



We need to think again about waste

OVERVIEW

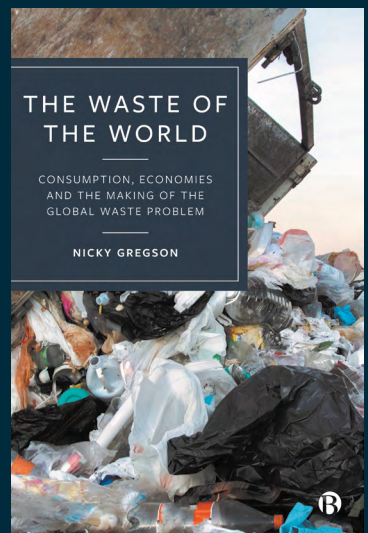
Economic growth often results in increased waste, but policy makers try to break this link by reducing the amount of material that becomes waste.

Early waste-reduction efforts focused on encouraging, and then intensifying, the habit of recycling. More recently, the use of recovered materials in manufacturing has been incentivised. Innovative schemes are addressing the challenge of 'problem wastes' – from inedible food to crisp packets and plastic waste. At the same time, the energy-from-waste sector has expanded, as a preferable alternative to landfill for residual waste.

These initiatives are often presented as 'win-win': reducing waste while using resources more efficiently. The reality is that they provide an incentive to discard waste which in turn intensifies cycles of consumption that are incompatible with greening economies in a net zero age.

Despite over 20 years of policy interventions, it is clear that the world – including the UK – has a very big waste problem. This book draws on 30 years of research to show that this is attributable to the capitalist fix that has been developed to address the problem of waste.

Rather than seeing waste as resulting from consumption, waste is in fact embedded in consumption. Dealing with it requires waste policy to move upstream and be repurposed for the net zero age.



The Waste of the World: Consumption, Economies and the Making of the Global Waste Problem by Nicky Gregson is published by Bristol University Press, May 2023

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FINDINGS

To understand waste, we must explore:

- how consumption relates to economies; and
- how consumption is embedded in our everyday activities.

How consumption relates to economies

Consumption-heavy economies, such as the UK, require people to discard a great deal of stuff frequently. Since Keynes highlighted the significance of consumer demand to economic growth, the consumption of goods and services has expanded and then intensified, through planned obsolescence. As a result, discarding is fundamental to economies.

The waste industry is economically dependent on this discard, and profits enormously from it. So too does the finance industry. Energy-from-waste plants are underpinned by long contracts which lock municipalities into supplying 'residual' waste of a certain volume and material character for up to 30 years. This has enabled residual waste to be turned into a financial product and traded on financial markets.

Everyday consumption

Consumption is not just about the purchase of goods and services. It's about what consumers do with what they acquire.

Everyday consumption occurs through mundane activities, like cooking, washing and ironing and watching TV. To do these activities requires stuff – often lots of stuff. 'This matters because, when stuff breaks or fails to work as intended, our ability to continue these everyday activities, or our efficiency in undertaking them, is compromised.

Thinking about waste in this way allows us to understand it not as resulting from, or the after-effect of, consumption, but as embedded in ongoing consumption.



IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

- The waste problem will not be solved by focusing on what is, or appears to be, waste.
- To reduce the amount of discard being generated in and by consumption, waste policy needs to move upstream.
- At the same time, waste policy needs to be repurposed for the net zero age and be closely aligned with the decarbonisation agenda.

Suggested sites of intervention:

- *Accelerate the trend for hybrid, flexible and home-based working.* This will result in less commuting, a lower carbon travel footprint and a reduction in the need for professional clothing. It therefore has the potential to reduce clothes purchasing and reduce the frequency of laundry. It gives more time for food preparation, resulting in less food waste, and makes space for repair in everyday life.
- *Introduce personal carbon budgets and a stepped carbon tax, which heavily penalises high users.* Consumer demand must be reshaped for a net zero age. Climate policy suggestions include the introduction of personal carbon budgets (and allied taxes) on all forms of fossil fuel dependent travel. To help reduce waste these budgets should include embedded carbon in purchases of consumer goods. Personal carbon budgets (and allied taxes) should be attached to all forms of fossil fuel-dependent travel. They will lay the foundations for a longer-term objective – consumption with planetary care.
- *Make it easier for consumers to connect discard to outlets which enable reuse.*
 - ◊ One example would be to develop reverse 'last mile' logistics, for collecting small-scale, low-volume items that otherwise end up in the residual waste stream, and connecting this with centres for reused goods.
 - ◊ Scaling up cooking with surplus food initiatives is another option. The cost-of-living crisis and attendant food and fuel poverty have turned food waste into an urgent policy priority. Third-sector initiatives might be scaled up to make meals from surplus food cheaply available in all communities.
- *Foresight the future world of waste* – by anticipating the wastes of 'green(ing)' economies and an increasingly digitised and automated economy.

About the book

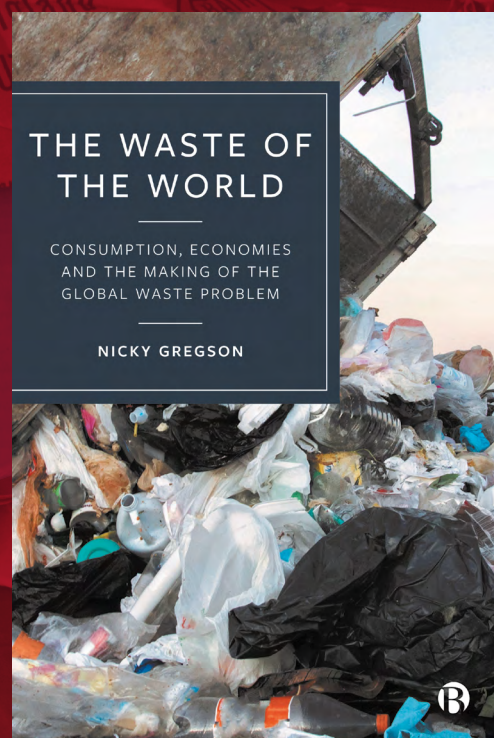
Despite frequent claims that waste is being reduced, consumer-reliant economies, everyday consumption and the waste industry continue to produce and demand more waste.

Combining a lucid style with robust empirical and theoretical research, this book examines the root causes of the global waste problem, rather than simply the symptoms. It challenges existing waste policies, highlighting what needs to change if we are to get serious in tackling this global problem. It concludes with policy implications for shifting waste from an 'end-of-pipe' concern to being at the heart of the debate over decarbonisation.

Author information





Nicky Gregson is Emerita Professor in the Department of Geography, Durham University. Her book, *The Waste of the World: Consumption, Economies and the Making of the Global Waste Problem* is published by Bristol University Press on 9 May 2023.

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