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A Posterior Excursus to the Ontological Alienation of Unrecyclability

Yuri Forbes-Petrovich
yforbesp@uwo.ca

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I. Economy of the unrecyclable:

General Economy: Restricted economy, embodied in classical economics, strives to understand economic phenomena strictly through the lens of capital. Unlike those sciences concerned with rational principles, rooted in the Greek *logos* (biology, epistemology, etc.), restricted economy as a field of inquiry is nebulous as the concern with capital alone. This economy is understood only in regard to the circulation of capital, suspending understanding about the surrounding world and the physical substrate of capital itself which includes the social reality of labour and the material requirements and excess of production. This restriction denies that economic phenomena are fundamentally material modifications of the world that exceed economic models on the basis of both labour and excess. While the former has been established as the lived reality of economics in Marxist analysis, the latter is only recognized as such when proposed as the material existence of economic relations that fall outside of the calculations of capital. Restricted economics are premised solely on the concentration of capital (aside from what can be used to further generate capital, which reaches natural limits); in contrast, general economy is concerned with the effect of this concentration in the result of luxury and/or waste. The first is well-documented in human history as the positive end of economics (the erection of monuments or carnivalesque celebrations of the masses) while the second is the necessary, negative end of the operation of economics. All economics accept some existence of waste in the production of capital; only the “explosive character” attributed to general economy by George Bataille enables this waste to be seen as necessarily an end to economics as luxury (41). Both are ultimately the end of economics, although only one is experienced as a positive ends by the economic agent.

Green Economy: Waste is not only the result of economic production, in the common sense of waste, but also in the end where the expenditure of capital can have no capitalist end (whether perceived as positive or negative by economic subjects). In line with the neoliberal expansion towards biopower, the green economy attempts to draw capital from those very sites that were presumed to waste capital.
Mikhail Bakhtin sees the productive utilization of luxury in Middle Age carnivals as entire populations “present the victory of this future, of the golden age, over the past” by connecting disparate elements (the peasants) to the whole (256); in the twentieth century, this became a principle of economics with social Fordism and the internalization of luxury as a productive principle (Antonio Gramsci 286-90). Waste, as well, follows this path: the waste resulting from the process of production itself can simply be reconditioned for the production process once again. The glass bottle, whose decompositional life approaches one million years, can be reconstituted into a further product where it re-enters the cycle of capital. Both forms of excess, which in a general economy is an end outside of the exchange of capital, are recycled in a green economy towards productive ends within the regime of capital. The demands of excess that Bataille details, from human sacrifice to Soviet industrialization, are no longer excess but capital itself under this new understanding of the green economy. The virtue of such an economy is the ability to curb the negative reception of excess caused by waste, especially in a consumer age where commonly consumed items have a global permanence far beyond their consumer. The potentially endless life of the plastic bottle is given a renaissance as cling film. Waste becomes a permanent element of the economy, where even nuclear waste is resurrected in a breeder reactor as spent fuel concentrates a new generation of radioactive leftover.

Toxiconomy: Green economy functions insofar as the operation of capital can be presented as producing only capital, where even essential waste can be recycled into productive possibilities. Of course, the relative success of recycling (of both the material and social existence of excess) overstates the ultimate reality of the green economy. While waste has been minimized and routed towards production, there is a degradation of material quality (or social cohesion) in each stage of the recycling process which requires the augmentation of new production. What recycling guarantees is the perpetuation of the production cycle by nullifying excess towards production—what its reality establishes is a concentration of ultimately unrecyclable waste, just as the general economy concentrated useable energy into the production of excess. Unrecyclables, however, are not the accursed share whose excess of the calculations of capitalism means it is destined for pure expenditure without return; they are that which cannot be productive in themselves but can still be the site of capital. The expected outcome of economic production as both product and waste is fundamentally altered in the toxiconomy; the toxic production produces product and unrecyclables, which both occupy a position in the economy as a saleable commodity or a hazardous commodity requiring persistent and costly attention. While breeder reactors can continuously produce nuclear fuel instead of releasing especially volatile and potentially weaponizable actinides, they ultimately produce far greater amounts of long-lived fission products such as Cesium. The premise of the green economy is undercut by the material reality of its products, which is not ending at the beginning of a
new process but in a toxiconomy is produced on the level of unrecoverable waste. Where the green economy sought pure optimization, the toxiconomy recognizes the inevitability and ultimate hostility of waste to productive enterprises. The extreme longevity and toxicity of Cesium, for instance, is the primary reason for the continuing environmental effects at the Chernobyl site. Cesium has not been naturally present on earth for millions of year and as such poses a unique hazard to ecosystems and human populations. It remains continually toxic for time spans longer than human facticity can equipmentally understand and so requires permanent attention. While both general economy and the green economy are characterized by an amount of risk that is to be mitigated or avoided (either in the excess itself or the functional use of the excess towards productive ends), the toxiconomy accepts risk as a manageable and capital-generating enterprise (Brad Tabas 133). While the circulation of capital continues, it does so only upon the reliance on a certain base unrecyclable materialism that requires a continuous regulatory presence (governmental or otherwise) in order to maintain the conditions of production. To keep the productive environment from the unrecyclables themselves, as in Three Mile Island, the toxiconomy becomes the guarantee of the economy. In a toxiconomy, risk is always already assumed while that assumption is itself in a perpetual state of violating that risk, unless the exchange of capital remains sufficient to guarantee its management.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Time Span (years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Human (expected)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Civilization (current)</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genus Homo (current)</td>
<td>2,500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Hominidae (current)</td>
<td>20,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3-Photosynthesis (expected)</td>
<td>600,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceans (expected)</td>
<td>1,000,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caesium-137 (expected)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aluminum Can (expected)</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diaper (expected)</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glass Bottle (expected)</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caesium-135 (expected)</td>
<td>2,300,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 These numbers are half-lives, which require a large number of iterations for the sample to become inert.
The timeframe under which unrecyclables will become inert and secure competes with the historical span of humanity’s biological (and not merely cultural) existence, so the toxic elements can no longer be understood within risk but as an unavoidable burden once they are produced. The toxiconomy is thus able to secure the permanent place of economic circulation in order to mitigate the unrecyclable’s sublime lifespan.

II. Phenomenology of the unrecyclable:

The materiality of the unrecyclable phenomena is not ambiguous. Unrecyclable objects, like other material objects, exist according to the classical determinations of space, time and causality. Understood according to the appearance of the phenomena in its materiality, the Styrofoam cup is as indistinct from a simple stone as the radioactive Cesium is to the air which it contaminates. A material conception of the unrecyclable is unproblematic, as a material object which defies certain productive activities.

Divorced from the strict identity of unrecyclability to its recyclable origin, the appearance of the unrecyclable phenomena as such poses several problems to a comprehensive phenomenology. Understood economically, the unrecyclable arrests production at a necessary end and thus falls out of the productive sphere as absolute waste. The divergence of unrecyclability from the accursed share is that the waste does not exit the realm of capital and return to nature (either immediately or upon its anticipated decomposition) but becomes an essential element of capital’s consideration. Cesium, for instance, has a half-life longer than the decomposition of any other produced material and remains toxic for several dozen half-lives, requiring constant attention to ensure that its material reality (easily transmitted radioactive matter) is maintained as absolute waste rather than left to the world itself. The requirement of management in order to suspend its material reality is the nature of the unrecyclable—that which retreats from the utility of production as waste but remains within the calculations of capital.

It is this retreat from production, still requiring consideration, which situates the effervescent nature of the unrecyclable. Tabas suggests Timothy Morton’s “hyperobjects” and Grant Harman’s “black hole metaphors” as two methods of struggling with the unrecyclable’s unique relationality as an object (2,4). The material constitution of unrecyclable objects is not of concern but the way in which object-relations with unrecyclable objects carry unique conditions. To properly engage with Cesium in a direct, empirical sense would undermine the conditions of that engagement by making the investigative subject and the surrounding environment inhospitable to the engagement itself. Unrecyclables require a certain already-established relation in order to manifest as unrecyclable, and this relationality defies the sense proper to how subjects relate to objects (perception, utility, equipmentality, world constitution).

Withdrawing from the relations that characterize objects without suspending the material status of objects presents a temporal consideration, alongside the fundamentally spatial relationality. While these objects are manifest to
subjects as material and in a particular time, the manifestation of an object as unrecyclable appears as futural alongside its presence. This notion bears striking similarity to Quentin Meillassoux’s “arche-fossil,” which in its presence when scientifically understood manifests “the emergence of the conditions for the taking place of the transcendental [subject]” as the “ancestral realm,” albeit projected into the future wherein there will no longer be humans present (25). The unrecyclable asks the question “how is thought able to think what there can be when there is no thought [in the future]?”; however, this unthinkability is co-extensive with the unrecyclable’s requirement of labour for the subject to engage with it at all (121). Unrecyclables thus present a temporal paradox akin to Meillassoux’s but with a crucial addendum. While the arche-fossil exists outside of a possible subject to give it significance, the unrecyclable, in contrast, requires a material and semiotic subject to respectively maintain its status as unrecyclable as well as give it significance. In short, the unrecyclable requires the subject to think of the unrecyclable’s future where the subject could not possibly exist (see Table 1) but would be required for the being of the unrecyclable. Where Cesium waste will outlive the possible human habitation of Earth, it would still necessitate a subject to exist both materially and meaningfully. The spatial withdrawal of the unrecyclable is mirrored in its temporality, as its presence is grounded upon a future that is outside of possible experience.

Unrecyclability appears in its withdrawal from the presence that nonetheless marks it as a material object. It is obvious that unrecyclable objects appear as material objects (in the form of piles of garbage, tainted water or undetectable energy), but this is not the fundamental limit to their appearance. Indeed, their appearance as unrecyclable is characterized by their “known unknown” wherein their objectivity is maintained only insofar as they are operatively known (i.e. purposefully maintained as waste, and not toxically dispensed) (Tabas 131). The unrecyclable future, the future which itself has no future, does not present the possibility of possibilities, as Heidegger maintains with death, but rather the closure of possibility: the spatial and temporal demands of the unrecyclable reduce the risk of excess to an essential property of maintenance. Withdrawal, as a negation of potential, in the unrecyclable reduces the whole and its possibility to the ()hole, the hole in the whole, and its “mutual contamination of solid and void in holey space” (Reza Negarestani 56). If unrecyclability opens ()holes then it is hardly a simple negation (as its material presence would suggest) but instead negativity: the unrecyclable is that which absorbs possibility with its nullity, as the result of an operation of possibility.

III. Logic of the unrecyclable:

A stillness absolute as death
Along the slacking wheels shall lie,
And, flagging at a single breath,
The fires that moulder out and die.
The roar shall vanish at its height,
And over the tremendous town

The Unrecyclable
The silence of eternal night  
Shall gather close and settle down.  
All its grim grandeur, tower and hall,  
Shall be abandoned utterly,  
And into rust and dust shall fall,  
From century to century;  
Nor ever living thing shall grow,  
Nor trunk of tree, nor blade of grass;  
No drop shall fall, no wind shall blow,  
Nor sound of any foot shall pass:  
Alone of its accursed state,  
One thing the hand of Time shall spare,  
For the grim Idiot at the gate  
Is deathless and eternal there.

Archibald Lampman,  
“The City of the End of Things”  
(Lampman 69-88)

The poet declares this city is named only in his dreams: it is no actual city (7-8). Furthermore, even in its dreamlike duration, the city’s persistence “from century to century” has reduced it to rust and dust, like the human “dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Gen 3:19). At the end of things, judgment, or the march of time, wears all humanity down to the level of creation. The only figure left standing is the grim Idiot who, apart from his compatriots, is “beyond the reach of memories” (Lampman 60) in a state where “[i]n his pale body dwells no more/Or mind or soul,—an idiot[]” (63-64) that reminisces of the subject who cannot actually be present alongside the unrecyclable in any form. The city of the end of things is no city that can be recognized currently; its only inhabitant, the Idiot, who is deathless (outside of possible relations) and eternal (outside of temporal flux), is in an accursed state outside of human time, the city of the end of things.

Lampman’s concern with the mass development of the Canadian electric age in the 1880s offers a functionally pre-industrial view of the unrecyclable. However, Lampman does not simply encounter the unrecyclable but hypostasizes the subject for whom the unrecyclable would appear simply as object: the horrific visage of the Idiot. It is this unique premise that characterizes the fundamental action of the unrecyclable, which is the positive diminishment of the subject in relation to an object that overwhelms the subject’s constitution. The classical paradigm for such a situation is the Kantian sublime, “that in comparison with which everything else is small” by overwhelming the subject’s spatial (mathematical sublime) or temporal (dynamic sublime) reference (Critique of Judgment 135). What defines the sublime is this overwhelming is experienced by the subject as a “negative pleasure” wherein the imagination’s limitless production of concepts to capture the magnitude or dynamism of an experience provides mental pleasure. Such a unique pleasure, a purposeful pain, can of course be rendered purposeless, in the respective situations of the actual infinite (that without limits) and terror (that which reduces the moment to eternity), as would perhaps be characteristic of the unrecyclable. Both the sublime and the unrecyclable occur within the transcendental limits of space and time, which are overwhelmed by the subject’s lack of access to totality, being rendered within a particular world. However, the
unrecyclable does not simply overwhelm the subject (which would be a conceptless collapse of the act of thinking in light of an object) but is a productive concept like the sublime. The unrecyclable would best be understood not as a correlate of the sublime’s negative pleasure, but instead as a negative destitution.

The pleasure of the sublime is the ennobling and enlightening of the subject through the action of their enlightenment, which proves to heighten the subject in their being-in-the-world. Unrecyclability’s destitution of the subject does not render the subject conceptless, but with a concept of their own failure in light of a materially unproblematic object. The ennobling of the object occurs at the destitution of the subject, who approaches the object not with a transcendental caution about its truth but leaves it with “manifold of cognition,” which fails to fully cognize the appearance of the unrecyclable as unrecyclability, or the perceived object as a transcendental object (Critique of Pure Reason 233). It is the failure of what Immanuel Kant calls “transcendental realism” to ontologically ascribe outer appearance to the things themselves directly, rather than as a mode of appearance, and thus cannot be certain about their appearance wholly but only sensibility (426). Unrecyclability overturns this by appearing in a form that specifically outlines the failure of subjective perception to wholly grasp the appearance of phenomena. Against the classical Kantian delimitation that “[t]he real things of past [and future] time are given in the transcendental object of experience, but for me they are objects and real in past time only insofar as I represent [them] to myself” (513), the unrecyclable is the object experience that defies the representation to the self by including the transcendental object’s requirements of a non-factical subject to realize (a pile of waste at the end of things).

For Kant such an experience is simply erroneous, for the subject would be caught in a contradiction between intuition and understanding. However, this is confusion over the role of the transcendental object, which for Kant is limited to and by perception in order to follow the principle of sufficient reason. This is what Alain Badiou finds remarkable about Kant, as the “transcendental object . . . is nothing other than the pure capacity for unity” and appears as the perceptual correlate to Badiou’s ontological “count-as-One” in Being and Event (223). This is not an epistemological critique of Kant, but a logical one, to work towards “the truth, which is to be found precisely in the overturning of Kant’s prudence: the concept of object designates the point where phenomenon and noumenon are indistinguishable, the point of reciprocity between the logical [being-there: world and object] and onto-logical [being-qua-being: the void, ø]” (241). Kant’s transcendental object, the empty category of objecthood, is clarified as a transcendental of a multiple which provides the index for the identity-function, the basis of objects. Here objects are defined in relation to the multiple they are indexed within rather than the capacity of the empty category of an ideal object.

Whereas the sublime instantiated the subject’s failure as a productive experience to
elevate the subject’s capacity, the unrecyclable provides for the elevation of the object beyond the grasp of the subject. This withdrawal from the subject is not the simple Kantian lack of access to the noumena, but a specific withdrawal that questions the capacity of the transcendental object itself. Rather, the unrecyclable demands to be indexed against the world of its appearing, rather than the classical categories of experience that seek to provide a unity to the experiential world. For William Wordsworth, the alignment of the sublime with unity is clear during the poet’s ascension of Mount Snowdon in *The Prelude*:

> There I beheld the emblem of a mind
> That feeds upon infinity, that broods
> Over the dark abyss, intent to hear
> Its voices issue forth to silent light
> In one continuous stream; a mind sustained
> By recognitions of transcendent power,
> In sense conducting to mortal form,
> In soul of more than mortal privilege.
> (Wordsworth XIV 70-77)

The poet’s mind is sustained by a power more spiritual than material, an ascension of the subject over their previous state. This transcendental position of the subject offers a perspective on the unity of the object as such—itself also transcendental. What the unrecyclable demands in its objectivity is not a transcendent position of the subject over objects but of objects over subjects, where the transcendental index is determined by the mode of appearing rather than the status as a (material) object through transcendental deduction. Thus, the sublime experience is reversed in the unrecyclable object: the transcendental is not a position attained by the subject but established by the object. The subject is not atop of objects but below them and in their midst—indeed, no longer atop a mountain looking down to understand but looking all around and thinking in an increasingly weird, green light.
Works Cited


