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Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Patrick O'Hare. *Rubbish Belongs to the Poor. Hygienic Enclosure and the Waste Commons*. London: Pluto Press. 2022. 218 pages.

This lucid and engaging, at times amusing, ethnography of waste-pickers in Montevideo, Uruguay, challenges readers to think critically about the role of waste in contemporary society, the nature of informality within the local and global economies of advanced capitalism, and perhaps most poignantly, whether people should have a “right” to urban waste as a resource and as a commons. *Rubbish belongs to the poor* thus serves as a summative title for this study, as an analytical point of departure, and as a normative affirmation for author Patrick O'Hare. The ethnographic world depicted in the book is as the waste-pickers see and value it, and as the anthropologist validates through a “defen[s]e of waste as a category” (180), a counter-invective against hegemonic and even progressive visions of waste elimination, hygienic cities, and circular economies.

Drawing from critical social theory and anarchist political leanings, this ethnographic study follows a long line of theorizing of, and fascination with, the urban poor, shantytown dwellers, the informal economy, and people living with and around garbage or waste. There is a particularly strong current of scholarship on these themes in Latin America, much of it cited by the author, but it is also more broadly reflected in the classic anthropological formulations of the “culture of poverty” (Oscar Lewis) or “matter out of place” (Mary Douglas), which have been used, and at times misappropriated, to interrogate both the internal sociocultural dynamics of so-called “marginalized” communities, as well as their role and place within the broader social order. The primary strength of *Rubbish Belongs to the Poor*, accompanying the work of others in the growing interdisciplinary field of “discard studies,” is in foregrounding the lived worlds and perspectives of these so-called marginalized people, and of centering and privileging the apparent marginalized spaces of urban informality as a taking off point, a staging ground from which to critically view and analyze society writ large.

The dominant, modern social order, what O'Hare refers to as "bourgeois infrastructural modernity," posits informality as a pre-modern economic anomaly. According to this logic, trash is in need of scientific management, concealment, or ultimately elimination. The informal waste-pickers who cohabitate with trash, consequently, are primary agents of urban disorder and even criminality. Waste, according to this dominant view, is inherently dirty, useless, and dangerous if left exposed. Waste-pickers, who sift through bins and dumps, often transporting their goods by horse and cart, embody vestiges of tradition and backwardness hindering the forward march of modernity. For a middle-income country like Uruguay nestled in the global South, these assumptions and understandings often take on politicized dimensions with almost existential undercurrents. Waste-pickers become positioned as both an uncomfortable mirror reflected internally, and an embarrassing postcard to the outside world. For instance, the proliferation of street waste-pickers, disparagingly referred to as *hurgadores*, or rummagers, during the years of profound economic crisis at the turn of the millennium, became symbols and metonyms of national crisis. At stake then are not just questions related to the political economy of disposal and recycling, but also the "moral economy" that judges the human character of pickers as individuals and as a social category (22).

In *Rubbish Belongs to the Poor*, the protagonists- Montevideo's *clasificadores*, or classifiers- come alive as fully fleshed subjects. Rather than matter out of place living in urban cultural enclaves of poverty, O'Hare demonstrates why and how exactly their lives matter, whether as crucial cogs in the local and global waste economy, as protagonists in the national labor movement, or as complex human characters with relatable needs and desires. His account thus avoids the stigmatizing narratives of the suffering subject that predominate in media and some scholarly accounts of the urban poor and the waste economy. After detailing an interlocutor's memories of the dump as a place of children's play, swimming, picking flowers, and other bucolic summer days, for instance, O'Hare concludes: "These images contrast sharply with the dystopian malaise of foul smells and creatures found in risk-based municipal and journalistic descriptions of dump sites" (64).

The author also depicts the intricate ways the lives of clasificadores are connected to local and global circuits of economic, political and symbolic capital. The book flips around the “waste-poor nexus” by highlighting a social world, “where rubbish is coveted rather than rejected, and where life is threatened by waste’s absence rather as opposed to its presence” (27). Urban waste, the symbolically stigmatized material substance which normative assumptions suggest no one wants, is instead subject to at times intensely disputed political claims between the urban clasificadores, the state, and private corporations. One of O’Hare’s central arguments is that the state attempts, often through public-private partnerships, to “enclose,” control and monopolize the urban disposal economy. Rather than accomplishing a hygienic modernity, he argues, the result is more often new forms of dispossession and capital accumulation that do little to ameliorate entrenched forms of social inequality. “Rubbish belongs to the poor” then is a rallying cry for the rights of the poor and the working class to the waste commons and through this to a means of livelihood, however complex and at times contradictory, that offers one of the few remaining avenues to evade the wage labor relationship and to “live freely” in a modern bureaucratic and stratified class society.

A second, unique contribution of this book is O’Hare’s comparative approach between experiences in Uruguay and the UK. O’Hare draws from the perspective not only of formal economics or (post)colonial politics, but of the commoners and marginalized. Some of these comparisons, in a fascinating angle, are drawn from his personal experiences of “dumpster diving” as part of an activist community during his undergraduate studies at the University of St. Andrews. While recognizing the significant qualitative differences in relative deprivation and motivation for waste scavenging in Uruguay versus Scotland, O’Hare nevertheless makes a compelling argument for comparison. As he states, the comparative approach recognizes a “common processes of enclosure in the global North and South that seek to restrain our access, and particularly that of vulnerable groups, to the excesses of production” (O’Hare 2022, 4).

The book flows well and its chapters are logically structured around various “sites” of the waste economy. Chapter 1 provides a detailed history of Montevideo’s “wastescape,” including the centrality of the municipal government in turning private discard into public waste and thus enacting its earliest forms of political sovereignty, as well as changing strategies over time in the

development of legal and material infrastructures to classify, contain, or eliminate waste. This chapter introduces the concept of clasificadores as constituting a “shadow infrastructure,” central to the waste economy yet discursively and politically marginalized from it. The historical angle offers fascinating insight into the ways the volume and character of Montevideo’s waste and its various “technologies of enclosure” (51) change according to different political economic models, social democratic governments or military regimes, and evolving ideologies of public health and hygiene. While O’Hare observes that Uruguay’s long history of theorizing its modernity is usually not connected to waste, he nevertheless misses an opportunity here to engage more deeply with the vast Uruguayan historical literature on early twentieth century foundational myths of Uruguayan modernity and exceptionalism, and the growth of the hygienist public health movement in particular.

Chapter 2 focuses on Felipe Cardoso, Montevideo’s largest landfill, referred to by clasificadores as the “Mother Dump.” Felipe Cardoso represents the ultimate hygienic enclosure where access to the waste is policed and restricted by authorities and local managers. O’Hare also shows how the landfill, or *cantera*, has parallels to the English commons and serves as a safety net for the jobless, the politically persecuted, or the addicted. It is also a refuge from low-paid wage labor and menial service sector jobs. He introduces in more detail the economies of survival and care embodied by *requeche*, the found items valued and used domestically (e.g. food, clothes, building materials) or those that become “recommodified” goods sold in informal urban markets. Chapter 3 focuses on the human relations of the waste commons, including practices of care and kinship. The sites focused on in this chapter include the municipal and NGO-run recycling cooperative, the family yard as a space of care, and the kin networks of what O’Hare refers to as the space of the “landfill brothers.” Here the author argues that access to waste is often based on pre-existing kinship bonds and is fused with acts of caregiving.

I found Chapter 4 to be the most interesting and compelling, with rich ethnographic insight crystalizing several of the central analytical themes of the book. Here the focus is the Aries recycling plant, where clasificadores’ “value recovery practices ran parallel and in opposition to municipal risk-based approaches to waste” (119). The public-private partnership of the recycling

plant was welcomed by some clasificadores, particularly some of the women, but in practice the number of workers incorporated into uniformed, formal employment was relatively minimal. There were tensions from the beginning between plant managers and the unruly, hyper-masculine ethos of some of the workers. Another mismatch was over the ways managers tried to discipline clasificador labor into a Taylorian system, and in the prohibition of use of the horse-cart and the collection of requeche. O'Hare forcefully argues that authorities "misclassified" and infantilized workers by anticipating they would be happy with minimum wage formal work, not realizing what the workers were in fact sacrificing in terms of freedom, autonomy, and profits. The new forms of enclosure restricting requeche also violated longstanding practices and privileges associated with the waste commons.

In Chapter 5, O'Hare turns attention to the labor practices and organizing of the waste-pickers trade union UCRUS. This trade union is unique in the world in that it is the only one to be affiliated with a national labor federation. UCRUS members struggled, however, to match their "mobile unionism" with the dominant "sedentary unionism" of the trade federation, as well as facing challenges in organizing among such a mobile and diverse urban population. The major struggles the trade union took on included efforts to resist or overturn prohibitions on circulation of horse-and-cart classifiers in certain urban areas, laws prohibiting some businesses from supplying clasificadores directly, and multiple issues associated with the recycling plants. UCRUS unionists engaged in various forms of protest and a tactical repertoire of roadblocks, marches, and most interestingly, urban circulation itself as an affirmation of belonging. The latter reminded me of the much discussed and controversial moment during the leftist coalition Frente Amplio's first ascension to power in 2005. Leading the procession were a handful of horse-and-cart clasificadores, who for the first time in history were afforded an officially sanctioned, public opportunity to enact their presence in urban space.

Rubbish Belongs to the Poor is a fascinating and provocative ethnography. It will be of direct interest to scholars and students of discard studies, but also broadly of Latin American, urban, and environmental studies. The book is both theoretically sophisticated and highly readable, making it

suitable for both undergraduate and graduate courses, and its reflexivity and immersive ethnography could be of interest in ethnographic methods courses.

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