Waste is a property of the human mind

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The Waste Society research project has a focus on the ways in which society deals with waste. As Jarno Valkonen points out in the programmatic text 'The waste society: Living with material overflows', the project is motivated by the recognition that waste constitutes one of the most 'urgent environmental and social problems' of the day, and the project explores its causes and effects, also looking at ways of reducing the amount of waste generated in the affluent society.

This short contribution, which summarises a video lecture presented to the programme, takes a different perspective. While mindful of the severity of the many problems associated with waste, pollution and the resulting environmental degradation, I will use this opportunity to reflect on the deeper nature of waste: Why is it that we classify some things as valuable and others as rubbish? There is no obvious and simple answer to this question, although it is true that waste is frequently a side-effect, a superfluous by-product, of production and consumption. We may accordingly begin by thinking about waste as that which creates pollution and impurity, material or immaterial.

Waste can be understood as an outcome of social classification. Bateson (1972) spoke of the human quest for outlines, while Lévi-Strauss (1958) built his structuralist anthropology on the conviction that people think through contrasts or 'binary oppositions'. Humans create boundaries: Without contrasts, nothing can have an identity, or – as Bateson famously said – information consists in differences that make a difference. In a certain sense, the only thing that exists in the world are differences. A third anthropologist, Mary Douglas, is more directly relevant for the study of waste. In her *Purity and Danger* (1966), which is largely a book about classification, she defines impurities, or pollution, as 'matter out of place'. That is to say, what counts as waste – disgusting, superfluous etc. – would have been perfectly respectable or even valuable if it were placed in a different context. Her most famous example may be that of the human hair, which can be pleasing on a human head, but abhorrent in a bowl of soup.

This view sounds like a recipe for a recycling movement since it seems to imply that nothing is waste *in itself*, but only through the wrong contextualisation. When I

wrote a book about waste a decade ago (Eriksen 2011), I visited a recycling facility – until recently simply a rubbish dump – to investigate municipal waste management. I told my guide, slightly jokingly, that I was looking forward to seeing his rubbish, and he visibly froze, almost as if I had uttered the 'n' word in an American cultural studies class, before composing himself, making an expansive gesture towards the site and stating in no uncertain terms that 'this is not rubbish; it's resources'. Today, even people who have not read Douglas are familiar with her way of thinking.

Douglas's student Michael Thompson (2016/1979) wrote, in his book *Rubbish Theory*, about the cycles whereby waste could be converted into value, as in old junk reborn as valuable antiques. Indeed, in a more recent contribution to the field, Catherine Alexander and Joshua Reno (2012, see also Eriksen and Schober 2017) take this argument one step further by investigating how *people* considered valueless and superfluous can be 'recycled' and turned into valuable citizens.

This kind of social constructivist perspective on waste is valuable, but it should not be allowed to lead to relativism. It is true that the boundary between waste and value changes. Recycling turns rubbish into something useful, just as pigs are valued, and feared, precisely because they convert waste into food. An old car may have nearly worthless in 1950, but fifty years later it resurfaced as an expensive antiquarian car. Yet, there are two reasons why the 'matter out of place' perspective is limited in the present context. First, sometimes, waste is simply waste. A polluted lake or non-recyclable plastic bobbing in the sea cannot just be recontextualised and mutate into something valuable. Most plastic cannot, in fact, be recycled. Secondly, in the present world of limited good, the Anthropocene, anthropogenic waste is destroying the foundations of human life through environmental destruction and climate change. Waste of this global magnitude – greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, pollution of land, sea and waterways, replacement of nature with infrastructure – is directly connected to the domestic waste studied in this research project. The global and the domestic are the same thing at different scales. Waste is sometimes just that: waste; and we have to reduce it, but it is not going away, so to some extent, we just have to learn to 'stay with the trouble'. Sometimes, there can be too much order. It is likely that many of the allergies that have become so common in the global north result from exaggerated hygiene.

The notion of the circular economy is attractive, but as I have just suggested, it is unlikely to be fully realised. Waste is often not just matter out of place; it is not necessarily an outcome of classification. It can be inherently destructive, it cannot always be recycled, and besides, recycling itself requires considerable energy and investment in infrastructure. It also needs to be pointed out that domestic recycling will scarcely solve the waste problem. Only ten per cent of the waste produced in the European Union comes from private households. The problem is systemic, and if politicians urge citizens to recycle, they convert what is in fact a structural problem to one pertaining to individual choice.

Having said this, as a reminder of the limitations of a social constructivist approach to waste, I now move on to considering some aspects of precisely that perspective, which draws on theorists such as Douglas (matter out of place), Bateson (boundaries and messiness), Thompson (waste turned into value) and Bauman (wasted lives).

Waste is a powerful and often used metaphor in literature. In the TV series *The Sopranos*, the main character operates a waste disposal company to whitewash money earned through mafia activity, while simultaneously undertaking psychoanalysis to excavate his traumas. The illicit money passes through the abject, dark and smelly world of rubbish in order to resurface as legitimate. Similarly, Tony Soprano has to move psychologically through the hidden recesses of his subconscious in order to come to terms with his true self. In Don DeLillo's *Underworld*, which can be read as a psychoanalytical dissection of postwar America, the protagonist Nick Shay works with nuclear waste, while simultaneously digging into his own mind, faintly echoing the encounter with the abject and disgusting in Sartre's novel about nausea, *La naussée*. Here's Shay in *Underworld*:

> We built pyramids of waste above and below the earth. The more hazardous
> the waste, the deeper we tried to sink it. The word plutonium comes from
> Pluto, god of the dead and ruler of the underworld. They took him out to the
> marshes and wasted him as we say today, or used to say until it got changed to
> something else.

Literal and metaphorical waste thus come across as two sides of the same coin. They are the shameful, disgusting, revolting side-effects, that which is best forgotten or rendered invisible.

Messiness is a related way of talking about waste. In one of the Metalogues which open Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* – semi-fictional dialogues with his young daughter Mary Catherine (herself later an anthropologist and communication theorist), the topic is order and disorder. The title of the metalogue is 'Why do things get into a mess?', and the opening gambit sees Mary Catherine exasperated at the way in which her room always seems to get messy, regardless of her attempts to keep it tidy. Her father explains that there are very many ways in which her room can be untidy, but only one or a few ways for it to be tidy.

A wry comment on the Second Law of Thermodynamics, Bateson suggests that entropy (chaos) is an inevitable outcome unless negentropic forces (such as the continuous effort to keep your room tidy) are regularly applied. However, he also says that waste exists in the eye of the beholder, since order has to be defined by someone.

This brings me to the next perspective on waste, namely people as waste. Bauman's *Wasted Lives* is an essay about superfluous people, who are not needed, who are in the way, disposable and unwanted. He has refugees and minorities in mind, but also the growing number of people who are unnecessary in economic production and inefficient consumers. Some are spoken explicitly of as human rubbish, such as Roma Gypsies in certain European countries (Thorleifsson and Eriksen 2018), while others are mainly ignored.

A related discourse concerns species invasion or, in more neutral terms, foreign species of plants and animals threatening to destabilise existing ecosystems. There are similarities between the anxiety over species invasion, the fear of 'human waste' in the form of unwanted and uninvited immigrants, and young Mary Catherine Bateson's untidy bedroom. All concern the tug-of-war between order and chaos, negentropy and entropy.

Waste can be shameful (as with human body fluids gone astray), it can be disquieting (when upsetting an existing order), and it can be a subconscious trauma gnawing at the polished surface.

The 'matter out of place' phrase is a structural-functionalist, conservative category. The world is in fact a messy place, changing and demanding continuous

adjustments. The fiction of a clean society is a dangerous one, whether we talk about the waste problem in terms of bacteria, people, animals or human excreta. An alternative to an obsession with order could be the acknowledgement that it is necessary to 'stay with the trouble' (Haraway). Not everything can or should be recycled. A certain degree of messiness and indeterminacy is necessary for the sake of diversity and flexibility.

What I have been trying to say is not that we should refrain from studying and dealing with waste as an environmental problem of planetary dimensions, but I have been arguing that we should limit the concern to precisely that. Since the contrast between the clean and the unclean is a property of the human mind, forever searching for predictability and regularity, there are real risks of spillover effects into domains where the quest for order and purity could have seriously destructive consequences.

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