

## Waste is not the end. For an anthropology of care, commitment and repair

This special section coordinated by Thomas Hylland Eriksen and Elisabeth Schober should not be seen as residual in the discipline, but treating matters of substantive importance such as the connection between human activity and the increasing production of waste, what characterises place-making, and the dialectic relation between cleanness and social order. Yet this themed section might serve to explore the always complicated question of how to move further for the scholarship on waste too. Eriksen himself makes clear in the introduction that one of the core points of the anthropological study of waste is to account for the tensions between disposable and recoverable: Waste “must be seen simultaneously as a material reality with implications for inequality, health, global ‘overheating’ and the environmental contradictions of global capitalism; and as an indispensable element in a symbolic grammar of order and chaos, exclusion and inclusion”.

Overall, the themed section provides some crucial insights on how waste is a multi-scalar phenomenon, defined differently by different actors. Empirical evidence from multiple contexts is used as illustration of the exclusion of growing numbers of people, a marginalisation which appears not simply as economic but also temporal (Frederiksen 2015). Among the excluded and made superfluous, the figure of the migrant remains still as a transgressive presence, politically charged by defying the lines of order and purity. In her article on the actual disposable strangers, Cathrine Moe Thorleifsson engages with Douglas’ axiom (1966) that things are defined as dirt not because they are unhealthy, but because they transgress particular cultural categorisations (generating dissonant and abject affects). She argues that in Hungary, the crossing refugees were made expandable and dehumanised through discourses associating them with the discarded items they left behind on their route. Pollution, waste and questionable economic productivity were then invoked to justify their exclusion from national territory, reinforcing in turn the symbolic and administrative boundaries of Hungary.

When people and places become associated with waste, they may be seen as waste themselves, disposable and superfluous, reduced to zero value (Bauman 2004). Waste always occupies the negative side in dichotomies such as efficiency and inefficiency, usefulness and uselessness, order and disorder. It is therefore part of what Zsuzsa Gille calls a ‘waste regime’ (2007), referring to the representations, practices and politics of waste that constitute societies and their values and relations to profit. Waste is the by-product of the systematic ordering and classification of matter, in our societies co-related with modernity and the values of efficiency and productivity (Scanlan 2005). However, if provincialising the understanding of waste we discover a more complex picture, in which the very constitution of waste is “subject to huge variation across societies—and debate within them”. By analysing what type of problem is waste in Egypt, Jamie Furniss shows how the definition of cleanness is correlated to social order and articulated by language, hence at the core of the conception of human hierarchies.

Defining the contours of waste has been taken for decades as an anthropological problematic, being recently likened to rubble, debris and ruination (Stoler 2013; Gordillo 2014; Ssorin-Chaikov 2016). Waste implies negligence and human failure (Lynch 1990), but it might be turned also into instruments of the exercise of power (Ferguson 1994), entailing a contagious disinvestment and disaffection, or even desolation and abjection. In or out, waste is a matter that takes place. In ‘Untangling translocal urban textures of trash: plastics and plasticity in Addis Ababa’, Caroline Knowles tackles the issue of place-making through the lens of plastics – as a substance and as a metaphor. Waste makes places in the form of dumps and landfills, which are occupied by ‘scratchers’ who scavenge its materials and share expectations for a different life. We see then that waste is part of the centrifugal and centripetal forces of Addis Ababa, since plastics shape the dump, and the dump shapes the urbanity of the city along. As Knowles explains, substances such as plastics are translocal, passing through sites and being part of what makes the periphery marginal and the centre a core.

After all, waste is not simply a symptom of culture and social relations, but a material that has effects and affects, signalling the vitality of the inorganic and the un-becoming within our networked world (Gregson and Crang 2010; Reno 2015). In ‘Not so much the water as what’s in it’, Michael Thompson and Bruce Beck reconsider the conversion of water into wastewater by assuming that “every substance contains within itself traces of every other substance”. As they put it, purity is nothing else than an entelechy, since matter is in a state of constant becoming. In a way, this assumption is related to Thompson’s formulation of waste (1979), as something in which a form of value dies, while another can be born. Its original postulate foregrounded that un-becoming was part of the life value cycles of things, whereby objects may lose and later regain value owing to shifting cultural valuations. Yet in this new essay, Thompson takes a rather indolent “*alles scheisse*” approach: “If the whole world is made of shit there is no point in trying to do anything about it!”, ignoring however that it is without maintenance and care that the world descends into disrepair and dereliction (Bond *et al.* 2013).

This polemical assumption brings the question of how to develop this field of studies. Taken together, the special section extends further the scholarship on waste, yet it lacks a prospective and proactive approach on

practices of discard and waste making. Discarding is an increasingly charged act, a means through which people articulate both an ethics of care and moralities of practice (Gregson *et al.* 2007). Making waste is part of what makes us the ethical selves we want to become (Hawkins 2006). Likewise, the enactment of care is a matter of everyday interaction, manifested in the form of affirmative micro-politics and affective transmissions, which inject kindness, welfare and integration, generating in turn a shift of values (Thrift 2005; Stewart 2007; Navarro-Yashin 2012). As services collapse and infrastructures fail, alternative modalities of sociality come to the fore (Rakopoulos 2016). We can even say that waste is the opposite of commitment, care and sustainability. Indeed, waste may be seen as nothing more than a symptom of a failed relationship, an unfinished recycling or repair (Gregson *et al.* 2007; Chapman 2016).

As a social category, waste is intimately related to shifting cultural values and performance (we also waste time, money, food, love, beauty...); it is thus embedded within living relations, falling out of the routines and practices of the ordinary (Crang and Gregson 2015). Otherwise, “that which occupies the site of disgust at one moment in history is not necessarily disgusting at the preceding moment or the subsequent one” (Laporte 2000: 32). Traditionally, waste has been taken as an indivisible remainder of withdrawals and extractions, yet its very materiality, with differing specific properties, renders waste amenable to different operations and reconsiderations; for instance, by propelling the mind backwards when the thing was in full usefulness or simply appeared contextualised in a different time and space. An inspiring example of this was William Rathje’s *Garbology* project (1996), in which he investigated fresh garbage as if it were an archaeological material, “studying consumer behaviours directly from the material realities they leave behind rather than from self-conscious self-reports”.

A study of the discarded and the dissipated reveals gaps in the prevailing narrative of evolution and progress, as well as the ‘orders of worth’ that sustain the arrangement of things (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006). Waste is always categorised and generated within a frame of value, equally relating to temporal regimes and the constitution of cycles – life and death, profit and loss, use and abandonment. The management of waste is therefore not only a problem for engineers, machinery and transportation; it also refers to social habits, cultural representations and political hegemony. As Douglas formulated (1966), waste is connected with notions of value and the processes of ordering. In her view, the constitution of waste has two phases, first the categorisation of what does not fit and rejection due to being ‘out of place’. Second, a process of dissolving any characterisation (rotting), which utterly leads to its disintegration and loss of identity.

Abandoned industries, rusting machinery, obsolete power plants, decaying buildings, chemically polluted zones, environmental catastrophes and debris have for decades symbolised the ‘collapse’ of the USSR, displaying the break-up of the regime in its more literary and material sense. This gave the impression that communism, toxicity and the production of waste could not be separated and produced a physical abjection towards that era and all that it meant. James Ferguson (1999) defined this adjustment as an ‘infrastructural abjection’, which designates certain aspects of social life as residual, beyond institutional care, expelled, thrown down, humiliated. Soon after its breakdown, state socialism was described as wasteful, symbolically polluted and economically out of order, not separating the consequences of the ‘collapse’ with the socio-material effects of the Soviet regime. As waste, the Soviet past was automatically associated with inefficient practices, hazardous products, empty spaces and a sense of ending, activating an imaginary elimination, becoming a subject to practices of disposal, recuperation and revalorisation.

This radical negation of the past was meant to give birth to a new order, hence it appeared as a necessary ‘sacrifice’ (Bataille 1989; Reinert 2015). Legacies from the Soviet world became waste, yet retained the potential for redemption (through generational or political change). As my own research shows (Martínez 2017), material inheritance from the Soviet world decays at a different tempo than the evolution of values within the Estonian society; this quality and generational change provide another chance to these legacies – the distinct duration of this remnants allows us to work on reconciliation, remembrance and cross-generational dialogue through practices of repair and curation. Decisions to abandon or rehabilitate are always informed by value judgements, not simply by the cost of time, money or effort required. Hence the importance of practices of maintenance and commitment, and the corresponding need to complement the anthropological analysis of discard with repair studies. This practice helps one to overcome the negative logic that carries the abandonment of things and people, recalibrating synchronicity and a sense of commonality. Repair has consequences for how we think for social relations in a form of redistribution of the sensible (Rancière 2006), by lending continuity to discontinuity and demonstrating care and recognition (Alexander 2012), and reconnecting personal biographies to public and private materiality. It can situate repair as part of the everyday micro-powers, those which contribute to create transcendental narratives of reconstitution after wrongdoing or abandonment.

In their article, Thompson and Beck reject any possible “elegant solution”. I reply here by putting forward one: repair and maintenance, in the form of ecologies of care, which reveal that waste, as brokenness, are not the end but an in-between condition, waiting for a new life, available for new relationships and reconstitutions. On the whole, the four articles gathered here share an emphasis on the materiality of waste and

how it is part of a social entanglement. They show the diversity of current discard studies, a field characterised by a critical examination of what is systematically left out and devaluated.

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