

Zero Waste—Zero Justice?

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Abstract

Plastic is slowly covering the earth, accumulating in oceans, soil, air, and human and non-human bodies. In the face of this catastrophe, zero waste activists call upon us for action, detailing, how we, too, can change our lifestyle to eliminate plastic waste and save the planet. Yet, who it is that is called upon, who speaks, and whose voices and lived realities might be ignored? In this contribution, we explore the social politics of the zero waste movement. This leads us to ponder: might popular environmental movements that relegate social justice to the back seat ultimately do more harm than good?

Keywords

plastics; zero waste; social justice; environmental justice; class; race

Over the last two decades, the growing plastic pollution of the earth has become a topic of increasing public attention. The news is grim. Plastic is slowly covering the earth: it is accumulating in landfills, on beaches and river banks, in enormous patches on the oceans' surfaces, and as minuscule microplastic particles in water, air, soil, and ice, as well as within human and non-human bodies. It is not without reason that the [2018 UN Earth Day](#) led with the sobering proclamation that our planet was "drowning in plastic pollution."

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This dismal prognosis has led to increasing activism directed at reducing the use and disposal of plastic products in everyday life. One instance of this activism is the “zero waste movement.” Advocated for in blogs, books, Ted Talks, YouTube channels, and magazine features, “zero waste living” is heralded as an alternative to common 21st century consumption habits. Prominent proponents of the movement, such as [Bea Johnson](#), promote zero waste living as a possibility for everyone to significantly reduce their plastic footprint by refusing to use plastic wherever possible, by reducing consumption, and by reusing objects and material, for example through shopping exclusively second hand, and by recycling any plastic that might still be left. Johnson herself proclaims that by keeping to these “simple” Rs —refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle— she and her family of four have been able to reduce the waste they produce to one mason jar a year. Everyone, she and other zero waste activists argue, can make a difference by changing their lives.

As important as this message is, upon closer observation questions emerge about who is included in this notion of “everyone.” Who is the “we” that takes center stage, that is the focus of appeal for zero waste activism’s propositions for change? A systematic analysis of written and audio-visual content focused on zero waste living paints a rather exclusive picture. Most proponents of the movement are White, middle-class, and female, and hail from North America or Europe. Their narratives of personal change detail their explorations of new shopping habits, such as going to the farmers’ market and buying fresh, unpackaged vegetables or starting to shop at the organic store that sells unpackaged items in bulk, experimentation with DIY practices such as making their own cleaning and cosmetic products, and departures from online shopping excesses towards the joy of finding hidden treasures in second hand shops. They recount how their lives shifted from a focus on things to a greater attention to experiences. How transitioning to a zero waste lifestyle allowed them to save so much money that they were able, to quote a few examples, to snorkel between two continents, ice-climb a glacier, or go sky-diving. How they feel so much better now that their inner values align with their everyday practices. According to the tenor of many books, TED Talks, and articles, a fulfilled life rich in experiences and self-realization awaits you, if you embark on the path of zero waste living.

What is wrong with this picture? While the reduction of plastic waste and of overall consumption is an absolutely important cause, there are substantial problems with the social politics these narratives perform. Firstly, it quickly becomes obvious that the position that these activists are speaking from is a position of relative wealth and high social status. Reducing, reusing, repairing, and buying second hand is a choice that they make; it is not a financial necessity. The assumption behind their narratives is that people—at least in Western societies—

currently live excessively and that a zero waste lifestyle will set free financial resources that are otherwise wasted on too many unnecessary things. One TED talk references, for example, the 50 pairs of shoes the speaker possessed before she adopted a zero waste lifestyle. Such narratives of affluence ignore the reality of a growing number of people in Western societies and beyond who live in and with poverty—people who are disproportionately people of color.

Secondly, most narratives of transitioning to zero waste ignore the fact that the resources needed to develop new consumption habits are unequally distributed across society. This includes the money and time to seek out different shopping venues such as organic bulk stores or farmers' markets—shopping venues that often don't exist in low-income neighborhoods. Particularly for low-income folks of color, entering these markedly White spaces might further constitute an awkward or even perilous social experience if White hegemony lets them know that they are considered out of place in these venues. Even the ostensibly simple call to “drink tap water instead of buying bottled water” might seem absurd if the water in your neighborhood cannot be trusted to be safe to drink.

This leads, thirdly, to a most crucial issue. Who can afford to prioritize the type of environmental activism that is articulated by the zero waste movement? “Afford” here pertains not only to money, or time, or even whether one is welcome and safe in the places associated with this movement. It also pertains to the question of whose lives might be characterized by more immediate dangers and injustices. This year has seen protests for racial justice and socio-economic equality across the globe, sparked by the brutal police killing of George Floyd and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States. Global monetary flows and taxation laws increasingly privilege the 1%, who now own more than [half of the world's financial wealth](#). A rising number of countries have elected right-wing populist governments who thrive on sowing division, fear, racism and on pathologizing the poor. Low-income neighborhoods are regularly threatened by immediate environmental catastrophe, such as polluted water and air, or floods.

Environmental activism that does not connect with these struggles might easily alienate people who live with and fight these battles every day. In fact, environmental action that does not put social justice concerns front and center might further contribute to social division and alienation. During the [2018 Yellow Vest protests](#) in France, which were sparked by an increase in fuel taxation—an arguably tokenistic policy for combating climate change—many protestors voiced the sentiment that “they,” i.e., the ruling class exemplified by France's neoliberal president Emmanuel Macron, could afford to care about the end of the world, but that the protesters were left to care about the end of the month. The notion that environmental activism is only for the

wealthy might easily be reproduced when one hears zero waste activists talk about all the money you could save if you just stopped buying take-away food on a daily basis or shopping excessively. It might also be felt when entering zero waste shopping venues, where many items for daily use appear overpriced. A plastic-free store in our city of residence, Munich, Germany, for example, features unpackaged toilet paper for about \$2 per roll, which is up to six times the price of a roll of toilet paper in a regular supermarket.

There are at least two lessons to be drawn from this apparent disjuncture. The first is that a politics of individual action always limits itself to those for whom these actions are available. More often than not, these politics exclude large parts of society for a variety of reasons. In the case of plastic, they also exclude many sources of the world's plastic pollution that are not related to individual consumption, such as plastic usage in industry or along the transport chain of goods.

The second is that unreflexive environmentalism that fails to combine its struggle for environmental action with a quest for social justice can possibly do more harm than good. We know that poor people and people of color are disproportionately affected by environmental pollution and catastrophe. However, [their realities, priorities, and communities are often not included in the membership, narratives, and action plans of popular environmental movements](#). This might significantly limit the social purchase of these movements and further increase social division. As marine biologist, environmental justice activist and founder of the Ocean Collective [Ayana Johnson](#) put it so aptly: "To the white people who care about maintaining a habitable planet: I need you to be actively anti-racist. I need you to understand that our inequality crisis is intertwined with the climate crisis. If we don't work on both, we will succeed at neither."

As the proverb goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. If zero waste activism fails to better connect with the social justice struggles of our time, including environmental, socioeconomic and racial justice, this might well be true for this movement.

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