

EDITORIAL

Of Fish Feces, Shamanic Bowls and Chimpanzee Scraps: Extension vs Precision in the Concept of Waste

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Joshua Reno's article is an inspiring call-out to Discard Studies. I thank him for the provocation and hope he takes my response in the spirit of a friendly polemic between fellow travelers in waste studies—which is what we are.

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I welcome Reno's call to transcend the social constructivism of much of the waste scholarship ("waste is in the eye of the beholder"), which he achieves by pinning down three meta-concepts or "senses" of waste. He arrives at these by distinguishing different types of activity as distinct sources of waste, by taking Hannah Arendt's tripartite typology of labor, work and action, each of which generates wastes for different reasons and in different senses—ecological, utilitarian and moral-political. He argues that Discard Studies scholars implicitly restrict waste to that which results from work, in the Arendtian sense, that is, from creating things not out of necessity and not continually, and in a means-end frame. We like this meta-concept of waste, he says, because this is the one that suggests avoidability, and thus allows for political and moral intervention.

While he admits that labor can become work when it's done out of necessity, there is no consideration for the socially circumscribed ways in which labor is conducted. Not all Arendtian labor, and thus not all ecological waste is unavoidable. Consider, for example, Elizabeth Shove's study of taking showers and doing laundry or Nicky Gregson's ethnography of wasting practices in households. In *Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience* Shove (2003) shows how bathing and doing laundry are carried out with a rhythm and in patterns of practice integrated into regimes of convenience that are dictated by the time pressure for families, normative expectations of cleanliness and the relative inexpensiveness of hygienic technologies. For example, the easy access to the washing machine renders this appliance a gap in Kevin Hetherington's (2004) sense: a place we put things that are dubious in their position in the value/waste spectrum as when we throw clothes in for a wash not because they are dirty but because they are in the way. In *Living with Things: Ridding, Accommodation, Dwelling*, Nicky Gregson (2007) also

demonstrates wasting practices that are the result of the rigidity of homes' spatial design and the expensiveness or unavailability of repair services (planned obsolescence). In sum, even labor that seemingly results from unavoidable biological functions, de-cluttering, cleaning, washing, cooking, is shaped by society in such a way that the resulting waste (of water, of detergent, of energy, of electronic appliances) are far from being inevitable.

The thought exercise at the end of the article in which the putative observer zooms out from a piece of food wrapper to larger and more distant cultural, economic and social causes and contexts confirms exactly this importance of the sociomaterial embeddedness of the three Arendtian waste-generating activities. The lesson should not be that one can never be certain what to label a certain waste but rather that we scholars have the skills, and may I add obligation, to tease out what is more important out of these complex and multiple determinations, and what can be changed or improved. Food wrappers, shamanic bowls, fish feces and chimpanzees may be alluring arm-chair examples, but nuclear waste, chemical by-products, fly-ash from incinerators won't lend themselves easily to such a thought experiment. It is in these examples that Reno would do well answering his own opening question: "who are the we?" Who thinks wrappers, shamanic bowls, fish feces, and chimpanzee-generated scraps are "our" biggest waste problems? Who determines what the measure of 'good' theories of waste should be?

Now let me return to the goal of the article, namely broadening our attention to other senses of waste. It is not clear why we should do so. Is it for the sake of an abstract respect for nonhuman life forms or for cultural diversity (so for example, as he says we can determine whether primates leave archeological traces)? The reason Discard Studies focused on the wastes Reno calls utilitarian, is because today ecological and political-moral wastes are subsumed by the dominant utilitarian logic he only attributes to work, as I showed above. In fact, even policies of what he calls sustainability, and which sees as reaction

to a “means-ends relationship between people and their objects of use,” are thoroughly transformed by a utilitarian and profit-oriented rationality, as hundreds of publications demonstrate. To summarize, our scholarship focuses on utilitarian waste because that’s what most wastes are in today’s society.

Finally, I take issue with the premise of the article, namely that ‘we’ have failed to be precise about what sense of waste ‘we’ are talking about. In fact, Ken A. Gourlay (already in 1992!) and later I (Gille 2007) defined waste as material we failed to use. This metaconcept is devoid of the blind spots and alleged moral and political biases Reno attributes to Discard Scholars. Whether ecological, utilitarian or politico-moral, waste is a material that we failed to use. This meta-theoretical formulation is fertile because it invites scholars to analyze the logics, processes, materialities, and relations that leads to leaving materials unused and often, as a result, disposed of in dangerous ways. Many of the classics of waste studies do in fact do just that, describing the waste-society relationship at the micro-level (such as the ethnographies mentioned above); the macro-level (such as Baran and Sweezy’s (1966) critique of monopoly capitalism) or at a level of universal tenets (such as Georges Bataille (1988) who really cannot be charged with ignoring what Arendt called labor and action, in his own explanation for a seemingly universal human proclivity for profligacy.) What we need is not the broadening of a static concept of waste for the sake of some abstract but short-lived theoretical gain, but

rather more precision in our understanding of the dynamics, rationalities and social relations that produce waste in their concrete materialities and temporalities. Not in order, as Reno fears, to improve our mastery over nature but in order to improve our mastery over the social determinations of waste.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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