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Waste and the superfluous: an introduction

The anthropology of waste, drawing on Mary Douglas's seminal work as well as later studies of landfills, ragpickers, environmental crises and even social exclusion, is a prism through which to view and understand the crises of neoliberal globalisation. This introduction reviews the literature and identifies some themes in the anthropology of waste, some of which are explored in the subsequent contributions to this special section.

When, in the autumn of 2015, hundreds of thousands of refugees made their way through what was then known as the 'Balkan route', heading towards Germany, ordinary Central Europeans reacted with a mixture of shock and disbelief. It was still weeks and months before the governments of Hungary and Austria, among others, began building fences and implemented some of the harshest asylum regimes in Europe. Facebook forums, Twitter and other social media were used to broach one issue in particular: that these men, women and children on the move left behind mountains upon mountains of waste. It was a rather curious subject to single out at that time, yet it seemed to be depicted and commented on nearly everywhere for a while. Pictures showed thousands of lifejackets discarded on Greek beaches, next to now useless rubber dinghies; piles of tents left behind at a Hungarian train station; empty plastic bottles, used blankets, old shoes and diapers, carelessly thrown into ditches next to a major road connecting Slovenia with Austria. What was the reason for this frenzy and moral outrage around the waste that these refugees left behind? The pictures, shared and re-shared over and over again, were to clearly communicate a message: these people would bring disorder to Europe. In the weeks and months that followed, we saw endless discussions precisely about the questionable economic productivity of these humans who had entered Europe in such a dramatic – and filthy – fashion. By closely associating the refugees with the discarded items they left behind, it was thus only a short step for a number of Far Right pundits to argue that perhaps the people responsible for creating all this garbage would also be of no use to us – a line of reasoning that points to a central dynamic to be explored in this issue, namely that 'humans are not a priori human waste. They *become* expendable and disposable by concepts and state practices of dehumanisation' (Thorleifsson, this issue).

The close relationship between literal waste and its transfer through metaphor to other areas (such as superfluous people) is not new to anthropology. Although waste has been far more peripheral in the history of anthropology than in the kindred discipline of archaeology, there are three obvious, complementary points of reference necessary to keep in mind when broaching the subject: Mary Douglas's successful amalgamation of structural-functionalism and structuralism (1966), William Rathje's

less well-known 'archaeology of garbage' (Rathje and Murphy 2001) and Zygmunt Bauman's reflections in *Wasted lives* (2004), which is representative of a burgeoning body of literature on the rise of surplus populations.

The epistemologically unfixed and slippery nature of things and people that end up labelled as 'waste' has often been commented on, both in academic works and in fiction. In *La nausée*, Sartre (1938), for instance, describes the cause of his protagonist's chronic nausea as the indeterminate and anomalous: Antoine Roquentin, walking on the beach, no doubt as Sartre occasionally did himself while working as a teacher in Le Havre, picks up a stone and examines it. On the surface, it is smooth and dry; but underneath it is slimy, sticky, indeterminate. Roquentin drops the stone and suffers an acute bout of nausea that is triggered by the accidental encounter with impurity. 'The truth, despite all our efforts to construe it otherwise,' Thompson and Beck (this issue) alert us, 'is that nothing is pure; nothing is discrete, separate and penetrated by nothing else.' Much of social life, however, is about humans coming up with classifications regardless of this fundamental messiness of things, because 'social life, it seems, can only go on if we insist that that is not how things are'. Hence waste is both an unwanted, unintended side effect of human activities, and inevitably also a social construct – an entity that only comes into being due to our incessant need to create social order amidst a chaotic world that is 'so continuous and so immense in its variety as to be unhandleable' (Thompson and Beck, this issue).

As intimated in these quotes above, it is impossible for anthropologists to talk about waste without saying 'matter out of place' at least once. Pollution versus cleanliness, and the borders drawn between them, have been core issues in social anthropology since James Frazer ('wise men see boundaries, therefore they draw them', as William Blake reputedly said (Bateson 1972)). But it was Mary Douglas (1966) who famously put the contrast between pollution and purity to work by engaging it simultaneously with social organisation and the human body. She identified the relationship between systems of classification, the importance of boundaries and the repugnant. The Douglasian research programme was then pushed further by her student Michael Thompson in his original, but neglected book *Rubbish theory* (1979), in which he would connect waste to economic anthropology through his investigations of value cycles whereby objects may lose and later regain value owing to shifting cultural valuations: 'Just as, to understand poverty, we must study the very rich: so, to understand value, we must study rubbish' (Thompson 1979: 19). Much later, some of the themes introduced by Thompson would resurface (or regain value?) in the literature on recycling (Alexander and Reno 2012), which also examines the potential of humans to become 'waste' and – in some cases – to be 'recycled' into the fold of social life.

The quantitative approach in the anthropology of rubbish was developed through Rathje's Garbage Project (Rathje and Murphy 2001). Dubbing their subdiscipline 'an archaeology of garbage', Rathje and his team carried out large-scale studies of American landfills, drilling holes, lowering buckets and taking samples which could be decades old. This research made it possible to map out variations between social and ethnic groups, but also change through time. Not surprisingly, the amount of household waste has grown very significantly since the Second World War. The close, but less academically respectable, relation of the 'archaeology of garbage', garbology, has thrived on the negotiable character of the boundary between the private and the public, thereby lending support to Douglas's analysis. The pioneering garbologist A. J. Weberman, famous for collecting Bob Dylan's rubbish in order to reconstruct the everyday life of

his hero, famously won in court against the suing Dylan, since the bin was technically no longer Dylan's property. As the rubbish had been placed on the pavement for collection by the binmen, it could not be considered anyone's private property. In an act of revenge after losing the court case, Dylan wrote the song 'Pig' about Weberman.

Finally, Zygmunt Bauman's *Wasted lives: modernity and its outcasts* (2004) is perhaps the most famous example of a new body of academic literature that links the issue of waste to the rise of so-called wageless lives and to people's durable exclusion from domains of economic growth. The most recent phase of globalisation arguably has also brought about a new wave of global enclosures, with the commodification of previously communally held natural resources having gained new strength over the last few decades (e.g. Eriksen and Schober 2016). With global capitalism going through a number of deep crises recently, ever new terrains have been affected by commodification and processes of financialisation. People who depend on direct access to natural resources for their livelihoods are certainly most severely affected: Saskia Sassen, for instance, in her book *Expulsions*, argues that today we are witnessing 'the immiseration and exclusion of growing numbers of people who cease being of value as workers and consumers' (2014: 10). A similar point is made by Kasmir and Carbonella, who contend that there is 'a growing scholarly consensus around the notion that these new enclosures are creating people and communities who are *permanently* constituted as "outside" of capitalism' (2014: 51). Tania Li, in her work on land-grabbing (see, for instance, Li 2011) proposes a similar analysis when she argues that, as the markets will clearly not take care of the millions of people deemed useless to their functioning, we will increasingly have to make a political choice between 'make live' or 'let die' when it comes to 'surplus' populations (cf. Li 2009).

A politics of state-driven 'make live' that is to guarantee the survival of the excess populations that climate change, war and economic globalisation have created, is a proposition also endorsed by thinkers such as Mbembe (2004) and Agamben (1998). This state-centric position has been critiqued by historian Michael Denning, who argues that 'to speak repeatedly of bare life and superfluous life can lead us to imagine that there really are disposable people, not simply that they are disposable in the eyes of state and market' (2008: 80). In Denning's view, we need to stop fetishising the idea of waged work, which is too tightly linked to notions of direct productivity and usefulness, and finally come face to face with 'wageless life': the new normal in the era we enter these days. Denning argues that analysts like Mbembe, Agamben and so forth, create a false sense of emergency in their analysis of poverty and desolation when they speak of 'bare life' (Agamben 1998), 'wasted lives' (Bauman 2004), of 'disposability' (Giroux 2012) and 'superfluity' (Mbembe 2004), where in fact there may only be a sorry state of new normalcy to witness (Denning 2008: 80).

Anthropological perspectives on waste can thus also enable new explorations of the boundaries between work and non-work and formality versus informality (see, for instance, Millar 2008). Among all the options left to those cast into the precarious realms of urban poverty, scavenging is perhaps the most informal of all activities available. Scavengers, however, are people who can help us gain very important insights into an economic system that expels ever more people, places and objects from its core. In an effort to reconceptualise and revalue 'the objects and peoples that the present world economic system discards as waste' (Millar 2008: 32), their strategies of survival, their creativity and transformative practices involving discarded materials offer an oblique, but significant, perspective on value creation and the rapid transformation of urban

landscapes, particularly in the Global South. '(S)cavenging is one of the most important sources of informal employment in the world: and (…) the remaking involved in recycling remakes us all. (…) In providing opportunity and small money, trash produces urban lives *in particular terms*', Caroline Knowles alerts us (this issue; original emphasis). '(T)he practice of urban life and the making of its lifeworlds are co-produced, and continually so, by rubbish.'

To be sure, as Knowles also points out, trash can be *both* matter out of place *and* also 'matter making place'. However, while working with waste can certainly be cast as creative and even transformative (not least by critical social scientists), in many societies, those who handle waste still tend to be very stigmatised, with their livelihood strategies involving discarded materials leading to them being considered as anomalous and dangerous. In India, for instance, the sweepers are the most unclean of all. In Europe, the nightsoil men, or 'gong farmers', often formed their own communities. In Christiania (Oslo), they even tended to be endogamous, but scarcely by choice. They handled human waste and dead animals, they lived in shacks just above the city and had difficulties finding godparents for their children. As late as 2010, the last remaining nightsoil man in Oslo, who emptied privies from cabins in the forest above the city, would not have his name and picture in the newspaper that interviewed him, for fear that his children might be teased at school about their father's profession (Eriksen 2011). There is both metonymy and metaphor at work here, and some stigmatised groups, like the Roma in many European countries, are classified as rubbish people in several ways simultaneously.

One of our ambitions with this special section of *Social Anthropology* is to explore how hidden, contested or competing regimes of what constitutes value versus what is considered superfluous, redundant or matter out of place are integral to the functioning of global capitalism in the early 21st century. All four articles examine the relationship between the physical reality of waste and its powerful, compelling symbolic dimension. While Thorleifsson initially discusses the dehumanisation of Gypsies in Hungary, amalgamating their assumed propensity to create chaos through rubbish with their identity as human waste or 'wasted lives', in Bauman's (2004) terms, her main focus is on the ways Syrian refugees have been associated with waste in more than one way, and the kind of responses that have been made by political actors in Hungary. Taking a very different empirical approach, Knowles investigates plastic as a key to understanding the urban ecology of Addis Ababa, its insides and outsides, boundaries, hierarchies and tensions between disposable and recoverable. Among the poor, almost everything can be recycled. Among the rich, almost everything that has been used for a while is disposable. Furniss' article from Cairo, on the other hand, does not take on the mounting waste problem in the city, but rather concentrates on the relationship between waste, modernity and purity. The relative lack of waste (as symbolised in the colour white) thereby becomes indexical not only of the distance people have placed between themselves and their bodily waste, but also of the efficiency of the modern state. Accordingly, engineering has come to the forefront of waste management in the city, which was formerly carried out informally and mainly manually. The emergence of a kind of 'engineering anthropology', finally, is the topic of the last piece: Michael Thompson – a main originator of the anthropology of waste – contributes a co-written article, with the engineer Bruce Beck, about water and purity, arguing that substances in reality are never kept fully apart, and that purity and pollution ultimately remain social constructions that are meant to help humans make sense of a chaotic

world. Arguing against the familiar 'elegant solutions' usually proposed in the world of urban engineering, they propagate that a collaboration between anthropologists and engineers may lead toward the emergence of 'clumsy solutions': solutions that 'emerge from the argumentative, but potentially constructive engagement' with hierarchical, individualist, egalitarian and fatalist actors that populate our social worlds today, and that can help to creatively solve some of the mounting social dilemmas we face around the issue of waste.

Rubbish and the people who produce or work with it, in sum, can be studied through the lens of political economy, ecological thought, material culture or social classification, among other things. One aspect that cannot go overlooked in the 21st century, however, concerns the sheer amount of waste we now produce. In the contemporary, 'overheated' world of interrelated processes of accelerated change (Eriksen 2016), the global growth in waste production is striking. On its closure in 2001, Fresh Kills, the municipal rubbish dump in New York City, was the largest man-made structure in the world. In Norway, the amount of domestic waste doubled between 1992 and 2010. Globally, waste production doubled between 1975 and 2010, and it is expected to double again by 2040 (Stromberg 2013). Obviously, this trend creates work and livelihoods, however precarious, but it also leads to environmental problems at all scales.

The four articles that follow all indicate the importance of a dual approach in the anthropological study of waste: It 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. Thompson and Beck investigate notions of purity in relation to water, thereby elaborating on Douglas's original scheme; Knowles analyses value cycles and scavenging, sketching an urban ecology and a cognitive map; Furniss, in his article from Cairo, relates waste to cleanliness and thereby inclusion/exclusion, while Thorleifsson powerfully shows the cultural productivity of concepts of waste while demonstrating several ways in which refugees can be related to waste. These articles, we believe, show why the systematic study of waste and its permutations should be seen as integral to any anthropological theory of value.

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Les déchets et le superflu: une introduction

S'appuyant sur le travail séminal de Mary Douglas, ainsi que sur des études ultérieures sur les centres d'enfouissement, les chiffonniers, les crises environnementales et l'exclusion sociale, l'anthropologie des déchets offre un prisme permettant de considérer et de comprendre les crises de la mondialisation néolibérale. L'introduction passe en revue la littérature sur ce sujet et identifie certains thèmes dans le domaine de l'anthropologie des déchets, dont certains sont étudiés dans les différentes contributions à ce numéro spécial.

Mots-clés déchets, néo-libéralisme, exclusion sociale, recyclage, classification