

The Costs of Inhuman Epistemology: A Response to Myra Hird and Zsuzsa Gille **Elizabeth Mazzolini, Virginia Tech**

I have been reading the exchange here between Zsuzsa Gille and Myra Hird avidly, beginning with Hird's productive essay in *Social Epistemology*, "Knowing Waste: Toward an Inhuman Epistemology." It would seem that for decades waste studies has revolved around matters of definition—what the definition is, but also who gets to write it—in responses to waste. My contribution to a volume I edited with Stephanie Foote (*Histories of the Dustheap*) is about the certainty and weight of particular definitions; specifically, how moral and epistemological certainty about litter at natural sites popular with tourists, in my case Mount Everest, can actually distract from more influential but less obvious causes of degradation, such as global climate change caused by industrial entities more powerful than careless tourists. Even with waste's very nature in question, waste seems to be capable of a lot, such as supporting an industry based on affective attachments, or prompting subjectivities to form around responses to hazardous sites. For scholars and activists seeking to form worthwhile ethical relations within human-material-environmental webs, pressing questions often turn from matters of definition to some version of, what is to be done about all this waste? In light of the mind-boggling quantities of waste with which we must deal, the nature of waste's existence seems to matter less than its effects. In other words, even without the facts of waste's matter established, what waste *does* seems more important than what waste *is*.

Indeed, part of Hird's original point is that effects and identity are inseparable, and that identities extend well beyond humanistic models. History shows that conceiving of environmental problems as having only human solutions developed with only humans in mind and framed exclusively by human agency does not always result in salutary policies. With this cautionary history in mind, it makes sense for academic environmentalists to develop a more expansive environmental ethics. However, there are millions of humans vulnerable to the effects of waste. For example, the deleterious effects of waste are distributed disproportionately to the poor. To borrow Hird's idiom, for someone interested in agential cuts that forward a progressive politics, waste studies can seem caught in a bind between too much and too little focus on humans.

Myra Hird's provocation to a non-anthropocentric environmentalism that seeks to show identities and agency as contingent on nonhuman entanglements fits with ongoing academic traditions. Toward varying political ends, many scholars in the humanities and social sciences have for the past few decades been invested in questioning or re-writing Enlightenment-based forms of subjectivity, epistemology and ontology. With this tradition of questioning well underway, some have stepped back to assess its consequences. For example, readers of this forum may recall a 2004 essay by Bruno Latour entitled, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." The essay first appeared in *Critical Inquiry*, and an abridged version appeared in *Harper's*, with the result that it had a wider circulation than a "merely" scholarly article. Indeed, it had broader and more urgent social and political exigence than a scholarly article might have. For sympathetic readers, it appeared at the nadir of the Bush presidency, during which the administration appeared to play fast and loose with facts regarding climate change and justifications for and actions during war. In particular, Latour's essay is concerned with "[w]ars. So many wars. Wars outside and wars inside. Cultural wars, science wars, and wars against terrorism. Wars against poverty and wars against the poor. Wars against

ignorance and wars out of ignorance." In 2004, this opening would lead the reader to infer that Latour meant (without actually mentioning) the wars waged by the Bush administration, both actual wars (in Iraq and Afghanistan), and wars on scientific knowledge, in particular scientific knowledge of climate change.

Of course, Latour also mentions cultural wars and science wars—both of which terms invoke, among other things, the "Sokal Hoax" of the 1990s and its associated inter- and intra-nicene conflicts among and between academic scientists and academic humanists. Readers of this forum might remember that, roughly, at stake during this era was the existence of a bedrock reality as described by scientists, versus a contingent and relative reality as described by postmodern humanists. By the time of Latour's writing, the drama had died down, but the issues lingered, and the idea of culture wars extended beyond academia to diffusely characterize the right's ostensible commitment to stability and a priori categories and the left's ostensible commitment to demonstrating contingency at every turn. Then lo, a hyperconservative president was capitalizing on the uncertain nature of truth in order to accomplish politically insidious ends, and it seemed as though all the contingency advocated by the left was being used against them, a kind of epistemological Frankenstein's monster.

The tone of Latour's essay might be partially characterized as hand-wringing, a "what have we wrought?" questioning for academic critics within science studies and other disciplines. For Latour, such critics insist on the contingency and political genealogies of those things that the unschooled in social critique might naively call "facts." Latour characterizes such critics as, at that moment, having painted themselves into a corner by being so devoted to critique for critique's sake that they are left unable to effect anything at all. Such critics are stuck being unable to act, because agency has been called into question, and unable to deal with stable facts, because fact-ness itself has been called into question. Against this historical intellectual backdrop, Latour reminds us that once facts are called into question, politicians and industries can run roughshod over any territory they please, because the facts of damage are no longer real. Hence Latour's titular question implies its own answer: critique has indeed run out of steam when all it can do is engage in endless cycles of critique, always undercutting rather than producing.

Meanwhile, political, economic and epistemological systems do keep producing, unburdened by the imperative to constantly reflect in an infinite house-of-mirrors as critique for critique's sake seems to do. And indeed, one thing that is produced unrelentingly is waste. Latour's points about critiquing versus effecting change haunt the exchange here between Hird and Gille, especially in Gille's final insistence that vulnerable people cannot afford to engage indeterminacy. Hird's initial essay wishes to recuperate indeterminacy for the issue of waste, especially in landfills, toward achieving a non-anthropocentric environmentalism that does not assume a central role for humans and their instruments. Hird's primary theoretical apparatus is a theory of indeterminacy, as forwarded by Karen Barad in a discussion of the history of quantum physics. Working within feminist science studies, Hird's indeterminacy follows the tradition of seeking alternatives to Enlightenment-based ways of knowing that have the potential to wreak epistemic violence to those excluded from the status quo. An important difference between Hird's indeterminacy and high theory's contingency of the 1990s (succinctly parodied in Alan Sokal's "hoax" essay and obliquely referenced by Latour) is that Hird's theory, via Karen Barad, comes from scientists

themselves. Rather than have humanists come along and describe science to scientists, Barad finds a description of science from within science, thereby revealing the non-bedrock nature of scientific reality to have been present from the ground up, literally, from the most infinitesimal building blocks of the universe. Although not framed as such, Hird's suggestions could almost be seen as the beginning of a response to Latour's question: "Can we devise another powerful descriptive tool that deals this time with matters of concern and whose import then will no longer be to debunk but to protect and to care. . .? Is it really possible to transform the critical urge in the ethos of someone who adds reality to matters of fact and not subtract reality?" (232). Hird's project seems decidedly not to debunk but rather to add — to use critique based in feminist science studies to add provisional realities to the situation of landfill waste. And yet we might take a lesson from Latour and take Gille's point, and consider very seriously as one of the most literally vital considerations of waste studies whether forwarding indeterminacy is too costly for members of our very own species.

To add to my point while putting it somewhat differently, embracing indeterminacy in order to avoid anthropocentrism by introducing the agency of non-human entities can include not only bacteria but also corporations — similarly "alive," moving, growing and reproducing in non-human ways. Meanwhile, forms of human agency exerted by actual humans are often overlooked because they do not fit into the Enlightenment-based model so many scholars are trained to critique. The kind of indeterminacies foisted on the poor by corporate and industrial waste practices, and some of the ways agency among the poor has been exerted in response, is explored in Rob Nixon's recent *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Nixon's focus on how environmental problems affect poor people seems simultaneously commonsensical and profound — commonsensical because waste studies scholars are familiar with the fact that the poor bear the majority of the weight of environmental degradation; profound, because few academic scholars have lately been invested in demonstrating and theorizing the agency of the poor, for a wide range of institutional and political reasons. As scholars and activists struggle with ways of defining environmental ethics and responsibility, the poor are often shadow figures, relegated to an almost inhuman status as their abilities and agencies are shunted in the interest of focusing on individual bourgeois and large-scale corporate responsibility in the face of environmental crisis. What waste *does* is make life very hard for many people, and it seems awkward to skip over this matter of pressing concern in favor of extending agency to entities whose interests are less local to ours as part of a project of critiquing and re-critiquing what waste *is*. Indeed it is a strange position for a leftist intellectual to be in when it makes more sense to consider the agency of bacteria than the agency of slum-dwellers.

The kind of human agency often critiqued broadly in the humanities and social sciences as well as within feminist science studies can seem already, discordantly, both inhuman and all-too human — inhuman because devoted to modes of ethics that reside far from home, so to speak, and human because the critique finds familiar forms of agency and interest in those faraway places. Myra Hird's essay makes progress toward rethinking agency altogether, and the conversation with Zsuzsa Gille makes clear what is at stake in determinations, definitions and agency. I would like to go even further and suggest that a productive path might be to explore the non-Enlightenment based forms of agency available to humans themselves—new ways of being human in response to environmental crisis, rather than new forms of humanity in unfamiliar places.

Mazzolini, Elizabeth. 2013. "The Costs of Inhuman Epistemology: A Response to Myra Hird and Zsuzsa Gille." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 2 (7): 31-34. <http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-P9>

Contact details: mazz@vt.edu

References

- Latour, Bruno. 2004. "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry* 30: 225-248.
- Mazzolini, Elizabeth. 2012. "The Garbage Question on Top of the World." In *Histories of the Dustheap: Waste, Material Cultures, Social Justice*, edited by Stephanie Foote and Elizabeth Mazzolini, pp. 147-168. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Nixon, Rob. 2013. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.