

Speech of Heinz Rothenpieler at Free University Uvira, Friday Febr 15:

The question of waste

Why in the beginning I would like to talk about „things“ and not about environment?

Please give permission that I bring you in a short excursion in my language and culture which is in this case the same as in English because some roots of English language are going to German language.

In our daily language and life we use „things“ to ease our life. Shoes, clothes, a table, a chair are „things“.

In the English language you find this word „thing“ in „something“, in „anything“, in „everything“ and more. In our Germany language there we find another connection. For our German tribes in old times/history a „Thing“ was the „parliament“ of the members of the tribe like a „palaver“ in Africa.

So could there be a connection between this „parliament“ and the „things“ which we use?

My answer is that the parliament makes the laws which for example define the ownership of the material „things“.

Through this ownership „things“ have a worth, a value. I can buy and sell „things“ or as we in English say „anything“ (which I own or want to own).

So normally our interest is that „things“ have a long life and have a good price.

In former times and in many parts of the world „things“ are or were produced on an *artisanal niveau*. This „artisans“ gave part of their soul in the things they produced.

Through all this our life is constituted by the soul of such things, by plants, animals brothers, sisters, neighbors and our house and village. Normally we feel this all is the soul of our life. We could say this

(round world)

But now we find „something“ in our life which is different.

This difference arrived with machines. „Machines“ are part of a magic world and the „magic world“ is defined by this (caro)

Machines are able to produce many „things“.

Advantage: Things are becoming cheaper

Disadvantage: The (real) value of things is going away.

Away to what?

At the end our environment is paying the real price for all this cheap things produced by machines.

So our environmental problem is connected with the less and less worth of things.

The best example is the world of plastic.

With plastic the sense of things changed. **Many „things“ are by cheap production available for one use only. After this one use we throw that thing away. So is no wonder that we are polluting our environment.**

This behavior came first from USA. (Mc Donalds for example)

But later this was copied perfectly by the Chinese. Now China is producing plenty of things by plastic for Africa and the whole world which are not expensive but have a low quality.

Additionally all this things are packed in plastic so that this packing pollutes the environment too, because this package material is quickly thrown away.

What is now?

All this cheap plastic production has reduced the value of things drastically. So we could say our environment is polluted by many worthless things. Such „things“ have a value for a very short time. After this they are without any worth.

What do we do with worthless things? We throw them away.

This is our problem of pollution in our towns. This magic machines are producing plenty of things for a very short time of use. This we call in Germany “Entwertung der Dinge”. In French it seems the translation is “compost”. But this word “compost” comes from the “round” world, from the organic world and is not saying the truth.

All things from plastic are part of an anorganic world. This world can never become “compost”. The way to come back is recyclage. This anorganic things are products of Chemistry/Scheidekunst (Art de la chimie).

But at the moment they are mixed with the organic world everywhere . This brings much danger. A drastic example we see in the oceans. Very little micro-parts or rests of this anorganic things you find now in the waters and fishes consume this with their food. Via this fishes this anorganic “things” are coming back in our chain of food to human being and violate our health. This is dangerous. In Asea additionally they found many dead whales (balein) on the beaches of the ocean and the stomach of this fishes were full of plastic.

What to do?

People, local communities and governments must cooperate for solutions.

In some countries like Rwanda plastic is more and more forbidden. In our country, in Germany, we have a system of “Pfand” (that means retournable bottles) and another system for batteries from cars. People pay a sum as bottle deposit / “dépôt de bouteille” by buying this products or for batteries by buying a car and receive this sum back if they bring an empty bottle or old batterie back. An old car batterie has a high value of about 500 dollar.

Furthermore we have a separate collection of plastic, paper and glass so that this can become re-used.

In Addis Abeba (Ethiopia) I saw large quarters of the town where people are living and working for recyclage. They are sorting the things back to their material or origin.

On many plastic things you find a sign from which kind of plastic this is produced. If things are produced by metal (computer, television apparatus etc.) they try to sort every kind of metal extra. This “clean sorted metals” and plastics are becoming again a new value because they can be re-used.

We call this work “urban mining”, because much material of a good value is circulating now in big cities and after use is given in the waste.

This “urban mining” is becoming more and more a business.

Here we have a chance to bring jobs to the youth.

But how to finance this?

The main source of money for this should be the income of selling of this “clean” sorted materials which can be used for new products. On the other side it could be helpful if the government gives obligation that sellers of much plastic etc. have to pay a contribution to this recycling. So if I buy something in Germany: In this price I find a little sum for recycling of this material if I have finished the use and throw it away. In the price of products now is not material only, production and profit but a contribution for collecting the waste. This money has to go to the responsible organization for collecting this kind of waste. We call this “green point”. Everything with a “green point” can come to recyclage and if I buy such a thing so I pay a little sum extra for this system.

But in Africa there are more possibilities. A friend of mine has analysed the quality of waste in the capital of N’Djamena (Tchad) a few years ago. In that time he found that 80 or 90 % of waste there was organic. They organised a company to produce compost for (Mbolea) this and at the end they could sell high quality compost for gardens and fields and received income for the workers.

All this should and could be done in cooperation with authorities. But authorities should know that normally it is their obligation to save the environment and give the needed rules for this. I was very surprised to hear that in Bukavu for example authorities demanded much money for a “licence to collect waste”. Normally the opposite should happen. In Germany every household pays money to the local authorities which collect waste twice a week in every street. This is an organized public service.

In our country this payment for collecting waste is demanded by all owners of houses, not directly from the households. This owners demand it back if they have rented flats to people. I have rented a flat. Every month I pay a small sum in the rent for the landlord for collecting this waste by the authorities.

This waste is coming to recyclage or in a depot of our town where I live. But some waste too from the 700.000 inhabitants of our town is brought in a big special oven. This is the waste which cannot brought to recyclage. So this will be burned away. With the heat they produce electricity which is spent in the system of our town and brings some money.

The same could be done with organic waste. It is possible to produce biogas. This could be used for cooking for example.

The best solution but would be to teach the people to reduce the use of plastic and other tools of short life which usually quickly are thrown away. The local governments could establish a special tax on all plastic etc. and the income from that could be used for collecting all waste.

There are many possibilities.....

I am glad that this problem has come in your focus.

When I came first time to Uvira, many years ago, I found no waste and a very clean beach of Lake Tanganjika.

Unfortunately this has changed. I hope and wish you that you can clean your environment soon again.

Nature alone without our help cannot do this. Or to say this with other words: Nature will fight back one day and this will bring more problems for life.

So now is our time to act and I am glad that you are willing to do this.

The base and the aim is that “things” are coming back in order. At the moment we are living in a time of disorder. On the niveau of plastic this disorder is created by all this machines which produce such cheap “goods”. But in reality and in truth this “cheap goods” are very expensive. Not for those who buy this goods now but for our societies. This social cost of waste we don’t find in the price of all this nice things. Exactly this must be changed. The price of goods has to mirror all costs including the cost of cleaning the environment.

Thank you.