# Alexander Clapp’s Waste Wars exposes the global crisis of toxic waste trade



Alexander Clapp’s book Waste Wars: Dirty Deals, International Rivalries and the Scandalous Afterlife of Rubbish, published by John Murray, London, presents an alarming yet compelling examination of the global waste crisis. The narrative combines meticulous investigative journalism with a geographic and historical analysis of how waste has evolved into a pressing international problem, disproportionately impacting poorer countries particularly in the Global South.

Clapp chronicles the trajectory of waste management beginning from the pesticide industry era, highlighting the initial efforts in the United States and other parts of the Global North to regulate and clean up hazardous chemical waste, following warnings by activists such as Rachael Carson. However, Clapp reveals a significant oversight in these regulations: they were limited mostly to wealthier nations, while industrial and hazardous waste was systematically exported to poorer countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. This transfer, often disguised as international aid, became a lucrative billion-dollar industry closely tied to development aid and geopolitical influence. For example, USAID shipped large stockpiles of waste to countries including India, Ethiopia, Indonesia, and Haiti.

The book details specific examples of how this toxic export model operated, exposing the complex interplay between environmental degradation and economic development. In East Java, Indonesia, a paper production industry reliant on bamboo turned to imports of waste paper from the US and the Netherlands once local resources were depleted. This waste paper was contaminated with plastic sheets, which villagers used as a fuel source for cooking and small industries such as tofu and cracker production—resulting in severe environmental pollution and public health hazards. Clapp paints a grim picture of barren soils, polluted waterways, and dying wildlife in these “waste villages,” yet notes the residents’ dependence on this hazardous trade as a source of income.

Turkey and Ghana also feature prominently in Clapp’s account. Following China’s 2018 ban on plastic imports, countries like Turkey became new destinations for Western plastic waste. Turkey’s booming construction industry benefited from cheap scrap metal imports, often recycled under conditions that outsourced toxic industrial pollution. Ghana’s Agbogbloshie slum is described as a hub where young workers dismantle and burn electronic waste to recover metals and valuable minerals, enduring harsh and unsafe conditions. Additionally, some individuals use personal data from discarded electronics to engage in internet scams, illustrating how electronic waste intertwines with socio-economic challenges.

Clapp further explores other dimensions of the global waste story, such as the use of toxic liquid waste to fill a pristine lake in Central America, the manipulation of unstable governments in so-called “banana republics” to facilitate waste dumping, and the hazardous ship-breaking industry concentrated in regions including India’s Alang yard. He reveals that the United States, the world’s largest generator of hazardous materials, has not ratified the Basel Convention, which regulates the illegal export of dangerous waste, thereby enabling continued transboundary pollution.

Throughout the book, Clapp argues that the underlying driver of this crisis is a form of “Trumpism” predating Donald Trump himself—a belief in Western exceptionalism that permits the rich and powerful to act with disregard for the rights and welfare of poorer populations. He states, “an Ayn Rand like selfishness guides the actions of the rich nations. The poor and the weak have no rights or claims; they can be and are treated like vermin,” which results in systemic environmental injustice and exploitation.

Despite the bleakness of the subject, Clapp offers glimpses of hope. He points to ongoing efforts, such as Kerala’s community-led decentralised waste management initiatives aiming for zero waste, as potential models for change. He emphasises that the knowhow and financial resources to tackle the problem exist but are obstructed by political and business interests prioritising profit over sustainability. Clapp calls for governments to implement effective policies and for citizens to support meaningful reform.

In summary, Waste Wars provides a sobering yet insightful global perspective on the environmental and geopolitical dimensions of rubbish management. It serves as both a comprehensive critique of the current waste export paradigm and a call to address a complex crisis through coordinated action and innovation. The book maintains striking prose and powerful imagery, making it a significant contribution to literature on environmental justice and global sustainability.

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