Bookshelf: Jens Kersten on Inwastement—Abfall in Umwelt und Gesellschaft

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Bookshelf

The **Inwastement** volume arose from the research cluster "**Waste and Society**" of the RCC together with **LMU's Center for Advanced Studies**. Published in German by **Transcript**, the issue includes contributions from: **Soraya Heuss-Aßbichler**, Claudia R. Binder, **Eveline Dürr**, **Gisela Grupe**, Rüdiger Haum, **Michael Jedelhauser**, **Jens Kersten**, **Roman Köster**, **Reinhold Leinfelder**, **Christof Mauch**, **Wolfram Mauser**, **Karen Pittel**, Gerhard Rettenberger, **Helmuth Trischler**, **Markus Vogt**, and David Wagner. A number of the contributors are also members of the **Academic Board** of the RCC **doctoral program in Environment and Society**.

This is a translation of an interview about the book with **Jens Kersten**.

Can You Explain the Title of the Book? What is Meant by the Term "Inwastement"?

The term inwastement draws our attention to parallels as well as contrasts between waste and money. It emphasizes the social, economic, and ecological agency that waste has in our society. Our inwastement—the waste that we produce individually and as a society—is in many respects the exact opposite of an investment. We invest in businesses and infrastructure as a way of securing our future. Inwastement, by contrast, isn't something we do deliberately, with the hope for a specific outcome; it is instead an incidental product of our activities. Unlike investments, we don't want to see what happens to our waste and what effects it has. In fact, we don't want any return in the case of inwastement—we'd prefer never to see it again, and certainly not with any accrued interest! And yet (unlike an investment) it is almost certain that our inwastement will return again in some form: dumped chemicals, plastic particles, and heavy metals return to the environment and the food chain, eventually building up in our own bodies.

Why Write a Book on This Subject?

Our society does its best to ignore the existence of **waste: out of sight, out of mind**! We do this by pushing our refuse into the Global South, or leaving it for future generations. This is irresponsible—towards both other humans and the environment, which is why we should not ignore the inwastement of our society.

What New Perspectives Does Your Book Open Up?

Our book opens up an interdisciplinary perspective on waste and refuse—from pre-history, through our throw-away society, and up to the visions of a zero-waste future. Experts in biology, ethnology, geology, history, engineering, culture, law, religion, and economics, dedicate themselves to the subject of our waste disposal practices and landfill sites. They describe the ethical and economic dimensions of organic food waste and CO_2 and their implications for world hunger and climate change. They follow global nutrient cycles and plastic in the world's oceans. They investigate slums and explore the long traditions of recycling techniques.

How Relevant is the Topic in Current Research Debates?

In our book we combine perspectives from the natural and social sciences, in order to illustrate as many different aspects of inwastement in our society as possible. Together, we have developed a waste framework that reveals the practices, standards, and contexts surrounding waste. We need such interdisciplinary collaboration to tackle the challenges that inwastement poses—whether ethical, social, and political, or economic and ecological.

With Whom Would You Most Like to Discuss Your Book?

Preferably, with everyone! Waste in environment and society affects us all: it influences our individual lifestyles. It also, however, demands the attention of civil society, the private sector, and policymakers of cities and states, up to the EU and the international community. We have tried to write our book so that those working at all such levels can find ideas relevant to their questions about our inwastement and thereby initiate dialogue, not just with us but with each other.

Can You Summarize the Message of the Book in One Sentence?

If we ask the question of why waste exists, we confront ourselves—our history, our society, and our future—that's why we find waste so intriguing.