

SCRAP(PED): Circulation and Stagnation of Discarded Electronics

Electronic waste (e-waste) is a fast-growing, highly debated, and hazardous waste stream. Electronic products are toxic, when dismantled, but they also contain valuable metals, which makes it profitable to take them apart to obtain these metals – so-called ‘urban mining’. While local scrap economies facilitate – in terms of green energy transition – a much-needed reuse of valuable minerals, the practices used in scrapyards expose hazardous substances and pose health threats to the workers and pollute air, soil, and water of the surrounding environment.

Through multi-sited fieldwork across world regions, Europe and Africa, specifically Ghana and Germany, this dissertation provides insights into an alternative, only partly visible, global trade in used electronic goods facilitated by trading networks. As these goods are moved, boundaries between new, used, spare parts, scrap, and waste become blurred and are not clear cut. Discarded electronics are materially ambiguous and balance on a fine line between commodity and waste – both socially and legally speaking. While it is illegal to export electronic waste (e-waste) from countries inside the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to non-OECD countries, it is legal to export goods for repair and reuse. The central question here is subsequently: when is it waste and when is it not? The potentiality for repair, resale, and reuse in Ghana means that discarded European goods are sent to Ghana by diasporians in Germany. They transfer and translate value between these two social contexts. Empirically, the dissertation thus shed light on the role of trade in used electronics in discussions on the global “e-waste problem”.

Following discarded electronics and their flow the dissertation shows that when things are thrown away, they do not disappear; they merely change form. An analytical attention to movement and circuits moreover demands attention to what gets ‘stuck’; the accumulation and piling up of the waste of the (e-)waste. Through the case of discarded electronics’ movement to Ghana and its links to bigger supply- and pollution chains, the dissertation thus discusses questions of global division of goods and harm.

The dissertation is article-based and largely based on interdisciplinary, collaborative fieldwork as part of the research project Environmental Crime and Illegal Ecologies (ILLECO).