

Rubbish as informants: a cultural contribution to Polish 'garbeology'

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This article is not intended to multiply the complaints of ecologists, though it certainly confirms—with the help of arguments taken from Polish realities—that consumption and garbage production comprise an urgent problem. Rather, this article is a preliminary trial project, inspired by United States 'garbeology', marking out a fairly new research field both for social anthropologists as well as for other researchers exploring the culture of contemporary cities. The new aspect is not the notion of the outcast itself, since the idea of vestiges and of various wastes as cultural material has been introduced and universalised very efficiently by post-modern philosophy. Instead, the innovative assumption is the movement of turning to the hard facts, namely to the material traces of human everyday activity: we should opt out of conceptualising garbage as metaphor, as thinking or as artistic figures, in order to go down to the refuse skip. Garbage can be used as informants too. The author tried this out during his 'fieldwork' in Warsaw at Christmas time.

Introduction: the territory of waste

At the turn of the twenty-first century, landfill sites and scrap yards have turned out to be increasingly popular territory in the humanities. At least three important ways are being trailed across this area. Postmodernism marks out the first one. Zygmunt Bauman (2004), Jonathan Culler (1988), and young Polish art critics fascinated by 'cultural recycling' (for example, Brzozowska 2004, Przerwa-Zydorowicz 2004), follow the hunches of Jean Baudrillard (1996). Every more or less avant-garde artist and creator stocks up on needed materials in second-hand shops. The postulate for 'recycled art', using ready-made aesthetics or odds-and-ends design, harmonises perfectly with the message of up-to-date postmodern writing. When reality has fallen apart and become dispersed, leftovers, so to say, survive as the sole substance of actuality. From now on waste appears in all possible cultural games.

Second, ecologists have concerned themselves with our 'wasted lives' (Bauman 2004). Those who are more reserved strive only for clean local ecosystems, while those who are more radical sound the alarm by warning that consumption and garbage production comprise a truly urgent problem. The dilemma melds with the issues of globalisation and ideology. Mariola Chrubasik works as an ecologist in Silesia, a mining region of Poland. She has estimated that by the end of 1998, about two billion tonnes of garbage had been accumulated in Poland (Chrubasik 2000). If we tried to hold two billion tonnes of garbage in special landfill sites, we would have to find approximately 20,000 hectares of free space to develop (*ibid*). But much worse is the fact that in Poland communal services embrace barely 55% of the population—by comparison, in Western Europe municipal services attend to 90% of all citizens (data

from the Polish Central Statistical Office, cited in the monthly Polish ecological periodical *Aura* 1998). This means that waste that does not decompose naturally will either remain on the 'savage fields' near residential quarters, or will pass around in alternative circulation routes. Waste stops being an industrial resource, and instead turns into a cultural resource.

Thirdly, the sense of playing a 'game with vestiges' (Baudrillard 1996) carries with it the sense of compulsion; it is a game that stigmatises and that signs negatively. Garbage and rejected objects become inseparable attributes of demoted, degenerated people: the homeless pauper, the station *clochard*, the skip scavenger. They come to constitute the 'littering' of public space or an index of glaring wastefulness, ubiquitous disorder and aesthetic chaos. These are popular criteria for dividing the world into two distinct garbage civilisations. The sight of a down-and-out, pulling his or her pushchair full of rubbish down a street in the capital of Poland, confuses social activists and publicists. In many of the reports that Polish weeklies (such as *Polityka*, or Wprost) used to publish frequently, one could read that such disorder caused irreverence towards the city, and disrespect for order and waste removal. It seemed to express all too well the mental image that people held, though they did not want to, of 'Eastern people'. The excluded people themselves, on the other hand, found this mental image to be 'exterior' to their own poor condition; nobody's wise words would set them in a new context where they would not feel the need for glass, recycling paper and pressed drink cans.

A few cultural notes on garbage

Let me now delve more deeply into the third path, and look more closely at a cultural approach. This rests on three premises. Firstly, material remains are still things, though they start to take on the meanings of being unnecessary and unwanted. The essence of an object is still determined by a need; I share Toporov's (2003) opinion that people are interested in things for the sake of their appropriation and for the end that a given thing has been designed for. Therefore, waste, which has no special goal and does not answer to any needs, stops attracting people's attention.

Secondly, the fact that several things become unwanted, does not change a certain fundamental regularity: rubbish or litter, in an ontological and epistemological sense, comes into existence solely in the light of its previous state, i.e. everything that precedes its existence as rubbish; the things do not lose memory of their original purposes. The existence of garbage carried in itself the history of its use, from the time when these same things served as essential vehicles for satisfying important human desires. Scraps from the kitchen table, crumpled paper boxes or rusty bathtubs point back to the cause of their being, manifesting a principle of metonymy, or semantic substitution. In other words, they point anthropologists in a certain direction: a direction that can help to concretise people's activities and disclose human choices.

Thirdly, if we treat skips as equal places of tradition, then diverse daily habits are revealed near the bins at Warsaw yard. Nowadays the majority of home objects stand in a state of incessant flow and entire sets of objects pass through; they seem governed by irrevocable rules of crumbling away, falling apart, or being 'instant'. A modern furniture suite from IKEA, for instance, will not stand the test of time like the old day's crafted objects, hand-made and solid, would.

Garbeology

A sociologist makes use of polls and statistical inquiry, while an anthropologist holes up in the field. But a researcher like me, who avoids overrating any empirical data or methods and who considers himself neither a strict anthropologist nor a sociologist, though he accepts a general 'anthropological' point of view (which in Polish kulturoznawca, a counterpart to nomenclature is called Kulturwissenschafter), could perhaps call rubbish and rummaging in the bins his own research procedure. But no—even such a weird mode of cataloguing human behaviours was tried relatively long ago. The branch in question is garbeology. Garbeology was established by William Rathje, an archaeologist and anthropologist from the University in Tucson. Rathje has spent most of his professional life in near contact with waste, since he has been working as the leader of the programme 'Garbage' (Rathje and Murphy 2001). Briefly put, the content of this ingenious project is an extremely systematic research study of garbage produced by a number of households in the United States. 'Garbeologists' examine regularities in the nature of waste and compare these results with the outcomes of more traditional qualitative and quantitative sociological research.

Thanks to garbeology's reliability it was discovered that United States citizens could be eating about 40% more meat than assumed by public opinion. After Rathje had sorted tonnes of waste, he succeeded in formulating and empirically proving the universal rule of throwing rubbish out: the more social habits change, the fewer things people get rid of. It should be admitted here that Rathje has worked his way up for over 30 years and his particular research won widespread recognition among authorities in the United States. 'Garbage' takes advantage of subsidies assigned by United States authorities, reputable foundations and great corporations. A full list of Rathje associates can be found in his book *Rubbish; The Archeology of Garbage*, (the crucial book on this subject), and numbers almost 600 names; the main part includes names of students of anthropology and archaeology.

My own garbeological observations in a Warsaw neighbourhood

As far as I am concerned as a researcher, I did not count on similar financial resources in Poland. In my situation, I decided to follow my modest course and try some 'garbeological' observations according to my own mode, without a student team but with a handy bamboo stick. I did it right here in my own neighbourhood—I live in the heart of Warsaw, and on 26th December 2004 I started researching for the first time. I judged Christmas to be the most suitable moment. According to the idea fostered by cultural anthropology, I have assumed that religious holidays create a time of revival that involves the simultaneous restoration of household furnishings and accessories, growth in home electronics, buying necessities—and so on. This is an image of Christmas as a time of abundance, giving prominence to home affluence. Indeed, during Christmas Eve and on the next day I watched the wind toss into the air various material traces of things from the holiday table in my local rubbish yard.

First, some contextual notes. There is no question that waste authenticates people's type of wealth. Not by chance, in Poland where the industrial and mental 'timber era' has lasted a very long time, waste on a symbolic level carries the meaning of 'affluence'. We even have a saying that expresses the Polish version of 'staying in the hood'—in word-for-word translation, it says: 'We feel best among our old private

garbage' (*Nie ma jak na swoich starych smieciach*). Even in old Polish proverbs, waste and rubbish do not pass as something dispensable or dirty, something in a crumbled or broken condition; on the contrary, debris and trash serve as substitute words for ownership, domestication, an efficient household, and richness. The phrase 'old private garbage' has meant being 'from right here' for a very long time.

Moreover, Poles handle garbage in an exceptional way during Christmas. The holiday belief interdicts family members from removing garbage and useless things while celebrating Christmas Eve. Anyone who behaved differently during this treshold time would run the risk of bad luck, trouble and poverty. From quite another point of view, the 26th December is the last moment before the rubbish van's arrival. Indeed, on the said day I noticed that in Warsaw centre waste began to tower inside and all around the small brick shelters in which bins are kept, while skips were placed in yards. And oddly enough on the route of my garbeological reconnaissance I discerned men with plastic buckets instead of stuffed foil sacks.

Here is the short analysis of the notes in my garbeological diary. The waste that I encountered most often, I divided into three groups. The first group included things which change into garbage very quickly, which is why they are literally thrown out. I had to dig them out with my bamboo stick in the skips. Above all I mean things that should be taken away swiftly from the Christmas table due to practical demands, though the Christmas table remains set long enough. I was not surprised at all that empty Coke bottles with a characteristic dwarf-like Santa Clause on the label, crisps packets of popular sorts and cigarette packets of average kinds took the lead in the first group. These waste objects are traces of consumption but unique in their ordinariness. In addition, I have to single out stinking garbage, constituted by scraps of typical Polish Christmas ingredients: packages of cheese, margarine, baking butter and so on. In December 2004 it was not cold in Warsaw in relation to the norm (it was above 10 degrees centigrade), yet no fish odour reached my nose, even though Poles usually eat carp around this time. Smells round the bins seemed to be sufficiently neutral if not completely imperceptible. At the same time I found neither any fishbones nor trunks, only some rests of purchased ready fish preserves.

While fermenting and stinking things are thrown out at once, things being touched by the processes of requisite modernisation and equipment exchange are moved out of the home to city yards. These compose the second analytic group. Owners prop such used things against the brick walls of the bin shelters. This city custom provides evidence for the development in contemporary Poland of 'plastic civilisation' (Chrubasik 2004). Before Christmas in 2004, city inhabitants parted with old flat doors, devoid of internal glass panels, wooden window sills (most probably replaced with plastic ones), torn sofas, worn blankets, kitchen counters, basins and bathtubs. Cracked basins do not immediately go to the skip, for they are still needed in the form of being something that we in Poland more caressingly call *rupiecie* (lumber, piece of junk). The indispensableness of junk of various kinds decreases very slowly; in order to be thrown out these items must be declining in the public eye, and they are controlled by neighbours and accidental passers-by, so that they can learn about what others can scrap without ceremony.

The rubbish that I included in the third group resulted from the practice of endowing everyone in the family with presents. Among material testimonies of this habit I registered small amounts of the usual Christmas wrapping paper, and a few elegant stiff gift bags, nicely patterned. However, plastic bags from supermarkets

predominated, in addition to unfolded or pressed large cardboard boxes and little pieces of bubble wrap. They performed a supplementary function, like the sacks for home waste.

I also took an interest in leftover boxes for small computer equipment, material traces of components needed for disk extension and increasing computer functionality (games, graphic cards, and speakers, though not many expensive flat monitors), and then, successively, in traces of cheap toys made in China (dolls, guns, imitation mobile phones), elongated CD and cassette players, and packs for pre-paid mobile phones.

Conclusion

At long last there arises the question: what are we in fact able to read out of Christmas rubbish research in Warsaw? Let me first take note of the first universal rule of throwing out rubbish, borrowed from Rathje—namely that the more social habits change, the fewer things people get rid of. Polish political transformation, which on a cultural level has primarily meant an introduction to consumerism, is now in the process of giving in to standarization and carries on in a slower motion. On 26th December 2004 I did not trip up over Warsaw plasma TV-set cases. Polish Christmas, the holiday which I have presented here through the medium of things and rubbish celebration, is not spectacular in respect of its material content; Coca-Cola has rapidly been assimilated on to the Christmas table, in similar manner to the 'capitalistic' citrus fruits that were rationed during communism.

This is not a cultural game we could freely relate to the notion of 'recycling culture' presented by Zygmunt Bauman (2004), in spite of the fact that some contemporary intellectual trends encourage us to use such an approach. In Bauman's opinion, the act of throwing things out without any ceremony emerges from the general desire of the post-modern person, from the consumer pleasure principle that has detached lust from the ordinary possessive instinct. The ideal consumer that every store manager wishes for, behaves in conformity with the rule: I get rid of many things because I want to manifest that I do not become attached to several things I could afford before. But the trouble of removing these material traces, the trouble of physically eliminating unnecessary things, does not exist in the consumer's life. The rubbish exhibition at the door or by the wall of the house is efficiently disassembled by the communal services in Western Europe. If waste management in post-modern cities had been partially lacking or even a little unreliable, many ideal consumers would not have grown up at all.

In vivid comparison to, for example, Bavaria in southern Germany, communal garbage disposal in Warsaw does not increase the human desire for exchanging and substituting things; it does not hasten the cycle of replacing and moving objects. In the Polish capital, the status of rubbish is assigned through another form of conceptualising subsistence within the culture; to say nothing of easily decomposing food scraps, the border between 'rubbish' (waste, garbage) and 'junk' (which is indispensable) starts with its liquidness. Polish recycling becomes in a particular sense 'put off'. Instead of an instant and absolute 'utilising' of objects, the peculiar 'ragmen economy' pervades here in Warsaw. Before the Second World War, even rich Warsaw quarters were often visited by itinerant backyard vendors, 'ragmen'. They used to pay loose change for rags and various *rupiecie*, which they then sold on to

poorer people or delivered to manufactures. Nowadays, it is the bin 'rummagers' who act as these former 'ragmen', the rummagers cash in 'waif' things found in backyards. As Susan Strasser (1999) unequivocally shows, the former 'ragmen economy' connected the city in its not-too-distant past with nature's own cycles, as observed on the city outskirts and in the countryside. It is a great opportunity for lazy caretakers to remain just that; the initiative is left up to bin scavengers as they file rubbish most meticulously and make sure that recyclable materials do not go anywhere, as the city administration takes waste away on a semitrailer to be dumped.

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