wastes, so solitary and desolate, with the grey river flowing along, possessed a wintry beauty that few people realized. Gone are the murmuring streams that thrust their way through the black peat-like ground, the water as clear and sparkling as a jewel. The cries of the wild birds that once inhabited the spot have given way to the clank of steam hammer and machine.⁸⁴

This ambiguous conclusion to a celebration of a major new source of employment to the district exemplifies the way in which everyday environmentalism emerged from the very same processes that in other contexts celebrated the elimination and valorization of urban refuse. In eliminating an eyesore, Ford's capital had irretrievably transformed and subsumed within its own space and time an entire 'natural' environment. The tensions between the

capitalist impulse to valorize space for accumulation, and the desire to preserve a certain kind of ‘wild’ nature as a common amenity, supplied the fundamental dynamics of the environmental politics of wasting.

In 1953, the Manchester Corporation began the reclamation of several old industrial sites in what the *Manchester Guardian* called the “devastated Agecroft district”, an area described as being pockmarked with excavations.⁸⁵ The tipping of waste at this site was designed to “revive waste land” and convert a devastated post-industrial landscape into useful parkland and playing grounds.⁸⁶ These claims did not, however, meet with universal popular approval, not least as this particular ‘devastated’, post-industrial landscape had already been reappropriated in everyday life, as a space of leisure and play. The attempt to ‘reclaim’ this space was instead seen as a second act of desecration. In such cases as this the antinomies of accumulative and non-accumulative processes, of waste and value, of different conceptions of time and space, were played out. The opposition of residents to Bournemouth Borough Council’s proposals to tip waste at a quarry site at Hengistbury Head was similarly articulated through the claim that the site had in fact already been reclaimed by nature, and that it had become a popular site for walkers, bird-watchers and a space for children to play.⁸⁷

In 1954, Manchester Corporation proposed a new ‘controlled tip’ at Didsbury. The subsequent dispute dramatized the antinomy between bureaucratic knowledge and residents’ claims over common ‘natural’ space. At a public meeting of the East Didsbury Owner Occupiers Association the proposals were condemned. The main line of defence was that the site proposed for tipping was “one of the few remaining amenities of South Manchester enjoyed by the whole city”.⁸⁸ K.D. Wombwell complained of the possible impact of bugs, rats and “a continual symphony of crickets”, as well, as the potential impact of traffic and flooding.⁸⁹ The *Manchester Guardian*’s coverage of the dispute included photographs of the affected area, which framed the ‘rural’ vistas under threat. It emerged at the subsequent public inquiry, which was ‘packed’ and characterized by ‘sharp clashes’, that some 1500 residents had signed a petition against the scheme.⁹⁰ Counsel for the residents’ warned of homes becoming virtually valueless, if the project went ahead. The Corporations’ counsel argued that the tip would usefully reclaim land as playing fields, or similar. Sir Geoffrey Jefferson ironically countered that “the delights of controlled tipping you speak of will only delight the people who make them”... “Why should we ruin these fields used so much by families for picnics or for walking?”⁹¹ As the *Manchester Guardian* noted, “several other residents who spoke from the floor, strongly opposed the scheme on numerous grounds: the spoiling of a place of beauty; the danger of infection; the nuisance to be expected from

“smells and rubbish”; and the fear of “fifteen years imprisonment among the rubbish”.⁹²

Yet, even amongst opponents of the proposal there were tensions. A local farmer, Mr Woodbridge, whose land was to be affected, argued that the neighbouring golf course should be the first to be tipped upon, and appealed to ‘nature’ against the production of a “dull expanse of weeds”.⁹³ R.L. Holt argued that the proposals were a temporary expedient, and that the corporation would eventually have exhausted all the available space for tipping and would still have to return to incineration.⁹⁴

What are we to make of such objections? It would be foolish to deny the importance of questions of property, or of class. The employment of professional legal counsel suggest that Didsbury was a case of strong middle-class opposition to tipping. But is it enough to characterize such opposition as mere NIMBYism? Was anything else at work here beyond the defence of privilege? Can these accounts be adequately attributed to the diffusion of preservationist discourses since the nineteenth-century, or the survival of ideas of customary right?⁹⁵ Such accounts of environmental political mobilizations are too narrow; they fail to account for precisely what was at stake in articulating opposition to waste disposal.⁹⁶ Moreover, they usually fail to read with sufficient care the manner in which the arguments of proponents were constructed and construed. Not far below the surface of opposition to dumping the city’s refuse at Didsbury lay conflict between the playfulness of everyday life and the temporal reproduction of urban space.

Wasting, Play and Everyday Time

Considering the relationship between time and space in everyday life, Lefebvre wrote:

The general problem here is the spatialization of temporal processes. In this respect, the work of art displays a victory of the rhythmical over the linear, integrating it without destroying it. Cyclical repetition and linear repetition meet and collide. Thus, in music the metronome supplies a linear tempo; but the linked series of intervals by octaves possesses a cyclical and rhythmical character. Likewise in daily life the many rhythms and cycles of natural origin, which are transformed by social life, interfere with linear processes and sequences of gestures and acts.⁹⁷

Reading the texts through which opposition to waste disposal was expressed; one encounters a struggle over the temporal dimension of everyday life. It can be found in the dispute over proposals by Esher Urban District for controlled tipping on Ditton Common. At what the local press called a ‘Monster Protest Meeting’, residents assembled who were “fighting mad” opposed the “desecration of the common”.⁹⁸ The opposition articulated itself around the

distinction between the concrete, everyday uses of the common, and the promises of a rationalized space of play offered by the council's representatives. One opponent, Mr Hawthorne, sarcastically counterpointed the ideas of 'improved' play and recreation with the "untouched beauty of the common". "Esher council claimed it would improve the common" but, he suggested mockingly, "How that was going to be done he could not imagine, but no doubt if they carried out the threat, they would have what might be termed a 'wonderful playing field'".⁹⁹ The council's proposal, which was to fill a number of disused gravel pits on the common that had originally been excavated for railway construction, was decried as "a monstrous and wicked scheme and has no regard whatsoever for our feelings, for our health, for our amenities, or for our children. Children had played on the common for many generations and they are using it still, because it is a safe place".¹⁰⁰

The recurring presence of childhood and play in a site viewed as 'natural', that is, beyond the space of valorization or accumulation, is significant. It points to the politics present in the claim something is natural. M.J.D. Roberts has noted that defenders of Wimbledon Common in the 1860s argued that 'the inhabitants of Wimbledon...did not want a Park at all [but] their Common in its wild, free, open state'.¹⁰¹ Roberts makes little of the language of this demand, accepting it as normal in an increasingly urban industrial world. But there is no reason at all to assume there is anything obvious about what such claims mean. Indeed, such a state of wildness has also often been regarded as risky or dangerous. But the particular articulation of the meaning of place is of vital importance in understanding every environmentalism, for it marks out particular spaces as irreducible to the temporal and spatial logics of the accumulation of value. They ideologically resist bureaucratic time-spaces of the kind identified by Lefebvre.

Letters to the Esher local press give a keen sense of the ways in which residents contrasted the spontaneity and playfulness of 'wild' spaces in post-industrial quarries to what the council was offering from controlled tipping. As William Butler wrote:

Our commons have come down to us unspoiled from primeval times. While most of Southern England is entirely built upon of agriculturally cultivated, ancient heaths, natural woodland, beautiful as plantations never can be, marshy fastnesses preserving a native flora have been saved as they were when man first dawned upon the earth. It is incredible, but it is a fact, that a council whose members were electorally pledged to safeguard the amenities of Esher, for the most part our commons, has been engaged for years not only in destroying our most treasured heaths but in converting them into the vilest receptacles to which land could be put."¹⁰²

Butler's articulation of amenity as *scarce* recall's Lefebvre's argument in the *Production of Space* that one of the characteristics of the capitalist pursuit of abstract value was the production of nature as itself a scarce resource. "Nature has disappeared altogether", he wrote, 'save for a few signs and symbols'.¹⁰³ The production of urban space had rendered 'natural space' a commodity produced by deliberate act. In these texts, then, time, space and play converge to reproduce the 'natural' that is to be defended. In this case the natural or the wild is actually a partly post-industrial landscape, in other words a 'second nature' at best, but it is more their present reality than their historical provenance that matters. Butler's arguments are articulated within this everyday sense of historical time:

"The result is that the obligatory stated requirements of "controlled tipping" are not meant as anyone can see, notably on the exposed face of the dumps. The recent deposits stink and you can smell the Horse-Shoe Clump refuse heap as you walk along the Portsmouth Road. Evil as they are the incidental nuisances are as nothing to the permanent irreparable loss of untouched common at what is called a beauty spot"¹⁰⁴

The hyperbolic claim regarding the primeval continuity of the commons is not here to be interpreted as an argument of historical fact. Rather, its 'truth' stems from the normative everyday belief that the commons being defended are, and should remain, outside of the linear time and the abstract space of capital accumulation. Hence, "incidental nuisances" are to be regarded as "nothing" compared to the "irreparable loss" of an "untouched" space existing outside of that time. Such objections extended to the feared permanent transformation of local ecology. as Mr Pike wrote to the *Esher News and Advertiser*: "By the rather drastic action proposed, they would lose a lot of turf, gorse and some wooded parts. What was going to be done after the refuse was put there? He foresaw nothing but a good crop of the weed known as groundsel. He suggested that common land should not be used for tipping, but for common enjoyment"¹⁰⁵ Again, it is the temporal dimension of loss of a place and its associated life that is emphasized. He "foresees" an irreversible ecological change that would signify an irreparable rupture in the continuity of the everyday; a derangement of an everyday space of play represented in the very ecology of the common itself.

The 'Moment' and Everyday Environmentalism

The Lefebvorean idea of the 'moment' is perhaps one of the most helpful in understanding the temporal dimensions of everyday environmentalism. The 'moment', for Lefebvre, represents neither a 'thing', nor a 'relationship'; rather it is a 'project', a working

or a doing that is defined by its temporality being antagonistic to the linear time of capitalism. The classic example of a ‘moment’ that Lefebvre deploys is that of ‘love’; though play also constitutes a moment, and *homo ludens* represents a key emancipatory figure for Lefebvre. The ‘moment’, then, introduces the question of affective praxis into the politics of everyday life. This is not a passive affective ‘experience’, but a project that involves active pursuit of desire. An example of the ‘moment’ at work in forming everyday environmentalism was present in June 1939, when the *Romford Times* reported what is called an ‘Astounding Council Scene’ that disrupted the staid politics of suburban Essex: “There was a remarkable demonstration by members of the public in Hornchurch Council Chamber at last week’s Council meeting, when during a discussion on the Rainham-road rubbish shoot, and at an obviously pre-arranged signal, a number of large black and white posters were held aloft, in full view of the Council Chairman, Councillor Mrs E.M. Field.”¹⁰⁶ The bills read: ‘RESIDENTIAL AREA: WE SAY - STOP DUMPING DUSTBINS ON RAINHAM ROAD; HEALTH AND COMFORT TODAY, NOT PLAYGROUNDS TOMORROW’.¹⁰⁷ Again, temporality was at stake, and residents rejected the future promise of improved local amenities in the future, for the maintenance of a healthy environment. The result of the residents’ actions was the suspension of tipping at Rainham Road.¹⁰⁸

We can also see the politics of the ‘moment’ in T.E. Evan’s expression of disappointment that his ‘summer home’ was at threat because of controlled tipping at Holyhead. Evans worked in the British Embassy in Cairo, but had purchased property at Penrhos Beach, where Anglesey Borough Council now proposed to ‘reclaim’ land by means of controlled-tipping. In October 1954, he wrote the following to a local inquiry initiated by the Ministry of Housing:

For households on the Bay, permanent residents and summer visitors, the position would be virtually intolerable. I myself attracted by the unspoilt nature of the district, in 1951, acquired, and modernized at considerable expense, the property known as “Pentowyn”, Penrhos Beach, for use as a holiday home during leave of absence from service abroad. For me personally, the project spells keen disappointment and certain financial loss.¹⁰⁹

A straightforward reading of this intervention could see this as an expression of middle-class NIMBYism, driven by fear of financial loss.¹¹⁰ However, as Jon Cope has revealed, there is little straightforwardly middle-class when it comes to so-called NIMBYism.¹¹¹ A close reading of this letter (itself an intriguing survival among the archives) through the lens of Lefebvre’s concept of the ‘moment’ suggests other possibilities. The presence of the

contrasting temporalities we have explored above, as expressed through the terms ‘*permanent residents*’ and ‘*summer visitors*’, is apparent. The attraction of ‘*unspoilt nature*’ again suggests the appeal of a space outside of the linear, progressive time of urban development. The emphasis placed upon a property name, for instance, is an affective appeal to permanence, or belonging. This cyclic or iterative temporality is central to establishing a claim that the tip confronts and threatens an everyday way of being. As Lefebvre wrote in the third volume of his *Critique of Everyday Life*:

The owner of a house is there for life, especially if he earned it by the sweat of his brow. He has his place in space. He dwells in the Same, and the ‘other’ cannot assail him or drag him out. He is installed in the identical, the repetitive, the equivalent... To be attached to objects, to privilege them affectively, is today, as in the past, to create a shell or bubble – that is to say, a protective layer against the assaults of a hostile world. This protection is simultaneously apparent and real, lived and valued as such.¹¹²

Yet, Evans’ ‘everyday’ was not purely individualistic, it was also social; it looked out to a wider social collective who share in the temporality of repetitive use of a particular space and its affective qualities. Evans continues his letter thus:

The amenities of the Bay are, however, enjoyed more widely than by the immediate inhabitants. Occupying a property situated at the Holyhead side of the Beach, I am in a position to affirm that residents of Holyhead in considerable numbers frequent the beach for recreation and also that regular visitors to that holiday resort, in view of its proximity and natural beauty of Penrhos, are accustomed to walk and take the air in the vicinity.¹¹³

At a superficial level, it might be argued that Evan’s expresses a set of purely self-interested, material claims, but even if he does, he *also* expresses a collective level of concern by appeal to the cyclic, collective, everyday time of leisure. The Holyhead Ratepayers Association made a collective submission that reiterated these same sentiments. With over 2000 people living within a mile of the “only sandy beach near Holyhead”, it argued that many local people frequented the area in the summer months. Moreover, the beach was a “safe and popular walk for young mothers with prams from the extensive London Road Housing site”, from which three-hundred residents had signed a petition against the tip.¹¹⁴ The emphasis here on the repetitive cycle of daily walks by young mothers with their children places this issue firmly within everyday life as a temporal project.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored ways in which a Lefebvrian approach to the history of wasting in twentieth-century Britain can throw new light on the social history of environmental politics in modern Britain. I would argue that historians need to rethink the current preoccupations of environmental history with the development and application of categories of environmental thought, such as ecology or preservationism, or efforts to explain a putative ‘greening’ of modern Britain.¹¹⁵ Such approaches may explain a great deal about the discursive structure of modern environmentalism, but are more limited when it comes to prioritizing and explaining what is at stake *socially* in environmental struggles, or why such struggles have political purchase in the first place. It is worth remembering that many of the people involved in the conflicts outlined in this paper would have been very unlikely to have called themselves environmentalists in a later context, but their struggles were arguably every bit as ‘environmental’ as those of more formal organizations such as the National Trust or the CPRE.

This article is also written in the belief that the everyday continues to produce powerful resources for a green political project. A project whose time may remain ‘not yet’, but whose necessity, in the anthropocene, has arguably never been more obvious.¹¹⁶ The people who provided the instances of everyday politics cited here did not articulate themselves as self-conscious environmentalists, such terminology would have been unavailable to them. Indeed, most of those who leave evidence were probably quite conservative in their politics. However, when read from the perspective of the everyday, it seems apparent that within these *ad hoc* projects of resistance to the bureaucratic imposition of the machinery of waste disposal, questions emerged that offer critical political insights for the present. These possibilities were immanent to the conflict between the spaces and times of capital accumulation and those of everyday life, and were embodied in the systemic privileging of the requirements to successfully reproduce capitalist urban space in the production and disposal of waste. Only in quotidian accounts of resistance and resentment does the conflict between the imperative of capitalist urbanization and the project of everyday life become, briefly, apparent. Arguably, exactly these antinomies have been replayed in recent disputes over fracking.¹¹⁷

The notion of ‘everyday environmentalism’, then, forces us to look beyond the question of environmental justice, and demands that we recognize the ‘ecological’ contradictions of capitalism present in everyday contexts. In everyday environmentalism, we are not just dealing with an issue of the ethics of siting undesirable facilities within one locale

or another, but the contradictions emerging between capitalist forces of production and the desires of everyday life more generally. This was the reality behind the historical geography of waste disposal. Any authentic environmentalism should seek to build from the ‘moments’ generated by everyday environmental tensions to link everyday causes together; to render their activity connected and self-conscious. Arguably, this was something that twentieth-century environmentalism failed to achieve, but that does not mean it is impossible.¹¹⁸ In the meantime, a progressively oriented environmental history can do worse than to focus its attentions on the politics of the relationship between the environment and everyday life.

Acknowledgments

Some of the research for this article was supported by the Wellcome Trust under Grant 091819/Z/10/Z. The views expressed are, of course, entirely my own.

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