

RESEARCH

Problematizing Plastic: A Visual Analysis of the 'Jute not Plastic' Campaign, 1976–1979 (Switzerland, Germany, Austria)

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The paper focuses on the problematisation of plastic within the public sphere. Through a case study of the *Jute statt Plastik* (*Jute not Plastic*) campaign that was conducted in Switzerland, Austria and Germany in 1976–1979, we show how 'a politically mediated process' can problematise plastic and thereby question consumer values. *Jute not Plastic* was the first campaign to politicise the public discourse connecting consumption, developmental goals and ecological pollution. Although the materiality of plastic has no fixed meaning in itself, the campaign demonstrates how social representation and sense-making through framing objects and proposing waste-avoiding alternatives can influence ways of seeing plastic. Based on previously unexamined campaign material and using the method of comparative visual analysis, the study shows how the campaign used different visual strategies to frame the jute bag as a morally charged lifestyle product in relation to the plastic bag.

Keywords: visual sociology; social movements; framing plastic

1. The *Jute Not Plastic* Campaign

Jute statt Plastik (hereafter *Jute not Plastic*) was a political campaign that originated in Switzerland in 1976. It arose out of activities by *Erklärung von Bern* (The Bern Declaration), a nondenominational and politically independent organisation based on a manifesto of the same name that garnered 1,000 signatures in 1968. The manifesto called for fair globalisation, and the signatories committed themselves to donating 3 per cent of their income to development cooperation. The main aim of the *Jute not Plastic* campaign was to combine political education with the implementation of specific projects of development cooperation. The campaign bought jute bags produced by women's cooperatives in Bangladesh, which were initially sold in Switzerland as an alternative to plastic bags. Two main reasons were cited for problematising plastic objects: Firstly, the low manufacturing cost of plastic items resulted in less demand for objects made from natural material and thereby a reduction in manufacturing jobs in countries such as Bangladesh; secondly, plastic objects bring with them an 'unsolved disposal problem, because they cannot be degraded by any biological process (rotting, decay) and can only be incinerated' (*Jute-Aktion* 1977b: 40).¹ The campaign argued that a plastic bag entails four times the energy consumption of a jute bag and that extended use of a jute bag increases the energy-saving twentyfold in comparison with a bag made out of plastic.

The project in Bangladesh was coordinated by the non-profit organisation Jute Works, which was created in 1973 by the Christian Organisation for Relief and Rehabilitation.² Following the success of the campaign in Switzerland, alternative trading organisations adopted the idea in Germany and Austria. The campaign in Germany was initiated in 1978 by the *GEPA Aktion Dritte Welt Handel e.V.* (Mission Third World Trade), an organisation working with support groups, cooperatives and governmental organisations in Africa, Asia and Latin America. By importing jute bags and various other products, such as coffee, the aim was to promote the social and economic development of producers. At the same time, 'the sale of the products should also inform the awareness in the consumer countries about the development process and international dependencies' (*Aktion Jute statt Plastik* 1979a).³ The project was carried out by the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Dritte Welt Läden e.V.* (Working Group of Third World Shops), an association of 'worldshops' operating in cities throughout West Germany in the 1970s. The German campaign was rooted in the work of Christian youth organisations under the two umbrella organisations of the Catholic *Bund der Deutschen Katholischen Jugend* and the Protestant *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Evangelischen Jugend*. *GEPA Aktion Dritte Welt Handel* distributed the material for the campaign and the jute bags (see **Figure A**), and local groups were responsible for implementation on the ground, as the target group of the campaign was the common public.

In this study, we analyse the *Jute not Plastic* campaign to examine how plastic has been problematised on the visual

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Figure A: Main campaign items. left (A1): *Jute not Plastic* jute bag made in Bangladesh, 1978; centre (A2): Leaflet with further information, 1979; right (A3): the campaign poster 'Jute – the symbol of a simple lifestyle', Germany, 1978.

level through social campaigning. The aim is to contribute to our understanding of how plastics as materials become political (Westermann 2007) and by what means they are problematised within political concerns (Gabrys, Hawkins & Michael 2013: 4–5; Pathak & Nichter 2019: 308–309). Visual framing, aesthetics and material culture have always been an essential part of political movements (Mattoni & Treune 2014; Müller & Sommer 2020; Stanisavljevic 2015; Watzlawik 2018). As our analysis will show, the contrast between lifestyles in Bangladesh and the countries organising the campaign gave rise to two conflicting ideas: on the one hand, the idea of empowerment, the promotion of domestic processing of raw materials and improving access to world trade; on the other, the promotion of an economic model beyond growth, in which a simpler, more sustainable lifestyle could provide a role model for social life. The organisers and participants of the *Jute not Plastic* campaign were aware of the potential conflicts in these aims, and questions such as the sustainability of purchasing jute bags and loosening the conditions for production standards in Bangladesh due to high demand in Western countries were debated at an early stage in the campaign (Aktion Jute statt Plastik 1978d).

For this study, we created a broad and extensive data corpus of pictures and material from the campaign, availing ourselves of different digital and local archives. We collected and digitalised original material used by the campaign and in the documentation of its history in Germany at the MISEREOR archive.⁴ Further data from the campaign was gathered from GEPA – The Fair Trade Company, the Swiss Social Archives and the West German Broadcasting Cologne archive.⁵ To gain a better understanding of the social and historical environment of the campaign, we conducted an expert interview with one of the key actors responsible for the initiation and implementation of the campaign in Germany.

The focus of our study mainly rests on the visual level of the campaign. It includes the official leaflet (which came

with each jute bag to inform purchasers about the aims of the campaign) and the main campaign poster (all shown in **Figure A**), images used in teaching material designed by the campaign and brochures with essential information, such as travel photographs, and graphs that focus on economic dependencies. Additionally, the jute bag itself is part of the data corpus as well as documentary photographs from the local implementation of the campaign by campaign members and press. This additional material provides more information on the activities of regional groups and their social interaction in pedestrian areas. Due to our visual analysis method, we used external image comparisons to further elaborate on different aspects of the campaign. The notation (E) in the description of the figures indicates external pictures that are not part of the campaign's data corpus and serve only for comparison purposes.

Methodologically, the analysis follows Erving Goffman's comparative study of images that he developed in his work *Gender Advertisements* (1979), which focuses on differences and similarities between visual representations of gender relations in advertisements that can be identified using a corpus consisting of a multitude of images. Because of the significance of contrasts for visual communication in general, we do not focus on an analysis of single images but follow the concept of the interpretive methodology of image comparison based on Müller (2016; 2020), in which he further refines Goffman's methodological insights. For our analysis, we compiled approximately 250 images in published material related to the *Jute not Plastic* campaign in the archives mentioned above dating from the 1970s and 1980s. The Figures shown in this paper are those that best represent the key categories we describe in our analysis. Goffman's approach is based on theoretical sampling and focusses on the discovery and presentation of specific categories and its dimensions within a given data corpus. The aim is not to make a proof out of a statistical sampling but to focus on the framing of the campaign in its

variation (Goffman 1979: 24). Therefore, during the analysis we looked for images in the material of the campaign that contradict our arguments.

Aims and implementation of the campaign

The campaign *Jute not Plastic* was influenced by the environmental movement beginning in the late 1960s. Critical voices began to question the limits of growth and the industrialisation process after World War II. Young people started travelling with youth organisations, such as the Scout Movement, or independently hitchhiking and thereby personally witnessed global social inequalities. Criticism of the so-called 'consumer society' intensified following the publication of scientific and economic reports (the Club of Rome published its first report *The Limits to Growth* in 1972) and also in response to the oil crisis in the 1970s, which led to a ban on driving in Germany on selected Sundays. During this period, growing public awareness led to the formation of groups in many parts of Europe that questioned Western lifestyles and exerted political pressure. The campaign and its underlying concept of development had a significant influence on the history of development politics in Switzerland, Germany and Austria.

Mainly grounded in the thinking of dependence theory in the 1970s, the campaign highlighted the fact that many of Bangladesh's problems were causally 'linked to asymmetric political and trade relationships' (Emdad Haque 1998: 22–23; Kapoor 2008). It should be noted that the mass production of jute in Bangladesh was a legacy of British colonialism that had various negative consequences. The expansion by the British of cash crops, such as tobacco, sugarcane and jute, altered the Bangladeshi agricultural system and resulted in a reorganisation of peasant life, the depletion of soil fertility and accelerated soil erosion. High demand and the rising price of jute in the 1960s and 1970s led to an increase in its cultivation in Bangladesh even in the country's most fertile areas. This resulted in reduced production of cereal crops like rice and made the population vulnerable to food shortages. As a result, the government had to import cereals and introduce food aid (Ali 2018: 17; Jha & Singh 2008: 88; Khan & Hossain 1989: 50; Rahman & Bala 2009: 52).

Notwithstanding its focus and roots in the critique of development policy, *Jute not Plastic* was the first campaign on a grand scale that problematised plastic and combined developmental goals with ecological demands (Arnold 2017: 87). It can be understood in the context of an ongoing 'moralisation of the markets' (Adolf & Stehr 2011) and as a 'pioneering product of fair trade' (Kuhn 2019: 225), with the jute bag becoming a symbol of critical consumption in which people questioned their way of life (Heinze 2019: 6). By introducing the jute bag as an example of an environmentally friendly product, the campaign showed how the meaning of an object in the social world is not self-evident and how social campaigning can change the way an object is viewed (Abele et al. 2008). The social and ecological milieu in which the campaign framed the use of plastic is essential for understanding its success (Krippendorff 2006). Shopping bags were one of

the main marketing objects of department stores in the 1970s. Plastic bags had replaced paper bags in stores on a large scale. In Germany, plastic carrier bags accounted for 86% of all bags in 1978/79, whereas only 14% of bags were made of paper (Schmidt-Bachem 2001: 247). Bags have several functions with regard to consumption: they enable people to buy more goods and increase their personal consumption; they provide free advertising space for retailers to print their logos to increase their visibility on the street; and even today, consumers still use the carrier bags of luxury brands to express their identification with the brand in everyday life. The *Jute not Plastic* campaign shifted this symbolic meaning of consumption to an emblematic expression in the form of a moral appeal (Soeffner 1986: 18), which was signalled by the campaign slogan 'Jute not Plastic'. The text 'Handmade in Bangladesh' on the bag shifted the focus from the logos of brands to the type and location of production of the bag itself. The moral appeal was reinforced by the information leaflet that accompanied the bag. Jute was presented not only as an alternative material for goods made out of plastic but also as a personal choice people could make to take an active stand and contribute to improving the world. Thus the campaign changed the way shopping bags were seen (Berger 1977; Mirzoeff 2011; Sturken & Cartwright 2009). The statues and values displayed by the bag and its carrier were not linked to specific brands but to an expression of political action. The campaign's framing of consumption as a matter of choice focused on four key points (see The Bern Declaration product leaflet, 1977): (1) 'more employment for Bangladesh'; (2) 'conservation of the environment and energy'; (3) 'a shift to a simpler lifestyle'; (4) 'rethinking an alternative concept of growth'. Here, the aim of the campaign can also be linked to the historical research on waste as a social problem (Köster 2017; Strasser 2003).

Based on Arjun Appadurai's concept of the 'commodity situation' (1988 [1986]: 13), one can argue that the jute bag's commodity phase was of short duration. Today jute bags are atypical, although there have been recent efforts to increase their use (for example, the use of the slogan 'Jute not plastic' by the UK wholesaler Ancient Wisdom).⁶ In the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, the campaign was a great success. In Switzerland, more than 240,000 bags were sold between November 1976 and April 1978 (Kuhn 2019: 226) leading to bag shortages as the campaign had not anticipated such high demand (Kuhn 2005: 27). For Germany, 1.2 million bags were sold within 15 months of the campaign (Stollhof 2019: 2). Orders for bags were received not only from individuals but also from organisations, shops and political parties. The campaign organisers debated the problem that the bags could end up being co-opted as just another consumer product and that the central aim of transmitting political ideas could become sidelined.

Today, jute bags are generally considered impractical as they are heavy and smell musty. Rather than the jute bag itself, it is the concept of exchanging the plastic bag for a bag made out of natural materials that has remained relevant. Discourse about the plastic bag as a symbol of

environmental pollution has intensified in recent years, and many retailers (partly as a result of government policy) have reduced or banned their use. Clapp and Swanston (2009) highlight the different patterns of the implementation of the anti-plastic bag norm with the ban starting early in the Global South and the Global North following later with the delay due to the influence of the plastics industry lobby. In Germany, grocery stores started to charge for plastic bags in 1991, thereby introducing a pricing mechanism to reduce their consumption (Nielsen, Holmberg & Stripple 2019).⁷ One direct consequence of the *Jute not Plastic* campaign has been linguistic: in Germany, the easily transportable fabric bag, even though it is nowadays made from cotton, is still referred to as a *Jute-Beutel* (jute pouch) or by a similar term. It is a common commodity that people carry in their handbags and use for grocery shopping without necessarily knowing the history of the term or the precise nature of jute.

2. Strategies for Problematising Plastic in the Campaign

We identified three main visual strategies used to problematise plastic in the campaign: a visual contrast of the routines of consumption in city centres; a personification of the problems and solutions of industrialisation and globalisation; and visually challenging different lifestyles and their use of natural and social resources.

Contrasting the visual and social routines of consumption in city centres

One of the campaign's primary ways of gaining visibility and attracting public attention was to organise events in the shopping centres of big cities as well as middle-sized and small towns. **Figure B2** shows that the campaign did not sell goods (e.g., jute bags and other handcrafted products, clothing, coffee, and tea) in the traditional way in shops but instead erected improvised stalls in main shopping areas. In the image, the roof of the stall is covered with crumpled jute sacking, bags are displayed on a rope attached to a lamppost and the campaign poster is taped prominently on the stand with no aspiration for symmetry and tidiness. The architectural features of

the stall imply a high degree of provisionality compared with a typical retail store and the way that products are displayed there (see **Figure B1**). This contrast is achieved on the ground by locating stalls spatially and visually in the neighbourhood of fashion and department stores in which perfectly dressed and illuminated mannequins are displayed. The visual design of the stall implies that consistency in the use of natural materials and improvisation rather than perfection and tidiness are valued by the campaign. By creating this juxtaposition in shopping districts, the campaign was able to propose an alternative aesthetic that contained an anti-consumerist message and a call for simplicity rather than artificial perfection.

Concerning the social interaction at the campaign events, the campaign's stall created a situation that can be described as a combination of selling products and transferring knowledge. Although products were displayed for the potential buyer in a manner comparable with a stall at a farmers' market, the campaign organisers did not stand behind the display like market traders (see **Figure C3**) but in front of the stall like politicians at a political campaign (see **Figure C1**), as the guiding principle was to combine selling products with political campaigning. In this way, campaign events moralised the rationalisation behind the process of buying products in everyday life with the negative framing of the plastic bag central to the sales pitch rather than the functional aspect of the jute bag (Krippendorff 2006). Thus it was the political awareness associated with the jute bag that was central and made consumerism political rather than the selling of the bag itself (Kuhn 2005).

It was not only the stalls that were made out of jute, paper and wood but all the other campaign materials, such as the leaflets, brochures and banners too (see **Figure D2**). All of the colours used in the campaign followed the colour-scheme set by these natural materials. No bright colours were used, only earthy tones in combination with black and red letters. This design principle stands in stark contrast to the flashy bright colours typically used for advertising plastic products during the same period (see **Figure D1**). Campaign members placed flip charts in the middle of pedestrian zones, dressed up in costumes made



Figure B: Improvised stalls contrasted with luxury shops. left (B1): Typical window display, Loeb department store in Bern, 1969 (E); right (B2): *Jute not Plastic* campaign stall, c. 1978, possibly Wuppertal-Barmen, Germany.



Figure C: Social interaction transformed by combining sales of products with knowledge transfer. left (C1): Labour History's Library 'Stiftung Studienbibliothek zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung' stall, Zürich, 1977 (E); centre (C2): *Jute not Plastic* campaign stall, 1970s, Basel, Switzerland; right (C3): Market stall, c. 1970, Münster, Germany (E).



Figure D: Capturing consumer attention. left (D1): Advertisement for plastic goods at the Horten department store, c. 1960s, Germany (E); centre (D2): Advertising slogan 'buy critically. Health, Justice, Environment' from the *Jute not Plastic* campaign, 1970s, presumably Switzerland; right (D3): Promotion of jute bags in Basel city centre (the rear figure wears a costume made from plastic bags), 1970s, Switzerland.

of plastic as ghost-like plastic figures (see **Figure D3**) and staged small theatrical performances in city centres to capture the attention of passersby.

At such events, the campaign addressed the problems of the inequality of economic growth, the saturation of the market with plastic goods that make no contribution to higher standards of living, overconsumption and the non-compostability of plastics compared with natural materials (Aktion Jute statt Plastik 1977). There were also events where jute bags were not available for sale but could be obtained in exchange for plastic bags and a proof of engagement with campaign issues (see **Figure E1**). This exchange was celebrated as something akin to a cleansing ritual, which further emphasised the moral valuation of jute in comparison to plastic. Interested passersby could fill out a questionnaire about developing countries like Bangladesh and facts on the environment and pollution. In exchange for the completed questionnaire and a plastic shopping bag, they received a free jute bag (see **Figure E2**). Thus, engagement with the campaign's issues

and potentially a realisation of their own ignorance about these issues, along with a willingness to relinquish a plastic bag, were the conditions for receiving a jute bag.

Another critical aspect of the visual routines of the campaign can be seen in specific forms of do-it-yourself (DIY) aesthetics. In the brochures and handbooks, the interrelations between the use of natural resources and plastic are described using graphs and diagrams (see **Figure F1**). Even though the sources of many such figures were the World Bank, all graphs and charts are hand-drawn, which gives them an improvised appearance and sounds an individualistic note. They resemble a drawing made by one person to explain something to another person rather than an image generated professionally for a depersonalised public. The aesthetics of DIY and improvisation stand in stark contrast to the design of products and marketing within the consumer culture of the time. **Figure F2** shows another example of the role of DIY. Here it is the collective symbol of a handmade button with the slogan 'Buy critically'. DIY-aesthetics were also used to customise

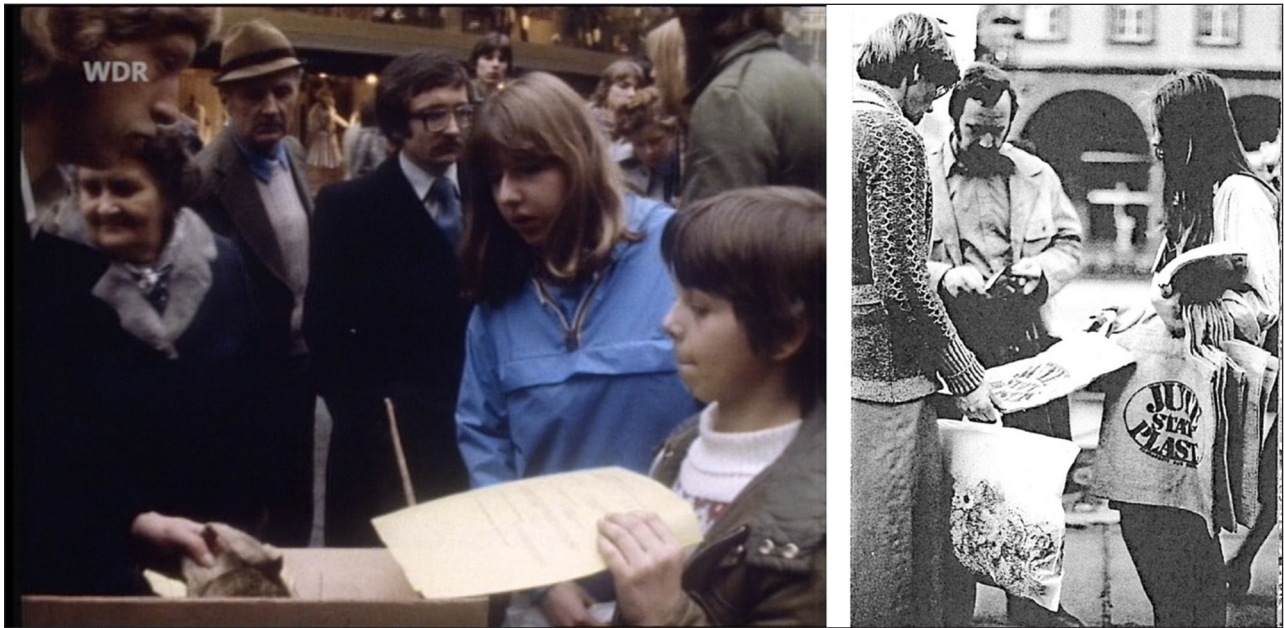


Figure E: Exchanging plastic bags for jute bags. Left (E1): Jute bags are handed out in exchange for plastic bags and a completed questionnaire about the environment and developing countries, Köln-Niehl, 1978 [still from a short report from the WDR]; right (E2): Jute bags being exchanged for plastic bags, c. 1978, Germany.



Figure F: Do-it-yourself aesthetics. left (F1): Graph showing ‘The development of jute and plastic in industrial countries’ from a campaign book with material for the classroom, c. 1979, Germany; centre (F2): A handmade button, with the slogan ‘Buy critically’, 1970s, Switzerland; right (F3): Children painting on jute bags at a campaign event in Wuppertal (Germany), 1978.

products and to enable the customer to give their bag an individual design: the campaign stall displayed a variety of hand-painted jute bags, and a regular activity for children at events was to paint jute bags with their own designs (see **Figure F3**).

It was the jute bag’s ability to be a highly adaptable fashion object rather than its practical function that ensured the campaign’s connectivity. The critical consumer perspective that the campaign addressed through its visual and ideological framing of the jute bag was highly integrative in youth movements of the time. This can be seen in **Figures G1** and **G2**, which show jute bags carried by protesters at anti-capitalism demonstrations led by student and youth groups. The entire campaign with the jute bag as its emblem became a lifestyle element of such groups that critically engaged with consumer culture, capitalism

and social inequality. Due to the diverse nature of the groups organising the local campaign activities, which included young people from the ecclesiastical milieu as well as politically and environmentally engaged associations, the jute bag appeared in a wide variety of different contexts.

Some subcultural groups distanced themselves from the campaign. A group of punks in Bern (**Figure G3**) turned the slogan around to read ‘*Plastic not Jute*’. One member of the group explained that, as a punk, he strived to differentiate himself from the hippie culture to which he had formerly belonged and that ‘the slogan “*Plastik not Jute*” was my answer to the “*Jute not Plastik*” boom that was rampant back then’ (Lurker 2007: 152). As punk aesthetic is antithetic (Meinert & Seeliger 2014: 48; Soeffner 1992: 126), however, some punks did use the jute bag,



Figure G: The jute bag in youth culture. **Left (G1):** Demonstration for ‘1st August Alternative’ on August 1, 1980, in Zürich; **centre (G2):** A person carrying a jute bag in combination with a vest displaying various autonomy emblems; **right (G3):** A group of young people identifying as punks gather in front of a second-hand store in Bern in 1978. The reversed slogan ‘Plastic statt Jute’ (Plastic not jute) is written on the window.



Figure H: Representations of three different groups. **left (H1):** Comic drawing from the campaign brochure ‘Basic Information’, with the caption: ‘We are the rulers of the world, tra la la ...’, c. 1979, Germany; **centre (H2):** Photograph from the campaign brochure ‘Basic Information’, c. 1979, Germany; **right (H3):** Drawing of a working group from the campaign’s 1983 workbook, Germany.

and the way that the campaign broke with the aesthetic values of the dominant classes and challenged capitalism through its DIY aesthetics appealed to punk culture (Hoskins 2014: 151). But the appeal of the jute bag was broad enough to resonate even with the values of conservative, religious groups for whom the pursuit of justice and the desire to give and share that formed a cornerstone of their activities were directly expressed by the *Jute not Plastic* campaign. Questioning the notion of prosperity as well as the campaign’s consumer-critical mindset also appealed to the hippie culture (Farin 2011: 37) so that the jute bag also appeared alongside anarchist and autonomy emblems (see **Figure G2**).

In this way, the jute bag enabled diverse cultural and social groups to visually stress aspects of their particular lifestyle and belief systems. In so doing, plastic was problematised as the emblem of a pro-consumption, pro-pollution, pro-capitalist and pro-injustice world view from which radically different groups wished to distance themselves.

The personification of problems and solutions to industrialisation and globalisation

Within the visual material of the campaign, we can differentiate between three types of actors. The first group (mostly exaggerated in their visual appearance in the form of comic drawings) consist of white, corpulent men, sometimes dressed in costume (**Figure H1**). These men are characterised as being in favour of industrialisation despite its negative impact and as belonging to powerful,

exploitative companies such as Shell and Esso.⁸ They are depicted as caricatures and personify the origin of problems concerning the exploitation of resources.

The second group, which are mostly shown on photographs in the campaign’s handbooks and brochures, consist of people from Bangladesh. They are depicted in the process of growing and harvesting jute, carrying out manual work on the jute bags and carrying out their daily routines. The portrait-like photographs (**Figure H2**) enable the observer to identify with the people depicted. These images focus on the social aspects of everyday life in Bangladesh and highlight the fact that the campaign influences the lives of individual Bangladeshi women. The decision by the campaign to support only women’s cooperatives is presented in the context of local events in Bangladesh. The campaign organisers point out that the catastrophic floods in November 1970 and the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 created existential problems for many women and that the cooperatives offered them an opportunity to help themselves (Aktion Jute statt Plastik 1977). The campaign material also highlights the traditional gender roles in Bangladesh and the emancipatory nature of the action (Aktion Jute statt Plastik 1979b). The Bangladeshi women are not visually presented as suffering from the negative consequences of the problems created by plastic—namely social injustice and environmental pollution—but are presented as part of the solution in their role as producers of the jute bags.

The campaign frames problems and solutions from a gender perspective. Power, industrialisation and its

negative consequences are portrayed as male (Group 1, the problem causers); whereas, the solution and positive side of production are represented as female (Group 2, the female workers). The presentation of difference in the campaign uses stereotyping as a practice of representation (Hall 2018); it is ‘the spectacle of the “Other”’ rather than the visualisation of emancipation that is the structural element of gender representation depicted in the campaign.

The third group are the members of the *Jute not Plastic* campaign, who are mainly depicted in drawings (Figure H3) in which they are protesting, talking or thinking (i.e., performing work of an intellectual kind). Through a combination of text and images, the aspects of the group that are conveyed are critical thinking about social and environmental issues, as well as knowledge and awareness, which are disseminated through protests and through the decision-making processes that take place within the group. Thus the group presents itself as part of the solution to the problems that arise through plastic consumption.

Challenging different lifestyles and their use of natural and social resources

In its visual communication, the campaign draws an explicit comparison between the resource consumption of different lifestyles. Infographics (Figure I2) are used as a pragmatic way of illustrating the excessive growth of domestic appliances in Western society. By contrast, photographs show people carrying out their daily tasks who require little more than simple tools and whatever nature provides (Figure I1). These different ways of depicting the availability of resources frame the Bangladeshi producers of jute bags in a dualistic way. On the one hand, their daily life is depicted as labour intensive and arduous compared with Western lifestyles. On the other hand, the pictures present aspects of a simpler way of life, which, according to the campaign, should be the goal of Western countries along with a closer connection to nature, more efficient use of resources and the abandonment of consumption of plastic goods. The images of Bangladeshi producers thus call for a response that combines both pity and a challenge.

Some drawings in the campaign material satirically criticise the notion that Western-style development is something worth emulating (Figures J1 and J2). The naivety that is often associated with people from non-Western countries along with colonialism and its exploitation of the world’s resources are also implicit in these images.

Whereas various photographs depict the everyday life of Bangladeshi women, similar situations in Western countries are not shown at all. In their place are cartoons that focus on visualising a profusion of material rather than representing actual people handling resources (Figure K1). Photographs taken in the West all derive from documenting the gatherings of the campaign organisers and their associated group events (such as Figure K3). In these photographs and drawings related to the West, the intellectual necessity of finding a solution to the problems caused by overconsumption is obvious (for example, in the form of a thought bubble in Figure K1). This shows how the campaign understood itself as a group whose primary resource was not material but epistemological (Figures K2 and K3). The difference between the resources existing in Bangladesh (manual labour) and Western countries (intellectual labour) is again implicit.

The jute bag was thus used by the campaign groups in Switzerland, Austria and Germany as a symbol for their political vision. Although the artefact was manufactured by Bangladeshi women and they appeared prominently in the marketing surrounding the product, it did not function as their mouthpiece. It made them visible—but only from the perspective of the West.

3. Conclusion

The main argument of the campaign was that the increasing use of plastic was creating less demand for goods made out of natural resources like jute, with the result that plastic was fast becoming the primary material for production. The fact that the jute bag could be reused was discussed, but the question of renewable as opposed to non-renewable resources—a topic of much debate today—was not taken up by the campaign. In order to make its

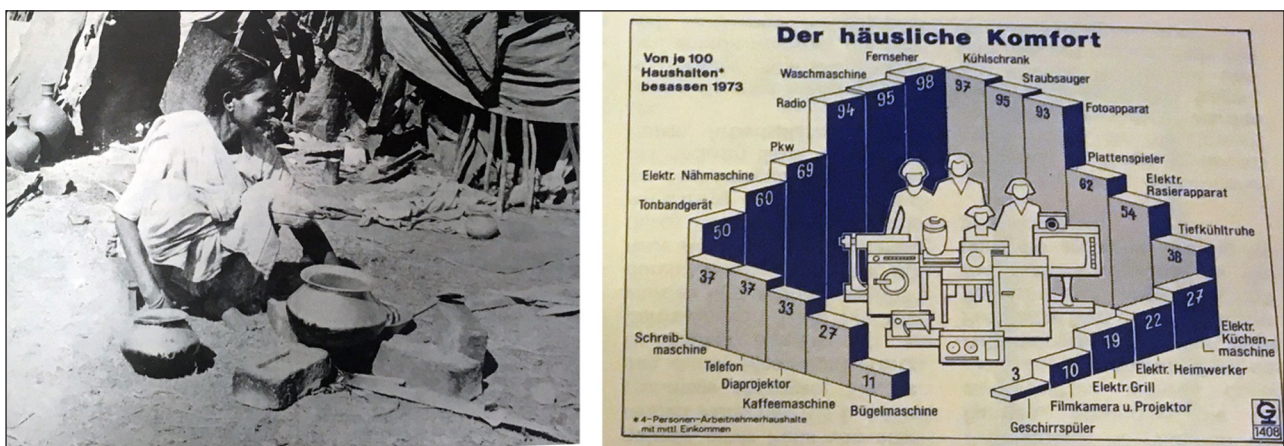


Figure I: Simple life vs excessive growth. left (I1): Photograph of woman cooking outside a hut in Bangladesh, published in a 1978 workbook, Germany; right (I2): Infographic titled ‘Domestic comfort’ showing the number of household appliances per 100 households in Germany in 1973, published in the campaign brochure ‘Basic Information’, c. 1979, Germany.



Figure J: The destructive power of growth. left (J1): Drawing from a campaign workbook with the caption: ‘Look, over there are the developed regions.’, 1983, Germany; right (J2): Drawing from the campaign brochure ‘Basic Information’ with the caption ‘You too can have progress!’, c. 1979, Germany.

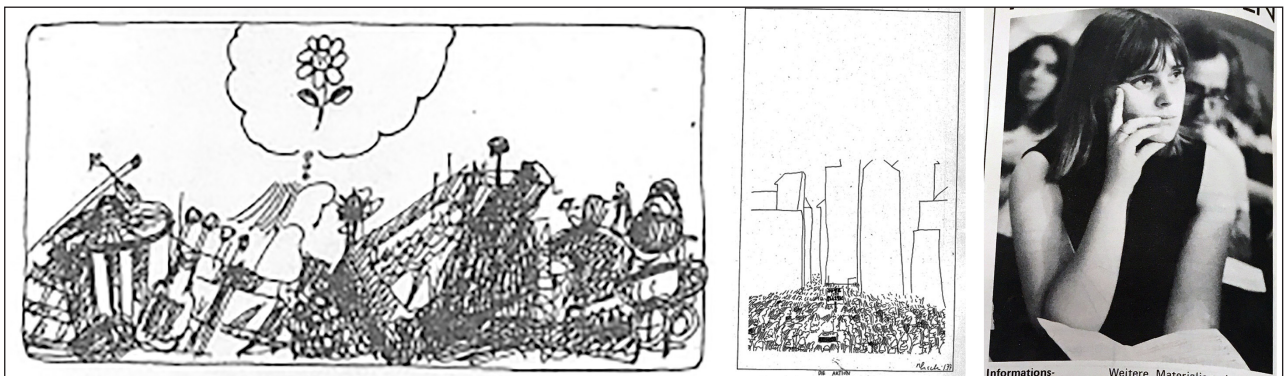


Figure K: Knowledge as the resource of the West. left (K1): Part of a cartoon from a campaign book with material for the classroom, c. 1979, Germany; centre (K2): Cartoon of people gathering to protest, one holding a ‘Jute not Plastic’ sign, image from a salesperson’s training dossier, c. 1977, Germany, right (K3): Photograph from the 1978 campaign workbook, Germany.

message concrete and easy to understand, the campaign used the plastic bag and jute bag as its main objects. The plastic bag was rarely visually present; whereas, the jute bag was a common visual feature of the campaign material. The bag enabled the campaign to draw a connection between the consumers of plastic (the target of the campaign in Switzerland, Austria and Germany) and those who bore the consequences of plastic consumption (the people of Bangladesh who suffered from the decline in the use of jute as a manufacturing material). This connection was visualised by the campaign with the central aim of encouraging people in the Global North to change their attitudes and practices of consumption.

Countries in which the campaign’s target audience reside are associated in the *Jute not Plastic* campaign with

plastic manufacturing and consumption and are visually represented in its brochures and leaflets in a dystopian manner, reminiscent of Baudriallard’s view of plastic: ‘[W]ith plastics, man has invented an undegradable matter, thus interrupting the cycle which through corruption and death reverses each and every substance’; it is ‘a project which aims at political and mental hegemony’ (2017 [1976]: 74). In order to present the possibility of change, the campaign presents a positive visual message next to the dystopian one with the jute bag as an example of a different lifestyle that is both possible and rewarding. This is accomplished by framing the jute bag not merely as a commodity useful in everyday life but as part of a lifestyle providing a coherent meaning system about the good life’ (Illouz 2009: 383), in which participants can characterise

themselves as belonging to a critically thinking, intellectual group that stands up for global social justice and the preservation of nature.

In the campaign's visual material, the proclaimed 'inter-cultural alliance' between the consumers and producers of the jute bags is frequently presented through portrait-like photographs of Bangladeshi women and a depiction of their 'simple' way of life, which Western capitalist societies should also strive for. No further elaboration is provided about how to implement such a lifestyle in the West. It was a change of mindset that the campaign aimed to achieve, rather than changing specific patterns of action—apart from using jute bags instead of plastic bags. Thus the campaign focused on spreading knowledge, educating people about the unjust impacts of globalisation and creating spaces of contestation (e.g., workshops and protests in city centres). The aim was thus to produce intellectual work that would ultimately result in more manual labour in Bangladesh and less poverty.

Nowadays, many stores and big supermarket chains offer jute and cotton bags next to paper and plastic bags at the counter. In many cases the cotton and jute bags are not only designed with the corporate logo, but also with statements such as 'hello, environment!' So the connection of jute as an alternative material with a political, environmental message, which was established by the campaign, still applies today. But the appropriation of the jute bag and its symbolic meaning by major brands does not automatically lead to a change of mentality or a widespread trend of a simple way of life. Instead, it is often merely part of image strategies for the companies.

In conclusion, the visual strategies used in the *Jute not Plastic* campaign problematised plastic through the lens of the jute bag by introducing it as a specific alternative on a micro-scale (replacing a plastic object in everyday life) and on a macro-scale level (as an emblem of environmental and social awareness). Through its visuality, the campaign moralised consumer behaviour, and the jute bag is still considered a symbol of sustainable consumption today. The bag's potential for assimilation and differentiation enabled it to be integrated into the everyday life and fashion of many diverse cultural and social groups. This made the campaign numerically successful in terms of the widespread use of the jute bags and the number of people who identified with the bag as a lifestyle emblem. It should be noted, however, that the jute bag and its successors today are mainly used to carry goods in single-use packaging from supermarkets. The openness and adaptability of the campaign made it difficult to achieve a widespread reduction in the consumption of plastic and a substantial change in consumer behaviour. Thus, the politicisation of lifestyles concerning waste, environment and social justice does not necessarily lead to a more efficient use of resources, and focusing on the moralisation of a specific product involves the risk of merely scratching the surface of the underlying problems. However, there is no doubt that the *Jute not Plastic* campaign succeeded in disrupting the way that plastic was commonly viewed at the time, and although it did not bring about a substantial change in the way that plastic was utilised, it contributed to an increase in public awareness of issues concerning sustainability, social justice and globalisation.

Notes

- Translations of original campaign material are by the authors.
- <https://folkdays.de/blogs/ourartisans/corr-br-bangladesh>.
- https://www.gepa.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Info/GEPA/ZahlenDatenFakten_E_06-18.pdf.
- Misereor Archiv Aachen, Germany, www.misereor.de/
- GEPA Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Partnerschaft mit der Dritten Welt mbH, Wuppertal, Germany, <https://www.gepa.de/>; Swiss Social Archives, Zurich, Switzerland, <https://www.sozialarchiv.ch/en/>; West German Broadcasting Archiv, Cologne, Germany, <https://wdr-mediagroup.com/>.
- <http://www.jutenotplastic.com/>.
- Switzerland introduced a pricing mechanism in 2016 and Austria banned plastic bags in supermarkets in 2017; the implementation of both policies were based on voluntary agreement (Hielsen, Holmberg & Stipple 2019).
- For a further discussion of the connection between the oil industry and consumer society, see Gabrys, Hawkins & Michael (2013), and particularly Marriott & Minio-Paluello (2013). Plastic factories such as Munchmunster were built by oil companies like BP in the 1970s, and the benefits for consumption in the Global North were linked to its negative effects on the Global South (Lessenich 2019).

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Picture Credits

Figure A: Main campaign items

A1: *Jute not Plastic* jute bag made in Bangladesh, 1978. GEPA – the Fair Trade Company; **A2:** Leaflet, 1979. MISEREOR; **A3:** Campaign poster, 1978, Germany. MISEREOR.

Figure B: Improvised stalls contrasted with luxury shops

B1: The Loeb department store in Bern, 1969. Collection Museum für Kommunikation Bern, Signatur: M5TD0305; **B2:** *Jute statt Plastik* campaign stall, c. 1978, possibly in Wuppertal-Barmen, Germany. MISEREOR.

Figure C: Social interaction transformed by combining sales of products with knowledge transfer

C1: Vogler, Gertrud: Labour History's Library The 'Stiftung Studienbibliothek zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung' stall, Zürich, 1977. Schweizerisches Nationalarchiv, Signatur: F 5107-Na-07-047-011; **C2:** *Jute not Plastic* campaign stall, 1970s, Basel, Switzerland. Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv, Signatur: F 5107-Na-02-069-027; **C3:** Market stall

in Münster, Germany, c. 1970. © LWL-Medienzentrum für Westfalen, Signatur: 10_1172.

Figure D: Capturing consumer attention

D1: Advertisement for plastic goods at the Horten department store, c. 1960s, Germany. www.wirtschaftswundermuseum.de; **D2:** Banner. Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv, Signatur: F 5028-Ox-003; **D3:** Sale of jute bags (Basel, am Spalenter). Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv, Signatur: F 5028-Fx-014.

Figure E: Exchanging plastic bags for jute bags

E1: Still, Gott und die Welt, WDR, 18.03.1978. WDR media group; **E2:** Jute bag in exchange for a plastic bag, c. 1978, Germany. MISEREOR.

Figure F: Do-it-yourself aesthetics

F1: Graph from a campaign book with material for the classroom, c. 1979. MISEREOR; **F2:** Badge. Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv, Signatur: F 5028-Ox-007; **F3:** Still, Hier und Heute, WDR, 22.05.1978. WDR media group.

Figure G: The jute bag in youth culture

G1: '1. August alternativ, 01.08.1980'; Zürich. Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv, Signatur: F 5107-Na-10-051-006; **G2:** '1. August alternativ: Nackt, usw., 01.08.1980', Zürich. Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv, Signatur: F 5107-Na-10-050-011. **G3:** A group of punks in Bern in 1978, Lurker, G (ed.) 2007, Plastik statt Jute. In: *Hot Love: Swiss Punk & Wave; 1976–1980*. Zürich: Ed. Frey. p. 148 (detail).

Figure H: Representations of three different groups

H1: Cartoon from the campaign brochure 'Basic Information', c. 1979. MISEREOR; **H2:** Photograph from the campaign brochure 'Basic Information', c. 1979. MISEREOR; **H3:** Drawing from the campaign's 1983 workbook 1983. MISEREOR.

Figure I: Simple life vs. excessive growth

I1: Photograph from a workbook published in 1978, Germany. MISEREOR; **I2:** Infographic from the campaign brochure 'Basic Information', c. 1979, Germany. MISEREOR.

Figure J: The destructive power of growth

J1: Drawing from a campaign workbook, 1983, Germany. MISEREOR; **J2:** Drawing from the campaign brochure 'Basic Information', c. 1979, Germany. MISEREOR.

Figure K: Knowledge as a resource of the West

K1: Part of a comic strip from the campaign book with material for the classroom, c. 1979. MISEREOR; **K2:** Cartoon drawing from a salesperson's training dossier, c. 1977, Germany. MISEREOR; **K3:** Photograph from the campaign's 1978 workbook, Germany. MISEREOR.

Campaign material

Aktion Jute statt Plastik

1977 *Infoblatt: Jute statt Plastik – Umschwenken zu einem neuen Lebensstil* (Österreich). Boxgraben MR II Regal 27. Köln: Archiv Misereor.

1978a *Poster 'Jute – Symbol für einen einfachen Lebensstil'*. Köln: Archiv Misereor.

1978b *Werkbuch – Jute statt Plastik*. Boxgraben MR II Regal 27. Köln: Archiv Misereor.

1978c *Presseanschriften vom 11. August 1978*. Boxgraben MR II Regal 27. Köln: Archiv Misereor.

1978d *Beilage zu 'Information Dritte Welt'*. Boxgraben MR II Regal 27. Köln: Archiv Misereor.

1979a *Faltblatt: Jute statt Plastik*. Boxgraben MR II Regal 27. Köln: Archiv Misereor.

1979b *Flugblatt 'Jute statt Plastik – Handarbeit aus Bangladesch'*. Boxgraben MR II Regal 27. Köln: Archiv Misereor.

1979a *Jute statt Plastik – Materialien für den Unterricht*. Boxgraben MR II Regal 27. Köln: Archiv Misereor.

1979b *Jute statt Plastik – Basis Information*. Boxgraben MR II Regal 27. Köln: Archiv Misereor.

Jute-Aktion

1976 *Infoprospekt: Jute statt Plastik*. Boxgraben MR II Regal 27. Köln: Archiv Misereor (Schweiz).

1976b *Faltblatt: Jute statt Plastik – Die neue entwicklungs-politische Aktion Winter / Frühjahr 1977* (Schweiz). Boxgraben MR II Regal 27. Köln: Archiv Misereor.

1977a *Infoblatt: Aktion Jute statt Plastik: Erfahrungen von Aktionsgruppen beim Jute-Taschenverkauf* (Schweiz). Boxgraben MR II Regal 27. Köln: Archiv Misereor.

1977b *Jute statt Plastik – Dossier zur Verkäuferschulung* (Schweiz). Boxgraben MR II Regal 27. Köln: Archiv Misereor.

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