

RESEARCH

What is Waste?

Josh Reno

An Arendtian approach to waste is offered which suggests that three common senses of waste refer to products of labor, work, and action, as explained in *The Human Condition* (1958). The paper offers examples of ecological, utilitarian and moral-political senses of waste, and argues that they are not incommensurable, but form part of a continuum with respect to their relative freedom from constraint. For this reason, different senses of waste offer distinct political dimensions for waste scholars that relate to boundaries between the human/non-human and critiques of oppression and injustice more broadly.

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Introduction

Many scholars now write about waste as something worth talking about as it exists for people all over the world and throughout history. But what do we mean when we describe something as *waste*? That is the central question of this paper.

But why even ask this question? And who is this 'we'? After all, the opposite approach could be taken, which would mean assuming that waste is absolutely reliant on social, cultural, linguistic and/or historical context and that, for this reason, there is no point in searching for any kind of consistent meaning out-of-context that would make sense to a fictitious 'us.' But taking this stance merely begs the question how discard studies could become the trans-disciplinary endeavor it has. At the very least, the existence of discard studies suggests that a number of scholars across various disciplines think they know what they mean when they read and write of waste. To be clear, I am not offering to provide an exhaustive or even partial overview of the growing discard studies literature and what is meant by waste when scholars in the social sciences and humanities write about it. Partly because this has already been done (most comprehensively by Sarah Moore, 2012, and also by me, Reno 2015), but mostly because beginning with the state of the prevailing literature risks preserving its blind spots.

It is not necessary, and may even be self-destructive, for everyone in a specific field to adopt an identical definition of the phenomena they study. Nor do I claim that we all mean the same thing by waste, but nevertheless seek to find something that connects different senses of waste, as if along a continuum. I can think of at least two reasons this can be a useful exercise. First, scholars with different senses of waste in mind may confuse differences between

approaches with incompatibility or incommensurability. This would effectively shrink or compartmentalize the field of discard studies, rather than make it more inclusive and dynamic. Second, the spread of different, seemingly disconnected senses of waste can also lead to conceptual confusion and support an implicitly nominalist or anti-realist stance, as if there was nothing real at all beyond our ideas about the world.

It can be useful to attempt definitions of important concepts, but it is admittedly somewhat out of fashion to do so. Even if such attempts are doomed to failure, however, we will still learn something by determining exactly why the definitions provided are insufficient. I take as my starting point that many people drawn to discard studies are especially interested in what human beings do with their waste, especially the impacts this has on other people, on non-humans and on their shared worlds. Some might object that post-human or inhuman approaches to waste refuse human distinctiveness in favor of the *vitality* of materials and ecological relations (see Hawkins 2009, Bennett 2010, Gregson and Crang 2010). Interest in (and opposition to) such approaches have not come at the sacrifice of human interests and struggles, however. If anything, these arguments have usefully redirected our interest to instances where boundaries are drawn and redrawn between what is assumed to be human and non-human, especially through waste.

To address the problem of what we mean by waste I therefore use human exceptionalism as a framing device. Specifically, I argue three things:

1. First, there are at least three distinct senses of waste which seem to recur across various contexts: ecological waste that comes from living things and processes, and is therefore *not exclusive* to human beings; utilitarian waste that comes from the manufacture and use of utilities, and is therefore *mostly exclusive* to humans (and rises in prominence as a problem

- in bigger, industrial societies); and moral-political waste that comes from systems of symbolic classification, such as rituals, religions, or racism, which are *entirely exclusive to* and arguably *universal among* humans (no matter how big or small the society).
2. Second, these three senses are not unrelated and irreconcilable, but roughly correspond to forms of the *vita activa* as outlined by Hannah Arendt in *the Human Condition* (1958): labor, work and action. Each of these represent ways of interpreting action as more or less free from necessity: what I will call ecological waste corresponds to Arendt's *labor* because it is waste that comes from necessary and repetitive activity; utilitarian waste corresponds to *work* because it comes from the singular creation of an artifact that needn't have existed; moral-political waste corresponds to *action* because it depends on the existence of communities that share values and symbolic systems. In discard studies, some senses of waste are analytically privileged over others in order to highlight differences between those more or less free, including between humans and non-humans or between oppressors and the oppressed.
 3. Finally, I clarify the difference between fixed *kinds of waste* and common *senses of waste*. The former assumes that objects can have an absolute and single meaning for us, where the latter suggests that the same object can mean more than one thing. This is a common semiotic insight—that no objects (not even our own minds and bodies) can be represented in their full totality, but only partially. Rather than accept interpretive flexibility as a limit or endpoint to analysis, however, I argue that distinct senses of waste can be linked as part of ongoing semiotic or interpretative processes, which emerge from the very gaps between interpretations of waste and waste itself, insofar as these relate to our assumptions about what it means to be human.

I begin by outlining the different senses of waste while simultaneously introducing Arendt's (1958) threefold distinction between labor, work and action. I then move on to explain everyday examples where waste can be taken to indicate relative freedom and constraint, in the way Arendt suggests.

Three Senses of Waste and a Metalogue

In semiotic theory, it is commonly accepted that the same phenomenon may be interpreted in more than one way, and the same holds for anything identified as waste. Of course, this does not mean that there is no real object out there, only that our access to it is always limited and partial by virtue of the fact that we are separate entities.¹

In the discard studies literature this is normally taken to mean that waste for one person is not waste for another, 'one person's trash is another's treasure,' as it is often said. We could, for instance, contrast the farmer with the city-dweller and say where the latter sees manure as something polluting and disgusting, the former sees something valuable that can be spread onto their land to replenish the

soil and grow crops. This is clearly an important insight, but it is primarily about whether something is considered waste or not. In other words, it is really about the interpretive flexibility of *value* (something is valuable or valueless in this or that sense), rather than the interpretive flexibility of *waste itself* (something is waste in this sense rather than another). We either need to go beyond this idea or we need to accept that everything identified as waste is waste in exactly the same sense, which I would argue is untenable. To make my point, I want to expand on this imaginary encounter with manure and introduce new social actors into their dialogue.

Let us imagine that a veterinarian, an eco-anarchist, and an anthropologist happen upon some manure. Further, they all agree that the manure is a form of waste in some sense, but disagree about what to make of it:

Veterinarian: Look at these feces! I can tell it comes from a cow suffering from acidosis! You can tell because it is loose, pasty, a bit shiny and bubbling (see milkproduction.com).

Eco-anarchist: That is terrible! But the bigger problem here is that nitrogen runoff from this industrial farm is going to make other creatures sick by causing algal bloom. Also, what that cow is belching is going to worsen global climate change since methane is a more harmful greenhouse gas than even carbon dioxide. None of these forms of pollution are easy to regulate so the only solution is fewer cows! We need to go vegan!

Veterinarian: If you care so much about the environment, then help me save this cow first.

Eco-anarchist: I feel bad for this cow, but you're missing the bigger picture because you are paid to act like the cow exists in isolation, a specific problem to be solved for a fee, rather than as a commodity whose exploitation leads to pollution.

Anthropologist: Yes, for both of you the manure symbolizes something disruptive and out of place—a sick body or a damaged ecosystem. It is an anomaly, something outside of the normal order of things. But is also generative; when we deal with it a new order is created, the cow and the environment healed. Mary Douglas (1966) explained all of this very well more than fifty years ago.

Veterinarian and Eco-anarchist: ?

Anthropologist: What I mean is that it is first of all something you are thinking about and trying to make sense of in your cultural framework. It is a form of "dirt" that does not belong, is out of place, and you are trying to make sense of that.

Eco-anarchist: I guess, but the climate really is being destroyed and our appetite for cheap, ani-

mal flesh really is making things worse. Sure, it's a symbol, but it is also toxic, choking the Earth to death and us with it!

Anthropologist: But seeing the manure as symbolic dirt also allows us to see other forms of injustice associated with our propensities for classification. Look at the poor migrant workers on this farm, they are criticized in the national media as simultaneously a drain on public welfare and as driving down wages and stealing jobs from ordinary people. They are exploited as labor and denied basic human rights. They are seen as human dirt, in a sense.

Veterinarian: Look, all I know is that this specific animal is sick and we need to help it. Its life is in jeopardy right now and I can do something about that.

Eco-anarchist: Great, save this cow, but it is just going to be exploited until they can't make money off of it anymore, like the workers. And the land will be exploited until they owners get any more use out of it and the people will be tossed aside too....

Anthropologist: Absolutely...could you sign this consent form so that I can publish this?

This imaginary dialogue (what, following Gregory Bateson, 1972, is better described as a metalogue) shows people who agree something is waste, but associate it with something different. For the vet, the feces offers a convenient way to diagnose the animal. They are like a detective who stumbled across an important clue to solve a case. For the eco-anarchist the waste is just one symptom of a much bigger set of inequalities associated with industrial farm production and the means-end relationship between the logic of capital, on the one hand, and forces and relations of production, on the other. For the anarchist, this is further dependent on all of us agreeing, as relatively free actors, to accept this system of food production rather than change it. For the anthropologist, our ability to see waste in different ways is a product of our distinct systems of classification, by which the same entity can mean different things depending on who is doing the interpreting, the interpretive repertoire they apply to the situation, and the context they are interpreting in.

None of them are wrong and none of them are seeing the manure as something other than waste: it is the excrement of that animal, it is the byproduct of industrial production and mass consumption, it is an anomalous signifier. For years I have had discussions with people in discard studies that resemble fragments of the dialogue above. Most often, the same people shift between these senses of waste, myself included. Assuming there is or should be only one sense of waste, they accuse one another of avoiding the real issue.²

What I turn to next is Arendt's analysis of the *vita activa* in order to gain conceptual clarity concerning these distinct senses of waste. I want to suggest, specifically, that they are not hopelessly incompatible, but nor are they

reducible to the anthropologist's structuralist and socio-centric analysis, which rest on the assumption that there are as many interpretations as there are people or communities. What frustrates the eco-anarchist and the veterinarian is that the anthropologist thinks that documenting systems of classification is the last word on the matter, when they are both interested in changing the world and not only interpreting it. Or, better said, they want to change the world by interpreting it.³

It is not my goal to poke fun at anthropologists (well, not my only goal). It is for good reason that historically they have tended to focus on symbolic interpretation, which is basically something that only humans, beings trained by humans, or devices built by humans can do. And there is nothing wrong, in principle, with only being interested in what humans do or what is done to them. The problem comes when anthropologists, or any scholars, come upon a profoundly interdisciplinary and multidimensional topic, like waste, and then assume that all that is worth knowing about it is how humans relate to it *as only humans can*. This is not only a question of *anthropocentrism*, of only being interested in people, but rather *anthropometry*, of measuring all beings and actions according to how *only people do things*.⁴

One way to deal with this problem is to develop inhuman approaches that get around human/non-human binaries (see Bennett 2010, Hird 2012, Reno 2014), which can be helpful, though is sometimes accused of depoliticizing waste or distracting from its impact on environmental and racial injustice (see Gille 2013). Another approach is to develop a taxonomy of senses of waste that explicitly takes into account relative distance from idealized conceptions of the human. Rather than depoliticizing waste, this expands the politicization of waste even further, to include how humans and nonhumans are represented as more or less unfree. This is where Arendt comes in.

Arendt's *Vita Activa* and Waste

Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* is less well known than her writings on totalitarianism and the banality of evil, but it was arguably her magnum opus. One way to describe the book is as her attempt to adapt the existential phenomenology of her former teacher, Martin Heidegger, to make it adequate to the political horrors of the twentieth century, something he certainly never did (see Benhabib 2003: 104–5). Arendt wanted to provide a genealogy for the political and moral valences of distinct forms of worldliness, or ways of living (and dying) as a human, that is, a being that knows it exists in the world.⁵

Why draw on Arendt? Because her work arguably bridges the many divisions that characterize contemporary discard studies: from questions of worldly becoming to social justice and rights, from the failures of modernism to the universality of the human condition. Central to this aim, and the book as a whole, is Arendt's distinction between labor, work, and action.

Labor and ecological waste

Labor is her term for the activity that human beings share with all over living beings and life processes:

The common characteristic of ...the biological process in man and the process of growth and decay in the world, is that they are part of the cyclical movement of nature and therefore endlessly repetitive; all human activities which arise out of the necessity to cope with them are bound to the recurring cycles of nature and have in themselves no beginning and no end, properly speaking...*laboring* always moves in the same circle, which is prescribed by the biological process of the living organism and the end of its 'toil and trouble' comes only with the death of this organism. (1958: 98)

In Seyla Benhabib's words, labor shows how 'life must be renewed, sustained, nurtured' (2003: 108), but that does not make it equivalent to pure biological necessity. Rather, specific social and cultural possibilities will require labor in order to persist over time: 'labor is activity geared to maintaining, under whichever social conditions, the constant care of the body and of the environment in which the body is situated' (*ibid.*).

Although Arendt does not refer to it explicitly, one critical aspect of labor for living beings is wasting. Every single day of my life, merely because I have a body, I have had to excrete, urinate, shed loose skin from my epidermis, breath out carbon dioxide, and occasionally cough things up or blow things out of my nose. This is not something only I do, other animals with bodies do the same sorts of things. That is not the final word on the matter, of course; other creatures or that same creature might make use of or consume the waste of another, because it has its own value or because it resembles that organism (see Reno 2014). The point is that, with respect to the body that releases this waste, in that moment it is necessarily inessential to its continued life in the world. This is the ecological sense of waste, a product of our labor, produced as a result of the continuous and 'endlessly repetitive' cycles associated with being and staying alive.⁶

So, when a veterinarian interprets feces as an index of an animal's health, or a hunter interprets it as evidence of the path their prey followed, they are taking waste to be something associated with Arendtian labor. Of course, beings can hold their breath, starve themselves, refuse to bathe and so on. By describing wasting as necessary, I do not mean it has to happen, only that it will if forms are going to last. The specific kind of wastage will vary depending on how a specific being continues to exist and the repetitive cycles this involves, but wasting will happen so long as they last. Nor is this purely about biological phenomena. Organisms actively dwell in their environments and may reshape them in cyclical ways, as when the components of a house, beehive, beaver dam, spider web, or bird's nest are continually repaired and cleaned to help them last. These actions might seem very different from eating and defecating, but they have similar ends—maintaining a stable form—which necessitates such repetitive labor (see Reno 2016).⁷

Work and utilitarian waste

If labor is a repetitive activity whose necessity is shared with other living things, the products of work are characterized by relatively greater permanence in the world.

Work is where Arendt's ideas most closely overlap with those of Heidegger. For Heidegger, things like tools have a worldliness insofar as they are either ready-to-hand or present-at-hand.⁸ Put simply, the former refers to entities when we are not thinking about them; in general, we travel, write, sleep undisturbed, without ever thinking explicitly about the objects we use to do so. Strictly speaking, we're not even using them, but are in a flow of activity where we never really think about where 'we' begin and these 'objects' end. If asked, we would probably claim we are separate, but until someone mentions it or something goes wrong, you are not aware that your sock is different from your foot any more than your kidney is different from your body. But when objects malfunction or breakdown we suddenly become aware of the blown head gasket causing a car engine to overheat, the skipping disc that won't let our computer's hard drive reboot, the hole in the roof that's letting rain come in. Now these are malfunctioning utilities that we have to think about because they seem to resist our intentions.

Though Heidegger did not mention it, we often rely on the *labor* of others to prevent such things from happening, to avoid breakdown in our possessions, dwellings and bodies (Graham and Thrift 2007, Houston 2017). It is commonly accepted in discard studies that waste becomes more politicized when infrastructure and waste labor breaks down and suddenly what is meant to be concealed from view becomes present-at-hand. Sewer lines are ignored most of the time, but have to be thought and talked about once basements fill with effluent; garbage collectors are ignored until they go on strike or pickups are delayed (see Nagle 2014). One of the reasons these forms of activity are considered less dignified, more polluting, less prestigious, is that they involve maintenance rather than creation or *work* in Arendt's sense.

The difference between labor and work is meant to reflect ideologies about what indicates a greater sense of freedom from the constraints of the world, of having to constantly clean and repair. If Heidegger's classic analysis of tool-being complicated phenomenal, worldly existence in general (see Harman 2009), it also reduced all human interaction to 'instrumental activity that concern forms of making or bringing about something in the world' (Benhabib 2003: 107). By work, Arendt means the conception and creation of artifacts with which their creator has a distinct means-end relationship. The engineer that designs and builds a car, the architect a building, the artist a painting or statue, is not normally the one who cleans and repairs it for an owner or the public. Unlike labor, which has to be continually repeated as long as a form is to be maintained, work is over 'when the object is finished, ready to be added to the common world of things' (Arendt 1958: 98).

Unlike the endless process of making waste, eating, sleeping and so on, work is not done out of necessity or continually. Work can be done repeatedly, only once, or never. You may paint only one portrait, build one house, craft one piece of furniture, or a thousand, or none. That is so because work suggests a relative freedom to create or not. Arendt is aware that historically labor, rather than

work, has been relegated to slaves, women or oppressed minorities for this reason.⁹

But these activities do not have to be interpreted in this way. If poetry, carpentry, or any similar activity is seen as something done purely to feed or clothe the poet or carpenter, then it may be interpreted as labor disguised as work, as merely repetitive activity done out of necessity and not as an expression of creative freedom. The most obvious way in which work can appear free is for it to resist the cycles of process and change that characterize ordinary life, to create something that lasts. As Arendt writes, 'the degree of worldliness of produced things... depends upon their greater or lesser permanence in the world itself' (1958: 96). If words and artworks stand the test of time we may forget that they were ever the work of starving artists. The less activities appear like continual practices of eating, defecating, cleaning, in other words, the more activities appear like something chosen rather than required.

As in Heidegger's tool analysis, the permanence of an object suggests an object that is not only present-at-hand but, insofar as it is thought about as something separate from the person, might outlive them and extend their legacy far into the future. What kind of waste would be equivalent to this? The waste that comes from work I term utilitarian waste. It would be anything that is lost as part of an act of original creation, a loss which is deemed unnecessary to the final utility of the object and so is cast aside.

Arendt thought only human beings work, which reflects the 'unnaturalness of human existence,' or Heideggerian *Dasein* (1958: 7), since work indicates an ability to imagine and build tools as well as freedom from instinct and the basic fulfillment of needs. Whether we acknowledge other organisms as tool users or dwelling builders, the work specific to humans is distinct partly because of the waste it leads to. Over the years presenting and discussing discard studies in different venues, I have heard it claimed that only human beings can make waste, or that only capitalist production leads to waste. When people say something like this, they seem to mean waste that comes from work, in Arendt's sense, which is to say something that mostly humans do and that specific societies do more extravagantly, with more lasting impact, than others. In fact, I suspect that most people initially drawn to discard studies have in mind utilitarian waste, that is, waste that only humans create, especially those from large, industrial societies for whom waste constitutes a crisis.¹⁰

If work is activity that seems free because it creates something permanent, something that lasts, then waste from work can appear like the dark side of such freedom, the toll it takes on the world that one hopes to transcend. The toxic and radioactive leftovers of industrial production processes are the legacy of utilitarian work that people unthinkingly engage in as if they were detached from cycles of replenished resources. If ecological waste is continuous and cyclical, it is also often part of worldly cycles. Sustainability arose as a trope of environmental care as an antidote for the idealization of activity as work, as a means-end relationship between people and objects of use. Waste from work, what I term utilitarian waste, is perceived as the product of such utilitarian activity.¹¹

Let's go back to the example of the cow manure. It is true that the cow had to excrete as part of the repetitive *labor* of staying alive and that farm workers will need to take that manure away as part of the *labor* of maintaining the farm, helping it and the cows to last. At the same time, when cows are raised *en masse* in order to generate saleable commodities like milk and meat, they are also products of work. This is so because the means-end relationship in industrial relations introduces a new perspective that simplifies the situation considerably. The living labor of those involved is removed from consideration except insofar as it can be reduced and translated into abstract labor power (see Pedersen 2013). That perspective is known as commodity fetishism, in Marxian critique, but the basic idea is that the complexity of cow-human-farm relations is deliberately bracketed from consideration so that only the cost of things, as money, is given close consideration.¹² The cow, the farmworker or vet that take care of them, the grazing plot, the feed given to the cow are all secondary in importance to the final end product. Here is where waste from labor, or ecological waste, is productively thought of instead as waste from work or utilitarian waste. Cows must excrete solids and gases, but there do not need to be so many factory-grown cows. Similarly, radioactive material buried in the Earth's crust is radioactive either way, but if it is mined and used in factory work to create a commodity, then the pollution that results can be thought of as utilitarian waste.

Put differently, if Arendtian labor must continually occur or a being will die or cease to last, work could have been otherwise. The fact that work needn't have occurred, that it was the result of free and creative activity, means that utilitarian waste needn't have existed. Put simply, our need for continual sustenance demands the labor of eating and drinking, but we do not need to eat *cows* or drink *milk*, let alone the industrially manufactured variety. This makes utilitarian waste more political or politicizable, by definition, because we might have done things differently. This is one obvious reason why many scholars in discard studies are drawn to this sense of waste, because it leads back to arguments about how to act more ethically in the world.

Anything produced and sold on the market generates multiple forms of utilitarian waste in this sense, because whatever materials and efforts were spent that did not go into the realization of that object's eventual use value represents a waste of resources. Industrial manufacturers are often aware of these wastes, since they represent net losses in their accounting budgets, and may attempt to extract as much as they can from them. Many common commodities today, from coal tar to glycerin, began as utilitarian wastes that were leftovers from production (see O'Brien 2007). Any commodity begins as a series of materials, some of which will be discarded in order for it to be created. Some commodities will also be discarded along the way because they are inadvertently damaged, do not pass quality control standards, or expire on the shelf before they can be consumed. And many commodities are draped in what I have called *bundling waste* (see Reno 2016) in order to convey them from site of exchange to

site of consumption (e.g., from the store to home). All of the waste that does not enter in the final use value of the commodity could be considered utilitarian waste. It is for this reason that corporations produce far more waste than consumers (Liboiron 2013).

And yet, capitalist value relations are only at the extreme end of the Arendtian work continuum. When someone in a non-industrial society creates a pot or a boat, they still discard materials that do not go into the final product, just not as much of it and probably not in a way that can alter the global climate. In the same way that markets and money exist whether or not there is capitalism (see Hann and Hart 2011), albeit in different forms, waste can be seen too as well. A utilitarian interpretation of work product is theoretically possible no matter what the form of production. If such an interpretation does not exist, then that should be demonstrated, but it should not be assumed lest waste be associated only with some presumed modern or capitalist or western break with nature that non-moderns or non-capitalists or non-westerners could never imagine. In such a reading, waste becomes part of an anti-modern diagnosis of humanity's fall from a primordial state of always being-ready-at-hand or at one with our surroundings. It is not that waste in the sense of utilitarian waste must exist, only that there is no reason, in principle, that it can only exist in large, heavily polluting, industrial societies.

Moreover, utilitarian waste might be universally human without being exclusively so. Consider when a chimpanzee gathers a stick and begins to strip it to use for termite fishing, as they have learned to do by observing others. The discarded remnants leftover from the crafting of their 'fishing pole' could be seen as utilitarian waste insofar as it was cast aside as part of a means-end relationship with a crafted utility. Whether this is regarded as labor or work depends on how much freedom and imagination we are willing to attribute to non-humans. And a different sense of waste (ecological or utilitarian) is one index of such freedom. Why does this matter if the remains of such 'wasting' are so non-impactful, so sustainable? Whether chimps create utilitarian waste will impact, for instance, whether they are thought capable of leaving behind archaeological deposits or not (see Mercader et al. 2007), whether they have something like a culture they pass on to one another over time, and whether they may be considered deserving of greater protections from poachers, experimentation, and encroachment on their territory. Arendt knew well that whether some action is characterized as work or labor is not a neutral evaluation of an objective condition, but an ideological and moral pronouncement on any actor's potential for freedom and the risk of having it denied them.

Action and moral-political waste

Arendt's final category of human activity is action. Action is always collective and political. Unlike work and labor, action is a form of activity that 'is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others' (Arendt 1958: 23). Arendt's idea of action is based on the Aristotelian notion of praxis (1958: 25), but she includes as a form of action speech (which Aristotle distinguished as *lexis*):

In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice. This disclosure of 'who' in contradistinction to 'what' somebody is—his qualities, gifts, talents, and shortcomings, which he may display or hide—is implicit in everything somebody says and does. (1958: 179)

Action involves how we represent ourselves to others (as a 'who') and are represented as social actors, as citizens for instance, or as members of a community of whatever scale. It is because commodities in capitalist systems of production appear as products of Arendtian work that they are fetishized, since the people who made them (who they are, whether they are being exploited for their labor and so on) is of no account in the exchange value or money price of the commodity that manifests during exchange.

But capitalism is not the only system with an impoverished view of the human subject. Another way to distinguish action from work or labor is to consider what is missing from the lives of people in a concentration camp, total institution, or totalitarian society. These social formations precisely rely on denuding people of their individuality and making them into what Agamben (1998), drawing heavily on Arendt, calls bare life. Action is disallowed in such contexts because making people unfree means limiting them to the bare life of repetitive labor and, possibly, toward the work of producing things for others (as when prisoners are made to produce goods that others profit from). What one cannot do in these settings is be a full-fledged *who* because this means shaping who you are and how you represent yourself to others as a full ethical being.

Action can be easily confused for work, since both are interpretations of people engaging in activity that is less constrained by necessity than is labor. But work involves only a two-part relationship between a creator and a thing made. Waste is that which is outside of this relation. In economics, all environmental pollution that is not part of acquiring a profit is known as an externality, literally as that which is of no account and falls outside one's purview. Environmental regulation in places like the United States and Europe typically proceeds by translating these externalities into costs, so that industrial producers can calculate things like pollution of air, water, and land as having economic consequences, which would otherwise be ignored as of no account since they do not enter into the exchange or use value of the commodity produced.

The waste of action is different, because it defines intersubjective relations as part of a *who* and a *we* of a community or polity. This is where it is instructive to connect Arendt with the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966). What Douglas famously defines as 'dirt', or matter out of place, is not all senses of waste (though this is how it is often misapplied, in my view). Rather, Douglas is specifically concerned, following Durkheim, with senses of waste associated with moral and political communities of

whatever scale. For Douglas, all communities have their outsiders and abominations, their witches and monsters, however free or unfree they may seem. Becoming a *who*, she might respond to Arendt, always involves dividing oneself from an other, a *them* or an *it*. The question is not whether some people and things are rejected, but *which* will be classified as such and *how* they will be dealt with.

More totalitarian societies are distinctly horrible because they attempt to definitively solve the problem of outsiders and enemies of the state once and for all. But any kind of moral and political community, according to Douglas, will have some form of anomalous or troubling substance and subject. This needn't conform to ecological or utilitarian senses of waste because dangerousness is here a product of social expectations concerning where persons and things belong. This is what I will term moral-political waste, by which I mean Douglas' notion of a potent and troubling sign or altogether unassimilable thing. The key here is that waste is not just *out of place*, as many people gloss Douglas' analysis, but out of place in a way that stands for a hole in a symbolic system. Not everything we might deem waste would qualify. Even human waste or 'rubbish' needn't be dangerous or troubling to anyone provided it is dealt with the right way (1966: 197–198). By dealing with this anomaly in some way, the community is brought together, power is maintained, the world goes back to the way it should be. Moral-political waste challenges and reaffirms social order through acts of rejection, re-labelling, ritual sacrifice, or reuse. In its broadest sense, moral-political waste would include curse words and taboo expressions, trashy novels, wastes of time, junk food, and human waste, since all of these only appear to be waste from the standpoint of a shared set of values and classifications in relation to which they are dirt.

So far, I have proposed the three-part scheme that takes into account three different but related senses of waste that are fairly common. I now want to show how it might relate to a specific situation.

Imagine a river. It's a smaller river that gradually flows into the headwaters that make up the Amazon in South America. Three separate waste events transpire all at once. A fish defecates in the river. A nearby copper mine releases tailings in the same spot. Meanwhile, on the shore, a would-be Urarina shaman uses special chants to tame a dangerous and powerful *egaando*, or magical stone bowl, on the bottom of the riverbed (see Walker 2013). Clearly one way to interpret this scenario is as three distinct senses of waste: fish feces (ecological), mine tailings (utilitarian), and animate stone (moral-political). The fish defecates to stay alive, the tailings are released as an externality in order for the owners of the mine to make money, the Urarina man tames the anomalous *egaando* in order to become a shaman in the eyes of others and have a sacred power he and they can use together to overcome evil forces (including other, untamed *egaando* that resist appropriation and can curse people). There are people who might be more drawn to one of these three more than the others, here are questions they might ask to justify their specific focus.

Why ignore the life of the fish as if it were less important? Doesn't such dismissal contribute to our abuse of the environment as a utility for profit-gain and as a passive object of techno-scientific mastery? To ignore their life processes is to lose sight of the ecological relations that connect all the beings to one another. Perhaps the feces of the fish can provide evidence of pollution, for instance, and improve a case one might make against the corporation.

Who could turn away from the power and influence of the mining corporation, who is a threat to the environment, if not them? To ignore the waste they create is to fail to hold accountable the most privileged and most detached agents involved in damaging this environment and the world as a whole.

Who are we to ignore the indigenous practices of local Amazonians who use the river and have been using it for generations? Why is shamanism dismissed as a way of processing 'dirt' and making meaning and community? After all, they have been denied self-determination for centuries through colonial regimes. To ignore their symbolic system is to lose a significant challenge to the universalizing ambitions of cultural/colonial/capitalist power structures (Viveiros de Castro 2012).

I would argue that each of these senses of waste is interesting and worth studying. Each path taken has its risks and blind spots and each one is critical to understand the waste situation in its entirety as a total social fact. Moreover, rather than utterly incommensurate, through Arendt's model of activity each of these senses of waste could be seen as dynamically related, rather than as absolutely separate. I turn to this in the final section.

Senses of Waste as Semiotic Processes

I want to clarify once more the distinction I am making between senses of waste and types of waste. A sense of waste suggests that there is a representation of some object that is not identical with it. I am not claiming that there are only three senses of waste in the world, only that these three are common, are connected to the extent that they can be taken to represent relative freedom from constraint, and can be used both to politicize waste and to use it to erect boundaries between ways of life or between humans and non-humans.

Whether an activity is considered repetitive and necessary, purely utilitarian, or meaningful as part of someone's life story will depend on interpretation. The fact is that many actions may be interpreted as one or more of these, from moment to moment, depending on the interpreter and the context. Therefore, in principle, we might recognize something as waste in general without knowing specifically in what sense or senses we think it is a particular kind of waste, and we might see something as waste that another regards as its opposite. But I want to conclude by making two interrelated points. First, the distinct wastes of labor, work, and action are worth thinking through because they may lead to distinct moral and political consequences. Second, they are not merely different categories in the abstract. They represent how people tend to think, or processes of cognition, and are therefore

not utterly incommensurable, but are very often related as part of a series of interpretive steps (see Deacon 2012 and Kockelman 2005).

Let us say you are strolling down the park and come across a bit of plastic, the remains of a food item that was unwrapped and presumably consumed.

Step One

Your first thought might be to fault the person who chose to throw away this waste in the open instead of disposing of it properly. You might classify them as someone who litters (in contrast with yourself whom you define as an ethical person insofar as you do not litter, which you might demonstrate to others by picking up the litter and putting it in a nearby waste receptacle). You thereby label them and the thing they left behind as forms of moral-political waste.

Step Two

But then you notice that a nearby rubbish bin was overturned and see the footprints of some animal. Perhaps some raccoon, coyote or skunk (if you're in North America) or a fox or dog (if you're in Europe). You may be annoyed with the animal, but now are more likely to consider the litter as a result of ecological waste since it was caused by a creature seeking sustenance which it must continually do.

Step Three

On the other hand, it occurs to you that the animal would have had to pry open the wrapper using considerable skill and determination. 'How clever scavengers are,' you think, 'and how like human beings who set themselves on a goal and accomplish it.' You may now be thinking of the wrapper as evidence of a singular achievement by the creature, seen more as a capable individual, not reducible to the normal habits and instincts of its species, and therefore the wrapper they cast aside as closer to utilitarian waste.¹³

Step Four

Then again, upon further reflection, you might blame the city or the owner of the bin for their inability to control animal populations, whatever their abilities, or keep them away from rubbish ('Was it locked?' you may wonder). You are now back to moral-political waste. You are a tax-payer, a good citizen and by contrast the other urban denizens, the city government and their agents are corrupt, lazy, untrustworthy dirt.

Step Five

Just then, a beleaguered caregiver passes by with several children in tow. You suspect they are someone else's children, whom she is paid to watch. In the process of trying to herd them along, a food wrapper similar to the one you found falls out of her possession and lands on the ground. Well, you think, I suppose people don't always litter on purpose and this waste does not make her a bad person, she is doing her best with a tough job. It might be taken to be more ecological waste, the process of continual, repetitive and low-status labor, or as moral-political waste, the leftover remnants of a society that

devalues and does not support people in the woman's position.

Step Six

You might go even further and blame neither the city, the animal, nor the caregiver, but instead the corporation for manufacturing a product that is wrapped in un-recyclable and unsustainable material (plastic) in order to make a profit. Suddenly the litter is the remains of a product of commodification and thus utilitarian waste, since the corporation only interprets things like plastic wrappers in a purely instrumental fashion, as an externality that must be expended to make a profit and nothing more.

Step Seven

But maybe you define yourself as a kind of person who only buys sustainably-produced, locally grown and organic food, and this plastic utilitarian waste was only covering up a bit of industrially produced junk food or moral-political waste...

And on and on, the point is not that there is a right answer or a single path of interpretation. I am only referring to how these objects might be interpreted as distinct kinds of waste at different moments along a path of inquiry, not how they must be interpreted. Different pathways of thought can lead one reasonably to ecological, utilitarian or moral-political senses of waste.

Sometimes they will provide support for one another, like an interpretive scaffold. For example, when calling someone a 'sack of shit' in English or *kusottare* (literally 'shit-drip') in Japanese, the utterance enrolls the biological fact of ecological waste (rejection through excretion) to insult someone as moral-political waste (mocking them as disgusting by association with shit and, possibly, metonymically rejecting them just as one does shit). The point is that what kind of waste it is thought to be matters because these byproducts may be thought to have distinct moral and political significance. The Arendtian interpretation makes this clear by relating kinds of activity to relative freedom from constraint, but there could be others. Indeed, it may also be that the political metaphysics behind Arendt's account is not at all generalizable, and that there are forms of interpretation that differ radically, where there is but one sense of waste (the other two are lacking), where there are even more possible, or where they lead to altogether different moral and political presuppositions and entailments.¹⁴

It can be a useful exercise, all the same, for people who encounter things or persons that are deemed waste to ask themselves and others, 'waste in what sense?' The world is complicated enough to allow room for farmers, veterinarians, eco-anarchists and even anthropologists, so our analyses should allow room for them too.

Notes

¹ This argument comes in many forms. Representations, from basic sensory perception to language, are never identical to what they represent. But semioticians differ over whether this is a kind of curse that distances us forever from the thing-in-itself, or a chance to bridge the distance between entities, however imper-

fectly. The latter position fits more with the pragmatic tradition of realist semiotics associated with the work of Charles Sanders Peirce (1955). This is the perspective I adopt in this paper.

- ² To reiterate, I do not mean people disagree on whether or not something is waste (trash or treasure) but that one approach to thinking about waste is superior to others. For a representative example, see the interesting debate between Myra Hird (2012, 2013) and Zsuzsa Gille (2013), who disagree over whether to privilege what I term a more ecological or a more utilitarian sense of waste, respectively. Both provide compelling reasons and both, in my view, are right.
- ³ Put simply, they are realists and the anthropologist less so. I say this because changing the world (whether healing a cow or curing the climate) means objects 'out there' more or less agree with our representations of them.
- ⁴ Though, as I hope to show, it is just as narrow to understand waste as something entirely reducible to life processes (with all reactions to waste, for instance, derived as epiphenomena from evolved and instinctual disgust reactions, see, Royzman and Sabini 2001; Fessler and Haley 2006; Curtis et al. 2011), or as something specific to economic production.
- ⁵ Having an adequate conception of human existence was necessary for Arendt, because she thought that totalitarian and genocidal states were structured on the basis of an impoverished understanding of human being. This, for Arendt, helps account for Heidegger's infamous support for Germany's Nazi regime. For a more in-depth appraisal of Arendt's contribution to the study of ethics and sociality, see Lambek 2010.
- ⁶ Perhaps it is appropriate, therefore, that the final act of many bodies is to shit one last time, thereby concluding life and its nonstop wastage.
- ⁷ A person might object that defecating is a product of evolution and maintaining dwellings of social history, yet niche-construction arguably represents a middle-ground between evolutionary and historical processes (see Ingold 2000, Laland and Brown 2006).
- ⁸ Here I follow the interpretation of tool-being by Harman 2009: 140–2.
- ⁹ Although Arendt does not appear to be one of her influences, this fits with Sherry Ortner's (1974) controversial argument that women have a tendency to be oppressed around the world because their association with child-birth and childrearing makes them appear closer to the ecological rhythms and cycles described as 'nature'. In Arendt's terms, women would be associated with labor rather than work. Although Arendt could just as readily provide a critical perspective on the implicit ideology of agency and gender in Ortner's account.
- ¹⁰ That being said, it is possible to interpret as work that which might be taken for granted as labor. Consider when a body builder prepares their diet and exercise leading up to a particular competition. Here activity is at the boundary between being interpreted as work and labor, insofar as it can be taken to be an interruption in normal cycles of repetitive eating, moving and defecating as a means to achieving a utilitarian end-product—the body as commodity.

- ¹¹ Only rarely do products normally considered ecological waste overwhelm the world the way products of work do, as when the unchecked explosion of photosynthesizing cyanobacteria polluted the atmosphere with so much oxygen that it led to mass extinction over two billion years ago (see Serres 2010, on life as inherently polluting).
- ¹² On the compatibility of Heidegger's tool-analysis with Marxian critique, see Harman 2017. I would add that abstract labor power fits within Arendt's analysis as a real, though limited, representation of human activity that abstracts it from the totality of life processes as well as the total life of the person as an actor within a moral community (in Arendt's terms, labor and action, respectively).
- ¹³ This might seem like a stretch, but creative interactions between creatures and objects for which they are not instinctively prepared was enough to prove to Charles Darwin that the idea of instinct might be problematic and the humblest non-human organisms might be capable of more than we normally expect (Phillips 1999). In other words, anything an organism is not evolved for could potentially be seen as a form of object present-at-hand, in Heidegger's sense, rather than part of habitual cycles of activity, work rather than labor.
- ¹⁴ I would, however, resist labelling Arendt's account merely 'western' since I suspect it can be applied in more contexts besides. For instance, it might prove to be more accurate to label this approach Euro-Asian, urban or Northern. This can only be demonstrated through further research.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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