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SOCIAL JUSTICE IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY

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Waste and modern societies

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In the light of fundamental socio-ecological transformations waste does not simply refer to leftovers, but rather to an urgent issue that calls for attention and action: Ecosystems, particularly oceans and seas are full of micro-plastic, rising CO₂ emissions produce greenhouse effects and global warming, nuclear waste challenges societies to find solutions for disposal of these toxic materials. In this context, modern societies more and more realize that “there is no away” (Morton 2013) for materials, substances and things that have become (ir-)relevant as waste. Waste thus emerges as a phenomenon of material resistance and activity that requires treatment, governance, and ethical frameworks. Therefore, debates on sustainability emphasize the implementation of a ‘Green New Deal’ or alternatively strategies of ‘degrowth’ and waste emerges as a contingent phenomenon, involving processes of interpretation and meaning making.

Although people necessarily produce waste (George 2014), we know that consumer cultures producing trash are a modern phenomenon (Strasser 1999). This means human consumption drives the production and accumulation of wasted goods (Packard 1960), but we must also consider that humans and their lives themselves can become wasted as outcasts (Bauman 2004). The notion of human waste demonstrates the tremendous metaphoric power of waste (Farzin 2017), although referring to Mary Douglas’ (1966: 36) structuralist perspective, waste is often discussed “as a matter out of place”. However, waste appears to be an issue created by ‘the moderns’ (Latour 1993, Descola 2013) and in view of the changing state of the nature and its relationship with people, waste is turning into a globalized ‘stress test’. Considering this societal relevance of waste, we encourage empirical and theoretical contributions from different sub-disciplines that will respond to the following:

- What is waste in modern times and who defines what has to be treated as waste and in which way? In other words, how are things, materials and artefacts classified as ‘waste’?
- Which situated ‘waste practices’ embedded in routines and everyday life are developed by the ‘moderns’? And what are the characterizing structures of waste management and governance and what are their societal effects on waste and society?
- Which conflicts and controversies emerge in the production, distribution and prevention of waste? How does waste challenge producers, consumers, and disposers and therefore societies at large? And what interventions are chosen to meet these challenges?
- Which theoretical perspectives are useful to study the materiality of waste as well as the construction of its meaning? And which methods are well-equipped to examine waste empirically?

Please submit your proposal (max. 500 words) to Nadine Arnold (nadine.arnold@unilu.ch) and Christiane Schürkmann (schuerkm@uni-mainz.de). Deadline is **January 29, 2021**.