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Bottled Water Practices: Ontologies, Markets, Politics

In the last ten years a huge variety of activist campaigns have sprung up against bottled water, focusing on everything from their threat to public water provision to the phenomenal global rise in plastic wastes. In this paper we approach bottled water in terms of competing ontologies of water - drinking. Our aim is to identify key theoretical resources for developing what Shove et al. (2007: 10) call 'a suitably materialized account of the emergence, reproduction and transformation of a social practice'. This focus on practice situates 'disposability' within the routines and habits of consumer culture and the ways in which various artefacts participate in these routines and help constitute the social. Practices, then, are always more - than - human. Rather than see them as an expression of human agency or culture they have to be understood as complex associations of materials, meanings, norms and bodily habits that are sustained and modified through repeated performance or enactment. In the case of the plastic water bottle, these practices differ significantly according to context. As an object designed for portability and single use it is most alive outside the home. Drawing on fieldwork from Bangkok, we ask how the bottle mediates between inside and outside or home and away, how it impacts on household practices around the tap, and how industry positions and produces the PET bottle as the most convenient way of arranging drinking water.