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Introduction: ethnography and waste

In March 2017 Marseille's new flagship cultural institution, the Museum of European and Mediterranean Civilisations (Mucem), inaugurated «Vies d'ordures: De l'économie des déchets» (Garbage lives: The economy of waste), an exhibition that explored the significance of waste in the Mediterranean region. The result of three years' collaboration between social scientists, historians, oceanographers, economists and photographers, the five-month-long show – according to Mucem's publicity – invited visitors to take «an atypical journey around the Mediterranean to discover landscapes, technologies, recycled objects [...] but especially to meet the women and men who manage our waste, make a living out of it and, all too often, suffer it» (Mucem 2017). What makes «Vie d'ordures» particularly pertinent for this special issue is that it was, the same promotional material declared, «based on ethnographic inquiry». As the two anthropologists-cum-curators, Denis Chevallier and Yann-Phillippe Tastevin, explained in their introduction to the catalogue, the exhibition «draws on in situ observations [...] focuses on gestures, traces flows, and reveals infrastructure» (Chevallier and Tastevin, 2017, p.18). The assembled group of researchers had also come to a consensus about the tone they intended to avoid: «no aesthetics, no folklore, no militancy, no beating the drum for the circular economy nor a show that was too depressing» (*ibid.*, p.19).

In other words, the exhibition consciously combined an inquisitive and dispassionate approach to tackling a matter of everyday, yet often neglected concern. Alongside the usual information panels, maps and graphs, photographs and videos, an intriguing range of objects was on display: from the technological, such as a sorting machine that demonstrated how household waste gets separated; to the more typically ethnographic, such as «tanakés» (kitchen utensils, toys and musical instruments made out of used tins and cans) and a lavishly decorated motorized tricycle used to collect garbage in Cairo; from the mundane, for instance a selection of plastic bags dating back to the 1960s, individually framed in transparent boxes as if they were works of art; to the more eminently political, as in case of a wall festooned with waste campaign T-shirts and related activist paraphernalia. Perhaps not surprisingly (given the global media's attention over the last decade), there was also a section dedicated to the recent waste crises of Campania, which consisted of looped video and photographic installations housed inside a mock pile of 'eco-bales' – the infamous black-

plastic bundles of trash that have been stacked up in their millions on land around the city of Naples.



The eco-bale exhibition space at Mucem. Photograph by author, June 2017.

«Vie d'ordures» captured both the increasing interest in waste on the part of social scientists and the multifarious aspects that fall under its rubric. Today the ways in which different kinds of waste (municipal, industrial, hazardous, electronic, etc.) are generated, circulated, concealed, transformed, valued and re-consumed constitute an established field of inquiry. Scholars associated with the emergent interdisciplinary field of «waste» or «discard studies», as it has come to be known in Anglophone contexts, have moved beyond longstanding anthropological concerns about culturally determined distinctions (à la Mary Douglas) to engage with the «productive afterlife of waste» (Reno, 2015, p. 558). Waste is studied both as a topic in itself and as a lens through which to examine broader processes under neoliberal capitalism, be these emergent forms of «green governmentality» or alternative modes of organizing social life. At a generic level, social theorists such as the late Zygmunt Bauman and Ulrich Beck have adopted waste as a meta-concept to make sense of the dilemmas of late modernity, while at a more specific level, struggles against incinerators and landfills, especially in the United States, have made a fundamental contribution to debates about environmental justice.

Ethnography appears well equipped to address the situated complexity of waste and thus enhance our understanding of the interplay between the meanings, processes and power relations that underpin its place in contemporary societies. If the governmental goal – at least in the immediate term – is to place waste out of sight and out of mind, then ethnographic practice, through its capacity to *excavate* what is invariably overlooked and hidden and to *extract* significance in the apparently inconsequential, is also able to *retrieve* waste's «workings and flows» (Reno, 2015, p. 561). Pushing this analogy to its logical conclusion, the modus operandi of the ethnographer can be said to resemble that of the informal garbage collector or landfill scavenger insofar as each seeks to build an intimate rapport with phenomena in order to effectively sift out appropriate material, be this for knowledge production or economic sustenance.

At the same time, however, «Vie d'ordures» hinted at the potential blind spots and limitations of an «ethnographic-focused» perspective on waste. This was especially evident in the section on the municipal and toxic waste crises in Campania. The striking images of garbage-strewn landscapes and protesting locals accompanied by captions denouncing «the Neapolitan mafia's stranglehold on waste» worked to corroborate rather than challenge the dominant global imaginary of a region under siege. Despite acknowledging that Naples, like Marseille and Casablanca, had long been stereotyped as «a dirty city» (*une ville sale*), the exhibition succumbed to the explanatory cliché whereby organized crime provides a *passé-partout* for the city's perplexing predicaments. For the many local observers who have patiently scrutinized the complicated evolution of the trash crises, such a diagnosis is more than misleading: it is simply not true. While the Camorra was certainly quick to take advantage of the debacle, the root causes were to be found more banally in the unworkable management vision born out of corporate negligence and administrative connivance; questions that were entirely omitted from the exhibition. Instead, Naples and its hyperbolic mounds of waste, although located only a few hundred kilometres down the coast from Marseille, find themselves decontextualized and, for all the attention to popular revolt, ultimately depoliticized.

The pressing question at this point is how might one forestall such an analytical *faux pas*? Was the temptation of spectacle so great as to lead the curators astray or does the mafia-waste fix reflect a more general underlying imbalance between the ethnographic gaze and contextual accuracy? By accuracy I do not mean just paying heed to the various systemic and historical forces at play, but also to the discursive frames that shape prevailing understandings and misconceptions of phenomena and events – which in the case of the Naples garbage crisis reverberated at the planetary level (Dines, 2016). If there is a caveat here for an ethnography of waste, then it is the need to be

wary of unwittingly endorsing the cultural preconceptions and ecological platitudes that not only lurk behind uncritical eulogies of, say, zero waste, but are also embedded in the ways in which the relationships between waste and certain localities get read and compared across time and space. Otherwise, the chances of embracing and comprehending the unforeseen situations and empirical conundrums that always emerge during ethnographic encounter will be seriously reduced.

The five articles in this special issue have developed out of a two-session panel on «Ethnographies of Waste Politics» organized at the Sixth *Etnografia e Ricerca Qualitativa* Conference in Bergamo in June 2016. The rationale for the panel stemmed from my pre-existing interest in the Naples trash crisis and, in line with the discussion above, from a wish to explore and reflect upon the sorts of empirical and theoretical insights that ethnography can offer for a deeper social and political understanding of waste. The articles all combine a specific set of methods and research questions in order to address different aspects of waste in five different national contexts across the Global North.

Drawing on two decades of fieldwork experience, Isabella Clough Marinaro analyses Roma traders of scrap metal and second-hand goods in Rome, Italy and their strategies to eke out a living and to secure personal autonomy and dignity. She considers how, in the face of increasing informality and illegality and by inverting public discourses about their polluting bodies and activities, the Roma present themselves as facilitators of environmental sustainability in a city in the grip of an unresolved waste crisis. At the same time, however, the active participation of the traders in urban life is counterbalanced by the macro-politics of waste management that is slow to change and continues to insist on hiding both waste and Roma from view

Karma Eddison Cogan explores the tensions ingrained in people's experiences of the «creative renewal» of materials otherwise destined for waste disposal that are acquired during the annual council-sponsored Garage Sale Trail in Sydney, Australia. The author builds on her observations during successive editions of the event and interviews conducted with a diverse range of participants to illustrate how affective encounters, such as empathy and shame, orient people towards certain objects and not to others. In doing so, she calls for greater attention to the «sticky attachments to things» in order to better understand how people, places, and objects are implicated in the variable geometry of waste.

Raysa Martinez Kruger reflects on the issue of environmental justice in relation to a waste incineration facility located in a low-income and ethnically diverse neighbourhood in Newark, New Jersey vis-à-vis the history of the State's intervention in waste management. Combining an analysis of public documents since the late nineteenth century and focus groups with residents of demographically distinct and differently affected neighbourhoods, the author charts the accumulation of «garbage governmentalities» over time – specifically anti-nuisance, sanitation and environmental protection measures – and illustrates how these have become embedded in different situated responses, irrespective of whether some people emphasize the deleterious effects of dumping in their local area while others proclaim their practices of «good environmental citizenship».

Drawing on ethnographic research in an e-waste management and recovery company in the United Kingdom, Alison Stowell and Martin Brigham explore the «polyphonic» relationship between e-waste and the assemblage of value as they follow the trajectory of discarded mobile telephones. The authors show, from both an organizational and employee perspective, how the company operates across different value systems (economic, ecological, pedagogical and political) in order to secure and routinize the mining of e-waste against the backdrop of shifting markets and legislation. In doing so, the authors point to the shifting links between production, consumption, disposal and extractive practices that call into question conventional bromides about the incontrovertible merits of a circular economy.

Finally Patrik Zapata and María José Zapata Campos discuss the production of a «waste gaze» during educational tours of waste management facilities in Sweden. Through their participation in school visits to different infrastructures as well as interviews with tour guides, the authors meticulously describe the dramaturgical dimensions – the front and back stage regions – of the waste tours and reveal the different narrative repertoires and identities that guides adopt to either subvert or reaffirm official discourses about «landfilling less» and «wasting less», and which sometimes leads them to propose a «consuming less» argument that contradicts the very purpose of a facility. As a result, they argue, the «waste gaze» has the potential power to transform the mundane matter of waste into an incentive for political action.

Together the articles highlight the depth and breadth of research themes in the burgeoning field of waste studies and how these interconnect with debates about value, justice, informality and sustainability. While situated in concrete settings, the contributions are all attentive to the flows and

spatial and temporal scales that fundamentally shape waste processes, and they bring broad concerns of social theory into conversation with the recent sophisticated reflections on the subject matter. Through a commitment to sustained analysis and fine-grained detail, the authors ultimately grapple with the simultaneously mercurial and fixed nature of waste and describe how human-object relations are constituted through and within different subjective positions and structural frameworks. In sum, it is this rigorous, probing but levelheaded approach that renders ethnography an important tool for making sense of the ever-increasing presence of waste and its offshoots in everyday life.

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