

MAGAZINE › MARCH 2022 › TIME

Trash Talk

Unpicking the deadlock around urban waste and regeneration

Francisco Calafate-Faria

8th March 2022

Every morning, shopkeepers on a South London high street cut open packaging of various kinds to unbox yam, exotic fruits, herbs, fresh and dry fish, meat, canned food and other myriad products that London's diverse communities circulate and consume. As the day goes by, the traffic and footfall intensify, and people struggle to negotiate narrow pavements crowded with bus stops, vegetable displays, cashpoint queues, waves of commuters, and piles of discards that grow several times throughout the day.

It is as if those rubbish hills are alive, and as they are removed by the multiple local daily waste collections, they still leave the seeds from which to regrow empty cardboard boxes, woodchip pallets, crates of bruised vegetables, takeaway coffee cups, single-use water bottles, fried chicken boxes and small bags of mobile rubbish. The circulating rhythms of people and materials moving through this street includes the rhythm of cleaning and waste collection, which move discards away from this street.

Urban change

This street is where, between 2015 and 2016, my colleague and I conducted research on local conflicts about rubbish. The project, Cleaner town centre, was led by two community organisations and funded by the local council. Throughout our research, we heard certain types of rubbish such as nail clippings, human hair and food waste, being categorised as dirtier than others, and certain ethnic groups as having lower standards of cleanliness. Shopkeepers from different national origins, residents settled from different waves of immigration and gentrification, municipal workers and council officers alternated as subjects and objects of theories about who was to blame for the dirt in the town centre. These theories in turn articulated perceptions of urban change, and who had a stake in the possible future of the place. If the town centre was to be cleaned, who should it be cleaned for?

Temporalities of waste

When examining the mechanics of waste management, the most salient finding was the lack of synchronicity between, on one side, the rhythmic circulation of materials, marked by migration, gentrification, intensive occupation, commuting and displacement, and on the other, the sanitary systems, marked by austerity-led cuts of public services and inefficient regulation of private operators. Temporality is key to unlocking the theoretical and empirical deadlocks around urban waste, highlighting the importance of the temporalities of discarding to understand urban life and change.

Like other urban areas, this town centre is polluted and cleansed in ways that result from power relations and political processes. This relational character of dirt is encapsulated in the aphorism “dirt is matter out of place”. Its uses in social theory and research have generated debates about the symbolic structural or spatial meaning of the word place. What has been missing from these discussions, however, is a more systematic understanding of time and temporality.

A threat to order

The phrase “dirt is matter out of place” was introduced by anthropologist Mary Douglas in her 1966 book *Purity and Danger*, at a time when the old maxim could be seen printed on rubbish bins on UK streets. According to Richard Fardon, the mid-19th-century British prime minister Lord Palmerston used it to claim that urban rubbish could become a valuable resource in rural areas, as fertiliser. Douglas, in turn, argued that bodies, things and substances only become dirt in relation to a system whose order they disrupt or threaten to defile, rather than simply because of their inherent material properties or their location in space. Whenever the category dirt is applied, we can tell there is a system of power that classified it as a threat to its order.

The expression has been adapted creatively by a number of ethnographers, including Beverley Skeggs, R Aldred & K Jungnickel, and M Conolly & J Ennew, and more literally by those interested in waste such as Myra Hird and Joshua Reno. The latter group, discard studies researcher and designer Max Liboiron points out, tend to replace dirt with waste as “matter out of place [<https://discardstudies.com/2019/09/09/waste-is-not-matter-out-of-place/>]”, but Douglas believed waste and rubbish always have a place in the systems that produce and circulate them. “Douglas is not making a geographical or spatial argument”, argues Liboiron; the point is that dirt is a result and a sign of the specific system of power that classifies it.

Place is more than a location

The distinction between waste and dirt doesn't mean that waste is never dirty or polluting. But equally, the understanding of place as a symbolic relationship, more than a location, shouldn't imply that geography is not relevant in the process. The notion of place can and must include the symbolic and the temporal, as critical geographers such as Doreen Massey and Ed Soja have shown. Equally, if places are also confluences of lines traced by people and materials, anthropologist Tim Ingold was astute in his belief that they exist through pulsating circulations as much as through historical change.

They are marked by both cyclical and irreversible time, to use the dual model articulated by sociologist of time Barbara Adam. So, to understand the making and sorting of urban waste, and their relationships to systems of power, it is necessary to understand the temporalities of those systems, applying what the Marxist philosopher and theorist of urban space Henri Lefebvre called *rhythmanalysis*.

Keeping London Clean

In our research in South London, the place of rubbish in relation to the rhythms of littering and cleaning, of conviviality and displacement, and of urban decay and regeneration became visible at different stages.

Halfway through the project, I travelled in the cabin of the local waste collection compactor during a round that included this high street. Contrary to the stereotypes we repeatedly heard, which characterised local shop owners as careless and rarely concerned with hygiene, I saw them engaging actively with the waste collectors on the truck, making strenuous efforts to keep their shops and the area around them clean, even when they did it to dispose of their waste against regulations.

This is a difficult task that demands complex coordination, as many of the shop spaces are divided into multiple businesses, often from different nationalities. To make things more complicated, each individual shop must have a private contract for waste collection. We counted at least 15 different waste operators with different collection days. The shops' spaces weren't fit to store different waste in synchrony with the different rhythms of these collections.

The result was that the waste truck ended up collecting much of this commercial waste, even though it is only meant to collect rubbish from street markets and street litter bins.

The morning round involved two trips to cover both sides of the street, but when we passed a third time on our way to a different area, we could see the piles of waste starting to accumulate again on the other side of the road. Two hours later, the piles of waste were already well developed.

Some smaller piles, mainly composed of small waste bags and rubbish from pedestrians, grew around litter bins. In advance of our arrival, the street sweepers had the job of removing all the bags from the bins. Following the previous years' cuts in public spending, council staff had been dramatically

reduced and fewer employees had to cover a larger area. This meant the rubbish bags were removed from the bins hours before collection. This presents a sign to pedestrians, including the many residents with no space to store their domestic rubbish, that these were appropriate dumping spots.

But instead of fine-tuning the systems of collection so they fit the space-times of waste production, the most popular political response is one that tightens penalties and enforcement, on the assumption that some people don't make enough effort to keep the place clean, and others are naturally prone to polluting it.

Wide of the waste solution mark

At the end of our project, I attended a community event to present our research report. The audience included residents, activists and officials from the local council. When I arrived, a poster on the wall pointed at the entrance. It read: "The great town-centre clean-up – everyone invited."

The title reflects the desire for a cleaner town centre based on the fantasy that dirty materials, bodies and substances will be removed or cleaned once and for all. Yet we had learned exactly the opposite; that the dirt in the town centre is cyclical and results from a system of order that engenders multiple temporalities.

My presentation at the event was well received by some of the council workers, who make routine efforts to bend the system in order to do more with fewer resources. But the highest council official was less convinced. The local authority already had their magic solution ready to be implemented: a new system of time-banded collection for commercial waste, accompanied by stronger enforcement of fines for those without private contracts.

These dynamics created their own cyclical rhythms of friction, political activation and frustration, which our research became part of. But positive change can also come from a deeper engagement with cyclical processes. As Lefebvre remarks in *Rhythmanalysis* (2013), that which returns seems to oppose becoming, yet one ends up engendering the other.

References and further reading

Adam, B. (2006). Time. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23(2–3), 119–126.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276406063779>

Aldred, R., & Jungnickel, K. (2013). Matter in or out of place? Bicycle parking strategies and their effects on people, practices and places. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 14(6), 604–624.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2013.790993>

- Douglas, M. (2002). *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. Routledge.
- Fardon, R. (2013). Citations out of place: Or, Lord Palmerston goes viral in the nineteenth century but gets lost in the twentieth. <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Citations-out-of-place%3A-or%2C-Lord-Palmerston-goes-in-Fardon/7c47a27db379a4a794f63edcb9f9fa416b924dcb>
- Hird, M. J. (2012). Knowing Waste: Towards an Inhuman Epistemology, *Social Epistemology*, 26:(3-4), 453-469. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2012.727195>
- Ingold, T. (2011). Against Space in *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. London; New York: Routledge
- Lefebvre, H. (2013). *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Liboiron, M. (2022). Matter out of place. In Gille, Z., & Lepawsky, J. (2021). *The Routledge Handbook of Waste Studies*. Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003019077>
- Massey, D. (2002). Living in Wythenshawe. In Borders, I., Kerr, J. and Rendell J. (Eds). *In The Unknown City: Contesting Architecture and Social Space*. MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/7008.003.0035>
- Reno, J. O. (2014). Toward a New Theory of Waste: From 'Matter out of Place' to Signs of Life. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 31(6), 3–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276413500999>
- Skeggs, B. (1999). Matter out of place: Visibility and sexualities in leisure spaces. *Leisure Studies*, 18(3), 213–232. <https://doi.org/10.1080/026143699374934>
- Soja, E. W. (1996). *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Wiley

About the author

Francisco Calafate-Faria

Francisco Calafate-Faria is an associate lecturer in psychosocial studies at Birkbeck, University of London, an associate lecturer at Goldsmiths, University of London, and a lecturer at London South Bank University. He works in the field of urban studies within the disciplines of sociology, geography and criminology. His PhD thesis was based on fieldwork with urban recyclers conducted in Curitiba, Brazil. He has since conducted academic, community, evaluative, and consultancy research on the politics of waste disposal, night workers on the London Underground, performance art festivals, arts and education engagement projects, and radio in prisons.

Cite this work

Calafate-Faria, F. (2022, March 8). Trash Talk: Unpicking the deadlock around urban waste and regeneration [Online]. The Sociological Review Magazine. <https://doi.org/10.51428/tsr.qejx3132>

Copyright

© 2022 Francisco Calafate-Faria. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Please consult the Creative Commons guidelines for information on how you may reproduce and re-use the content of this article.