

Garbage in Gotham: The Anthropology of Trash

G65.1813

Draper Master's Program in Humanities and Social Thought
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INTRODUCTION

Garbage is mostly understood as a practical problem, but this course also considers values, traditions, and cultural assumptions inherent in the category "trash." How is the material object called "garbage" created, perceived, processed, ignored? What are the economics of garbage in Gotham especially now that Fresh Kills, the city's last landfill, has closed? What are the social assumptions that allow garbage to be an acceptable, even inevitable part of daily life?

The class starts with readings that propose more inclusive parameters for authoritative knowledge so that garbage might find a place in academic discourse. We then look at ideas of private property and value imparted to material objects and consider how value is inverted in the process of creating trash. Readings move to anthropologists who have studied categories like sacred versus profane and include philosophies and histories of waste and worth. We step into contemporary conversations about trash through several considerations, including the gendering of both domestic and municipal trash management, the history of garbage handling in various times and places, the relationship of garbage to consumption, who exactly is responsible for taking away the trash, garbage archaeology, and the ways in which solid waste and related industrial processes shape landscape -- among other themes.

Like most urban spaces, New York has wrestled with a trash problem for centuries, and the city will be our primary case study. The semester includes an independent field trip, a guided tour of a waste facility, and guest speakers who have special expertise on the city's debris.

By the end of the semester students will have a deeper understanding of the practicalities of trash, and will see how garbage serves as a mirror for contemporary social life. More importantly, students will better appreciate the historical and cultural underpinnings of a perpetually vexing problem.

REQUIREMENTS

Reading

Students are expected to complete all reading assignments before class sessions. Books may be ordered from amazon.com, and articles are available at the Draper offices and at New University Copy on Waverly Place. If there is demand, they will also be on reserve at Bobst.

Writing

Students will write four papers. Three are "response" papers of three to five pages, written in response to assigned questions. The questions are based on readings, on class discussions, and on class deliberations between class meetings, via our newsgroup. The fourth paper is a research effort of 15 to 20 pages about a theme to be chosen in collaboration with the professors. Note

that there are topic development dates built into the semester. While wholly independent projects are fine, it is more expedient and a better use of your time to draw on course readings as the primary basis of your work. *All topics for the final paper must be approved by the professors and must be relevant to an anthropology of trash.*

Presentations

These will be assigned at the beginning of the semester. Students will be responsible for some of the material of a class session.

Class Participation, In Class and Online

Class participation is required. This does not mean that shy persons must speak just to bolster their grades. Participation can happen through our newsgroup, which allows us to continue class discussions between class meetings.

Garbage Practices

It is a challenge to change even small habits of waste generation. The Garbage Practices require attention, memory, a little time. They require commitment. They challenge our awareness and our sense of time and of worth, among other things.

Saving - September 3 through October 1

Choose a product that you would normally discard after using. Instead of throwing it out, save it and use it as many times as you can until it dies. Examples might be paper or plastic shopping bags, paper coffee cups, plastic water bottles, etc. Mark the date that you first reuse it and see how long it lasts. Also notice how many of them you save by using one over and over.

Replacing - October 1 through October 29

Choose a product that usually comes in a discardable form and replace it with a non-disposable version. Again, bags – paper or plastic – come to mind. Do you always leave the grocery store with half a dozen plastic bags full of food? Use a couple of canvas bags instead. Do you drink a cup of coffee every morning and then toss the cup? Replace it with a ceramic mug. Do you use disposable diapers for your baby? Switch to cloth. Whatever you choose, use the permanent version every time you would otherwise use the disposable one.

Collecting - Dates to be determined

At some point in the second half of the semester, everyone will save all garbage they generate for a 72-hour period. We'll choose that time together and everyone will save their trash for the same three days. This includes anything that you would throw out in a garbagecan or waste basket; it does not include toilet paper. We'll then bring our trash to class. You won't be asked to display your trash as a collection of individual objects, but you'll share with each other the quantity that you've accumulated.

Other Practices - October 29 through December 10

Students will propose and then carry out other Garbage Practices along the lines of the three described above.

Most cultures evaluate garbage in fundamentally similar ways because garbage is, in a sense, the negation of culture. It is the mess at the edge of any category, the disorder that threatens every order. But variations of economy and environment across different cultures create many diverse concepts of garbage. Modern industrial and technological societies have had to respond culturally to conditions that have given garbage an especially revealing cultural history. The first part of the course places our topic in this broad context.

Class 1: September 3 Introduction to Class Themes
Start Garbage Practice I: Saving

Class 2: September 10 The Modern Concept of "Waste"

•O'Brien, Martin

1999 Rubbish-Power: Towards a Sociology of the Rubbish Society. In J. Hearn and S. Roseneil, eds., *Consuming Cultures: Power and Resistance*. New York: St. Martin's.

•Brekhus, Wayne

1998 A Sociology of the Unmarked: Redirecting Our Focus. *Sociological Theory* 16 (1):34-51.

•Locke, John

1958 "On Property," in *The Second Treatise on Government*. New York: Liberal Arts.

First response paper due next week

Garbage Practice I: Saving (ongoing)

Class 3: September 17 Anthropological Views of Taint and Trash

•Douglas, Mary

1970 Introduction and first three chapters, *Purity and Danger*, New York: Pantheon.

•Miller, William

1997 Chapter 3, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.

•Bataille, Georges

1994 "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. Minneapolis: U Minnesota P.

First response paper due

Garbage Practice I: Saving (ongoing)

Class 4: September 24 What's gender got to do with it?

•Strasser, Susan

1999 *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Garbage Practice I: Saving (ongoing)

PART II: GARBAGE LOGISTICS: HISTORY, CONSUMPTION, LANDSCAPE

This section of the considers ways in which other cities, ancient and modern, have dealt with the problem of solid waste. We also open a conversation about potential meanings of consumption and their implication in garbage creation patterns.

Class 5: October 1 History of Garbage in Urban Space

•Melosi, Martin V.

1981 Introduction to *Garbage in the Cities: Refuse, Reform and the Environment 1880-1980*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press.

•Miller, Benjamin

2000 *Fat of the Land: A History of Garbage in New York, the Last 200 Years*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows.

Ben Miller will be our guest speaker

Start Garbage Practice II: Replacing

Class 6: October 8 Addicted to Consumption?

Miller, Daniel

1998 "Why Some Things Matter," in D.Miller, ed., *Material cultures*, Chicago: U Chicago P.

Corrigan, Peter

1997 Chapters 1 and 2 in *The Sociology of Consumption*. London: Sage.

Kopytoff, Igor

•1986 "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP.

Garbage Practice II: Replacing (ongoing)

Class 7: October 15 To Love a Landfill?

Nagle, Robin

forthcoming Landfills as Commons: The History and Future of Fresh Kills. In Robert France, ed., *Healing Natures*. Boston: MIT Press.

Second response paper due next week / Garbage Practice II: Replacing (ongoing)

PART III: THE PLACE OF GARBAGE IN MODERN THOUGHT (BOTH CONSCIOUS AND NOT)

Here we move from practicalities into a more theoretical perspective. What assumptions allow us to create garbage? How does garbage fit the rhythms of postmodern life? Is that place different now from what it was, say, 50 years ago? Why or why not? The next few classes explore some of the finer points of human practice and habits of behavior that are often taken for granted in our relationship to material objects, whether through their consumption or disposal.

Class 8: October 22 Habits of Trash

•Bourdieu, Pierre

1990 "Structures and the habitus," in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Stanford: Stanford UP.

•Certeau, Michel de

1988 "Indeterminate," in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: U California P.

Harvey, David

1990 "Time-space compression and the postmodern condition," in *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Second response paper due

Abstract of final paper due next week / Garbage Practice II: Replacing (ongoing)

Class 9: October 29 The Malleability of Value

•Thompson, Michael (out of print)

1979 *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value*. London: Oxford.

Abstract of final paper due

Garbage Practice II: Replacing (ongoing)

Class 10: November 5 From Increased Velocity to Increased Waste

•LaPorte, Dominique

2002 *The History of Shit*. Boston: MIT Press.

Third response paper due next week; outline of final paper due next week

Start Garbage Practice III: Your Proposal

PART IV: GARBAGE IN DAILY LIFE

Through your Garbage Practices, you have learned that the habits by which we create garbage are deeply engrained in our everyday practices. Archaeological studies of trash reveal the discrepancy between what we think we throw away and what actually gets tossed. These final weeks of class let us look at a key piece of that archaeology. We also consider what it takes to be a sanitation worker, how we are implicated in their labors, and what relationship endures between the rhythms of daily life in a variety of contexts, the debris that life generates, and who suffers that debris.

Class 11: November 12 What we really throw away

•Rathje, William

2001 *Rubbish! What Our Garbage Tells Us About Ourselves*. Tucson: U Arizona P.

Third response paper due

Outline of final paper due

Garbage Practice III: Your Proposal (ongoing)

Class 12: November 19 Who handles the trash?

•Coleman, John

1974 *Blue-Collar Journal*, p 203-252. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott.

•Honey, Michael Keith

1999 "I Am A Man': Unionism and the Black Working Poor." In *Black Workers Remember: An Oral History of Segregation, Unionism, and the Freedom Struggle*. Berkeley: U California P.

Garbage Practice III: Your Proposal (ongoing)

Class 13: November 26 The Waste of Social Life

•Calvino, Italo

1993 "La Poubelle Agréée," in *The Road to San Giovanni*. New York: Pantheon.

1986 "Continuous Cities I," in *Invisible Cities*. New York: Harvest Books.

•Riis, Jacob

1997 *How the Other Half Lives*. New York: Penguin.

Optional: Rough draft of final paper due today. Comments back to you by next class session.

Class 14: December 3 (last class) Garbage as Metaphor [Choose one of these texts]

•Ammons, A.R.

1993 *Garbage*. New York: W.W. Norton.

•Klima, Ivan

1993 *Love and Garbage*. New York: Vintage International.

•Tekin, Lattice

1996 *Berji Kristin: Tales from the Garbage Hills*. New York: Marion Boyars

Garbage Practice III: Your Proposal (ongoing)

No Class: December 10: Final paper due by 5:00p in the Draper Program office