

Man the Oblivious Waste Creator

by Sylvie Lupton

Modern man produces increasing quantities of waste. But his relationship with refuse has changed. What does this waste—that we attempt to conceal or distance from our societies—reveal? Do we control the waste we seek to manage or does it elude us?

About: Baptiste Monsaingeon, *Homo Detritus. Critique de la société du déchet*, Collection Anthropocène, Seuil, 279 p.

Baptiste Monsaingeon invites us on a strange journey, amidst the waste produced by our contemporary societies. This book that tries 'to listen to what is left' is the result of a study that began with a sociology thesis. It opens with a brief historical overview that traces the relationship man has with waste—mainly household waste—and focuses on the current challenges related to the use and reappropriation of garbage. In this work, he formulates a critique of our waste producing society that proclaims its mastery over garbage through an ideal and politically glorified means of waste management based on recycling. Now, this method seeks to obscure the disturbing items that reveal a society of overconsumption, responsible for the destruction of non-renewable natural resources.

The history of waste

The first half of the essay traces the history of household waste management. The author establishes an exhaustive literary review, from the medieval period onwards, quoting the works of Sabine Barles, Catherine de Silguy, Jean-Pierre Leguay, Thomas Leroux, Delphine Corteel and Stéphane Le Lay, as well as Rathje and Murphy's research. Justifiably, the author defends the idea that waste does not exist in the medieval period, due to the absence of a 'social construction' of waste management. Although certain kings did want to legislate on refuse. The street is the recipient of all the scrap thrown away by the inhabitants, and, from the 3rd century AD onwards, the city functions amidst the chaos of its waste.

We could define this chaos as a 'Hobbesian state of nature'¹ in the absence of institutions to manage refuse. The author looks at the activity of rag pickers, the waste collectors whose numbers increased after the preindustrial period. Between the hygienist trend that sought to clean up cities, and State efforts to regulate their activity, this rebellious profession that lived mainly on the fringes of society, saw its numbers shrink to a mere handful. Following an order issued by the Commissioner of Police dated 30 November 1946 the profession disappeared completely.

While the two World Wars encouraged recuperation and reuse, Baptiste Monsaingeon emphasises the low efficiency of collection during wartime. The immediate post-war period was marked by the development of disposable products, the pillars of a society of programmed obsolescence. By now, waste has been relegated further and further into the distance and is treated far from the eyes of the inhabitants; it is either dumped in landfills or incinerated. The author calls this period 'the apprenticeship of oblivion. While the 1970s are classically described as an environmentalist turning point, when frantic growth and wastefulness meet their first overt adversaries, the consumption society is not really questioned. Waste is 'environmentalised' thanks to a political defence of the benefits of recycling, a virtuous circle that ensures that the established social order is in no way disrupted.

The author has no hesitation denouncing the greenwashing that benefits certain economic actors involved in waste. It is clear that the large waste management groups

¹ Vahabi M., 'Economics of Destructive Power', in Braddon D. and Hartley K. (Eds), *Handbook on the Economics of Conflict*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, chapter 5, 2010a, pp. 79-104.

like Suez and Veolia experienced spectacular economic growth that coincided with the change in the approach to waste. With the regulatory management of waste from 1975 onwards, municipalities were given strict waste management guidelines. This marked the golden age of delegated management of refuse, entrusted to private actors.² With recycling and its consecration *Homo detritus* pays for a clear conscience: the correct disposal of refuse becomes a skill allowing society to rely on the illusion of ecologically managed waste. In reality, over the last century and a half, we have produced a certain amount of highly toxic waste (containing heavy metals, radioactive materials, and synthetic polymers) that cannot be integrated into any kind of redeeming natural cycle. The author's thesis is particularly welcome today, a time when circular economy has become so popular that it is rarely subjected to any kind of critical analysis.³

Here, the author looks in greater detail at a specific element, and this was the subject of his fieldwork: *The Great Pacific Garbage Patch*. The term designates the vast floating accumulation of plastic drifting around in the heart of the Pacific Ocean, a resounding example of the colonisation of the biosphere by plastic waste. While it took nearly a century for plastic waste to occupy public space, the recycling of these objects (PET bottles, for example) remains an unresolved problem, and we now see initiatives to reduce consumption levels upstream. The energy transition law of 1 July 2016, banning the free distribution of plastic bags, is an illustration of this although the cost of plastic bags is now borne by the consumer instead of supermarkets, which represents major savings for the latter.⁴

A society more conscious of the waste it generates?

Given the huge increase in the quantity of waste generated, Baptiste Monsaingeon provides a detailed review of the struggle against garbage from several perspectives, starting with the management and prevention of organic waste. The fight

² Defeuilley C., 'La dynamique industrielle des firmes de services urbains', *Entreprises et Histoire*, vol. 1, n° 38, 2005, pp. 96-107; Lupton S., *L'économie des déchets. Une approche institutionnelle*, Collection 'Ouvertures Economiques', Bruxelles, De Boeck, 2011.

³ Lupton S., 'Jusqu'ou doit-on promouvoir l'économie circulaire?', *Revue POUR*, special issue on the circular economy, 2019, *forthcoming*.

⁴ According to an article published by *Capital*, the cost of plastic carrier bags represents over 10 000 euros a year for a major urban supermarket. *Capital* (2017), 'Sacs de supermarché: ils ne méritent pas toujours leur prix !' 25 February, <https://www.capital.fr/lifestyle/sacs-de-supermarche-ils-ne-meritent-pas-toujours-leur-prix-1209748>

against food waste was severely criticised in a United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) report in 2011, before it went on to become the object of several programmes in industrialised countries. The Food Waste Challenge in 2013 was one such programme that sought to reduce, collect and recycle food waste. More specific initiatives like vermicomposting (digestion of organic waste by earthworms) that emerged in the 1980s, have also developed. Another example is freeganism, a movement initiated by William Oakes, who supports a minimal consumption ethic and encourages dumpster diving and cooking meals made from recovered food.

The donation economy, based on give-away sites like the Freecycle groups (created in the United States in 2003), also plays a major role. This Internet platform today includes 5000 collaborative exchange groups where web users can give away the objects they no longer want. A number of initiatives of this type have developed in North America, Europe, Argentina, and all over the world. We can regret that the author only refers in passing to the marketing research that emerged as early as the 1970s, on the behaviour of post-consumerists giving away unwanted objects, and on the reasons that motivate them to give things away.⁵

This leads us to question this trend: is the relationship between the givers and the receivers of unwanted objects any different from the ordinary exchange of paid goods? What does the receiver of free goods experience? What characterises this post-consumerist society? The cities involved in the zero waste movement can give us a partial idea of this. The city of Capannori, in Tuscany, is exemplary with a source-sorting rate of almost 100%, leading to a fifty per cent reduction in residual waste in less than 10 years. Other municipalities have followed this example.

Homo detritus or Homo destructor?

This work on *Homo detritus* provides a vulgarisation of knowledge on waste producing societies and their contradictions, underscoring the limits of the circular economy, for which the virtuous circle of recycling is rarely perfect. Nonetheless, certain conceptual comparisons could have been examined in greater depth. The

⁵ Belk, R., "Possessions and the Extended Self", *Advances in Consumer Research*, 15(2), 1975, pp. 139-168; Nicosia F. and Mayer R., "Toward a Sociology of Consumption", *Journal of Consumer Research*, 3, 1976, pp. 65-75; Jacoby J., Berning C. and Dietvorst T., "What About Disposition?", *Journal of Marketing*, 41, 1977, pp. 22-28 ;

author compares *Homo detritus* to *Homo œconomicus*. Indeed, waste reveals the destructive face of our economy. Refuse should be interpreted in the context of a destruction of value.⁶ The existence of waste forces us to redefine economics that studies how rare resources are used (or reused) to satisfy the needs of people living in society (recycling, added agricultural value, reuse...), but also how they are destroyed (landfills, incineration).

Waste, an object to be abandoned, or having lost its value, generates negative externalities.⁷ This is true of the recycling of a material (atmospheric pollution related to the transport of collected glass, paper and cardboard), agricultural recycling (metal and emerging pollutants⁸ present in urban water treatment plant sludge that is spread in fields) or incineration (air pollution). Just when a new recycling ideology seems to hold the promise of our being able to continue our longstanding style of consumption, the difficulties associated with the treatment of our waste remind us of the fundamentally destructive potential of *homo detritus'* methods of consumption and production.

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⁶ Vahabi M., *The Political Economy of Destructive Power*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham, 2004.

⁷ "Negative externalities can be defined as 'the effects provoked by an activity (in this case the management of waste, by means such as recycling, dumping in landfills or incineration), a good or a person that gives rise to a cost borne by others. These negative effects are not compensated or remunerated. They are both involuntary and uncontrollable.'" (Lupton, 2011).

⁸ We can mention, for example, pharmaceutical and personal care products, disinfectants and phthalates.