

Monday 4 December 2023 at 3:30 p.m.  
5th floor, Seminar room of the Institute of Ethnology,  
Czech Academy of Sciences, Na Florenci 3, Prague 1

# Patrick O'Hare, Ph.D.

Department of Social Anthropology, University of St Andrews



## Disappearing the Plastic Proletarian

This paper identifies and explores a tendency within multidisciplinary studies and popular discussions of plastic to downplay or ignore the role of workers at various stages of its value chain, from fossil fuel extraction and manufacturing, to recycling and waste disposal. It argues that the marginalisation of plastic labour takes place through four key mechanisms: aestheticization, fetichism, flexibilization, and wasting. Aestheticization refers to the way that plastics are focused on as aesthetic objects, not only when associated with design modernism and the household mundane, but also when used as symbols of ecological devastation and the Anthropocene (as with so-called 'plastiglomerate'). The second process draws on Marx and Lukacs' concept of commodity fetichism, where a perceived relationship between objects in a capitalist marketplace masks the human relationships and labour involved in production. Third, flexibilization refers to one of the ways in which the voice of organised labour in the plastics industry has been marginalised, a move complemented by the benefits offered to plastics sector workers to deter industrial unrest. Finally, the wasting of plastic refers not to the generation of plastic waste, which has been amply covered elsewhere, but to the way in which a focus on (consumer) plastic waste has crowded out the attention paid to plastics production. Finally, the paper turns to the way in which the new UN treaty on ending plastic pollution is, through a focus on 'just transition', finally shining a light on the plastic labour involved in the various oil, chemical, manufacturing, and recycling firms that together compose plastics supply chains.

Patrick O'Hare is a Senior Researcher and UKRI Future Leaders Fellow in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of St Andrews. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA) and a member of the editorial board of 'Worldwide Waste: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies'. Dr. O'Hare holds a Ph.D. in Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge (2017) and have held research positions at the Universities of Cambridge, Manchester, and Surrey. He has conducted research in Uruguay, Mexico, Argentina, and the UK on themes relating to labour, waste, cardboard publishing, and plastics.



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