

Benjamin J. Vail: *Litter on the Shores of Bohemia: Environmental Justice, European Enlargement, and Illegal Waste Dumping in the Czech Republic*

Prague and Brno 2011: Institute of Sociology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic and Masaryk University Press, 145 pp.

Benjamin J Vail's book is a well-researched and well-argued confirmation of the negative expectations a few Eastern European scholars had about the nature of the relationships between Western and Eastern Europe as the two halves of the continent drew together in an 'ever-closer union'. Some saw this in world-system terms, as a new version of Western European colonialism, others called attention to signs of what may be called cultural imperialism, or even multicultural imperialism, and a small group of scholars focused on the mutually constitutive relationship between environmental problems and East-West inequalities. *Litter on the Shores* belongs to that new wave of social science scholarship that deals not so much with the transition from state socialism to capitalism, but rather with issues emanating from a relative settling and solidification of social structures—national and transnational—following the volatile decade of the 1990s. However, to the extent that the socialist past is still not irrelevant for this story, Vail's book may be described as post-postsocialist [Hann 2002].

Vail argues that contradictory to expectations that membership will bring an unhampered environmental improvement in postsocialist members of the European Union, in the realm of waste a tendency of deterioration prevails. For the author the primary manifestation of this regression is not the turn to end-of-pipe technologies, the abandonment of the relatively preventative waste policies of state socialism, and the spread of consumer society predicated on disposability—as I argued [Gille 2007]—but a somewhat narrower phenomenon,

namely the rise in West-to-East illegal waste trade. I see this more limited approach as justified both because the task now is to demonstrate the above-mentioned post-postsocialist nature of contemporary policy developments—rather than the broader and thus still nascent trends of the early 1990s—and because the complexity of any environmental issue is such that a more sharply focused but deeper, if you will, thicker, description yields more analytical rigor than a more general but ultimately more superficial study of all things related to waste.

Vail indeed skilfully mines his case study, the German-Czech waste trade, to draw out the theoretical implications. After a careful, if perhaps too long, introduction to concepts developed by mostly US environmental sociologists and their application to waste issues, he analyses illegal waste shipment both specifically in relation to the Czech Republic and in the larger context of the eastern enlargement of the European Union. In the conclusion he settles on the treadmill of production thesis as providing the most explanatory potential. The treadmill of production theory was initially developed by US environmental sociologist Allan Schnaiberg in his classic book [1980], and was then taken up again in a series of case studies in the early 2000s, many of which focused on recycling. While it is a theory much focused on economic drivers, he argued, in contrast to eco-Marxists such as James O'Connor, that it isn't the profit motive and private property in themselves that cause systemic environmental degradation, but rather the addiction of capitalist (and socialist) societies to economic growth. It is not only producers and consumers but also state and local governments that suffer from this dependency and who, therefore, cannot help but 'lubricate' the engine of the treadmill. While Schnaiberg initially put a lot of faith in the alternative technological movement, more recent applications of the theory call for a much more assertive role

for the state, a conclusion that Vail endorses. However, he—much to his credit—puts forth a more nuanced understanding of the state, one whose interests are much more complex and whose capacities are much more curtailed in the Eastern member states of the European Union. The book, for example, shows that on the one hand the adoption of the environmental acquis and subsequent waste regulations made waste policy stricter with regards to waste disposal standards and norms of recycling in the Czech Republic. However, when the Czech government tried to unilaterally ban the import of waste, including waste that is on the 'green list'—that is, when it tried to go above and beyond EU law—the EU's legislative repertoire aimed at ensuring the free movement of goods was mobilised and ultimately lethally applied against this attempt. While I think this contradiction is well-proven, I would have liked to see this conclusion put not in terms of 'unintended consequences', but rather theorised as the outcome of the strategic application of contradictory policies that ultimately create so much uncertainty that governance becomes impossible.

While *Litter on the Shores* attends in nuanced ways to state capacities and interests on multiple scales, the overall thrust of the argument rests on an economic analysis of the structural reasons for illegal waste traffic. In fact, by liberating the treadmill thesis from its nation-state confines, the author demonstrates that it is not so much growth within one national economy but rather the relationship between different economic factors in the sending and receiving countries and the policies at the supranational level that make cross-national waste movement inevitable. He identifies the confluence of a number of factors: (1) the rise of waste volume in Germany at a time when the country's stricter waste policies make disposal more expensive, but when the necessary recycling facilities are not yet in place; (2) the price differential in (even

legal) dumping and incineration between Germany and the Czech Republic; (3) the lack of enforcement of existing waste regulations if not their outright weakness in both countries; (4) the disappearance of border control in the shared EU customs union; (5) the redefinition of incineration as recovery, which makes cross-national waste transport legal; and (6) the EU's prescription that waste be handled as close to the place of its generation as possible, the proximity principle. With regards to the latter, proximity is understood not in national territorial but physical terms, so that a shipment of municipal waste from the eastern part of Germany over the Czech border will easily be within the target of 150 kilometres as the maximum distance for waste transportation. To draw out the structural implications and the synergy of these economic factors, it would have been important for the book to reveal if German waste management companies are building or otherwise investing in waste facilities in the Czech Republic and to demonstrate the role these businesses play in domestic and supranational (EU) waste legislation.

Vail's suggested solution is very much in line with the theory of the treadmill of production, which has been very critical of recycling as simply an instrument, a kind of transmission belt in the treadmill. As long as we lull ourselves into believing that it doesn't matter how much we consume since we recycle, we will keep producing increasing amounts of waste. Since now disposal and incineration are masked as recycling and recovery (whether of materials or energy), and the transportation of wastes is equated with the movement of goods, which must be unimpeded, it is clear that waste trade too is a mechanism to sustain growth. It is therefore logical for the book to conclude with a call for reducing the amount of waste we generate.

Overall, the book makes an important contribution to environmental sociology especially by modifying existing Western

theories as they are brought to bear upon Eastern European and transnational realities. Helping to achieve this goal are the several very useful tables that match theory and concepts with facts from the case—thus providing a wonderful model for graduate students to follow. I also highly recommend that policy-makers in Brussels and in Berlin read this book so they can finally understand that their prosperity and environmental hygiene comes at a huge cost to the less well off. It is high time that Europe stops treating itself as an exception to worldwide patterns of environmental injustice.

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Branko Milanović: *The Haves and the Have-Nots: A Brief and Idiosyncratic History of Global Inequality*

New York 2011: Basic Books, 258 pp.

The Haves and the Have-Nots deals with the inequality of income and wealth in their many dimensions and in and across different times and different places. For those familiar with Branko Milanović's work, this book might at first glance be mistaken for a popular, non-technical version of the author's landmark contribution to the analysis of global inequality in the era of globalisation, *Worlds Apart—Measuring International and Global Inequality* [2005]. *The Haves*

and *the Have-Nots*, however, is more than that. It is also, as the subtitle hints, a brief history of inequality, expanding the focus also into economic history, the history of economic thought, political philosophy, and even, for good measure, literary history. Although executed as a relatively short collection of non-technical academic essays and freestyle vignettes, it is an important and innovative book and one of the most comprehensive and accessible sources on economic inequality today.

Inequality is a simple and yet slippery concept. It is relational (and hence relative) by definition. In Robinson Crusoe's world there is no inequality until Man Friday shows up. Economic inequality may involve comparisons of income or wealth, between individuals, or social groups, or countries. Milanović considers and explores three main types of inequality. First, inequality among individuals within a country. This is the type most commonly perceived in everyday life and discussed in the internal politics of modern countries. However, defining and measuring interpersonal inequality can be quite tricky, and over time a variety of alternative measurement methods have been developed that attempt to express the potentially infinite income distribution structures as a single synthetic indicator. The Gini coefficient is nowadays well established and most widely used as a proxy for within-country inequality.

Second, inequality among the countries of the world. This is an easy to grasp concept for anyone who has travelled around the world or who simply watches the news—Switzerland and the United States are rich, Chad and Bangladesh are poor, and Turkey and Brazil are somewhere in between. Measuring inter-country inequality is in principle technically less difficult than measuring within-country inequality—it requires 'only' that average national incomes expressed in international monetary equivalents are adjusted for their actual purchasing power.