



University of
Western Sydney

INSTITUTE FOR
CULTURE AND SOCIETY

2015 Seminar Series

INSTITUTE FOR CULTURE AND SOCIETY

Political Materials: the Pragmatics and Politics of Plastic

Professor Gay Hawkins

Date

Thursday 12 March

Time

11.30am – 1pm

Venue

EB.2.21 Parramatta (South)
Campus

Abstract

This paper wrestles with the question of how to write a political history of the relationship between plastic and food. It assesses the significance of recent debates between science and technology studies and political philosophy about the 'stuff of politics', or the ways in which materials can become constitutive of political processes. It also considers French 'pragmatic sociology', specifically Laurent Thévenot's account of the grounds on which new sociotechnical and ethical commonalities are founded. A key concern is with how the technical possibilities of plastic, a material central to massive transformations in food production and consumption, can emerge as political situations and become implicated in the building of new collectivities. These theoretical resources will be put to work on two cases. First, the relationship between packaged food and the rise of self service. How did the seemingly trivial matter of plastic packaging become implicated in changing conducts of shopping and the experience of free choice – an experience central not only to consumption but also democracy? The second case explores an alternative food enterprise in Brisbane, Northey Street Markets. The particular focus will be on attempts to reduce plastic use in the markets by going 'plastic free' in July 2014. How did this experiment stage the problem of plastic? What regimes of engagement and practical techniques were used to build commonality around the refusal of plastic? Different cases, different ways of configuring plastic as a political material.

Biography

Professor Gay Hawkins joined the ICS in January 2015. She researches in the areas of social and political theory, materiality, and markets. She is particularly interested in issues of water, waste and animals. Her most recent book is *Plastic Water: the social and material life of bottled water*. This book was co authored with Kane Race and Emily Potter and will be published by MIT in June. The research for this paper is based on a large ARC 'The Skin of Commerce: the Role of Plastic Packaging in Food Security, Waste and Consumer Activism'.