



Waste as a Metaphor: Contextualism of a Human and Social Risks. Toward a Sociology of Wastes

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Abstract

The complex frame of interpretation that arises from waste production as a cultural problem is here observed as a social fact and as a metaphor. Waste constitutes a real world, complex and symmetrical to that of consumptions: a world which, behind the mirror in which the consumer civilization loves to reflect and become aware of it, gives us back the truest nature of the risks that populate our daily lives.

Keywords: Waste; Social Exclusion; Social Change; Social Vulnerability; Cultural Landscape

Introduction

Climate Change, the Production of Waste

Earth's climate is changing, with the global temperature now rising at a rate unprecedented in the experience of contemporary human society, and there is an urgent need to develop strategies for mitigating such changes. Of course, the climate change issue is a serious threat of the larger challenge of sustainable development. As a result, climate policies can be more effective when consistently embedded within broader strategies designed to make various development paths more socially and environmentally sustainable since the casualties, the idea that a phenomenon has a cause and a cause has an effect, will have various impacts with a multitude of primary and secondary effects cascading through the social and the natural system.

In this complex frame there is a tight and unsustainable connection between consumer society, erosion of natural resources, and increase in discards, led to reconsidering the waste as a starting point for a review radical of the categories of meaning and action of contemporary civilization even in

the frame of the climate change as a threat and as a risk. It is a social problem and the social problems literature comes mainly in two varieties which it is possible to label as the objectivist and the subjectivist camps. Objectivists take the objectionable or problematic condition identified with a social problem to be a given, that is, to be both objectively real and objectively harmful, and proceed to examine the causes, characteristics, and consequences of that condition as a condition. Subjectivists on the other hand deny that objective conditions are either necessary or sufficient for a social problem to exist. They contend that social problems are the outcome of group activity. Problems, in other words, are accomplishments. Hence the term constructionist is used to describe this camp; in fact, this is really a more accurate label than the term subjectivist. Constructionists contend that conditions, whatever their objective nature, must be turned into problems through active promotion, called "claims-making". They insist on using the adjective putative to indicate that the objective features of conditions are sociologically irrelevant in explaining social problems. Without taking sides in this debate among adherents to these theoretical approaches, I move with two possible conclusions. First, the

social problem status of a given issue is a function of what members of organizations and representatives of institutions say and do about some condition, not of the objective features of the condition itself. Second, the consequences of what they say and do is simultaneously facilitated and constrained by the characteristics of the organizations in which they participate. A constructionist theory of social problems and the resource mobilization theory of social movements, which deals with the organizational characteristics of claims-making while downplaying the nature and validity of grievances, provide useful tools for examining waste threats since waste has become the most common product of industrialized societies and has been spreading globally.

The huge quantity of materials dispersed in the ecosystem raises concerns about the environmental damages, the social and the economic risks. From this point Nicklas Luhmann's theoretical explorations on social systems [1,2] is an untapped resource for waste researchers. I find especially useful his assumption that reducing uncertainty in the environment is the basic problem facing all social systems, his propositions about time including ideas of non simultaneity and time-binding, that is, of linking present and future and therefore cause with effect. More familiar to waste researcher could be find in his essay on risk [3] emphasizing the separate vocabularies of danger and risk. For Luhmann, societies which develop vocabularies of risk come to think of more and more potential future harms as causally linked to prior human decisions and how vocabularies evolve from danger to risk and the implications of this evolution for the way in which social systems deal with uncertainty are central to his analysis of contemporary system of threats.

Waste and energy represent a risk for pursuing a sustainable development choice. In his seminal work *Risk Society (Risikogesellschaft)* Beck introduced the distinction between simple and reflexive modernity [4]. The Author argues that through rising levels of education and wealth, processes of cultural individualization and technological risk production, the industrial society, simple modernity, and its core conflict of capital versus labour have been replaced by the risk society, reflexive modernity. The central scheme of risk society is the perception, distribution and effect of technologically generated risks as, for example, the waste and the subsequent environmental contamination). These are seen as problems resulting from organized irresponsibility [5] within the dynamics of economic growth and scientific-technological progress. In other words waste is a key word of the contemporary *Risk Society* «to sketch out the lines of a social bifurcation, a dividing-line between individuals repressed by exclusion from consumption on one hand, and individuals seduced by inclusion into the possibilities of consumption on the other, showing social structures as mechanisms for the social exclusion of an increasing part

of individuals within current societies under conditions of globalization» [6]. Although waste means a complexity issue in a matter of perspective and framing, which in our case relates to human intention and interests, level or details, and the result of perceiving through observation. This complexity should be observed through the climate change as outcome of mass industrialization and heavy consumption society: waste and the production of human waste is an outcome of these processes [7]. The question of waste seems emblematic to understand the processes of characterizing the contemporary: reconstructing the "waste crisis", the climate crisis, seems to place the "waste" in relation to the "project" that produces it. Waste becomes a sign of the Risk Society that «begins where societal systems of norms promising security fail in the face of risks caused by decisions» [8]. In fact, the production of waste is the consequence of productive actions long thought of as secondary to the benefits of production, to the social project, a production that measures climatic changes in interpretative terms: «Hence waste is both an unwanted, unintended side effect of human activities, and inevitably also a social construct-an entity that only comes into being due to our incessant need to create social order amidst a chaotic world that is 'so continuous and so immense in its variety as to be unhandleable» [9]. And waste as a fact and as an ontological metaphor seems to be the unhandleable product of the cities.

Across the world we are facing crises of sustainability, resilience, security, stability and adaptation. Many of our cities have become sprawling and bloated zones of unsustainability. In the meantime, too many politicians and commentators squabble over schedules, timetables, and buck-stops. From problems associated with climate change or sustainable water supply to those concerning increasing economic inequality or the break-up of communities, processes such as escalating resource use or increasing cultural anomie, problems that we once responded to as singular concerns are now bearing back on us in a swirl of compounding pressures. Cities are at the centre of this human-made maelstrom. For all their vibrancy and liveliness, cities face a growing challenge to provide secure and sustainable places to live. Even the world's most Melbourne, Munich, Vancouver and Vienna – are utterly unsustainable in global ecological terms. If all city residents across the globe consumed at the rate of the world's most liveable cities the planet would be in catastrophic trouble. Despite their inconsequential geographical footprint, cities are responsible for around 80 per cent of global energy consumption, and some of the world's most wonderful exciting cities contribute at a proportionally much higher rate» [10].

Europe, where 500 million people live, produces about half a ton of household waste per capita every year [11], mainly in urban areas. All this waste has a huge impact on

the environment, causing pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, which contribute to climate change, waste, processing waste, as well as significant material losses.

Waste as a Cultural Problem

Waste is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, which intersects different areas and disciplines. Waste changes over time and in space, state, and composition material. The chain that its path is composed of is one multiplicity of actors that generate and manage them, defined by a sequence of places and systems, taught by a series of different processes. The heterogeneity and classification criteria of waste (solids, liquids, dangerous, etc.) put in place a sociological objective difficulty in considering the phenomenon as a whole and the complexity of managing systems and infrastructures, which give body and shape to the waste chain, it has to deal with a growing demand for efficiency and overall performance, in front of which the proposed solutions often appear partial and with limited efficacy. In the last twenty years, it has increased the attention on environmental issues and there is a growing production of studies e research relating to waste, scraps and recycling. It's about a very extensive field of sociological observation, which it considers not only the flows of all those consumer objects we use and of which we get rid of every day, but also all the waste of the environment and decay phenomena on a wider scale. Social actors live in an era characterized by the triumph of waste both from industrial and productive origin and from mass domestic consumption origin. Of course technological innovations and recycle behaviour and technique have been made easier waste management but have also contributed to an unprecedented increase in production adding challenges associated with climate change and sustainability.

It is therefore necessary to try to view these phenomena in terms of complexity to understand and deconstruct the relationships between production, consumption and technology. To avoid an interpretative blindness that arises from a rooted cultural tradition, founded on separation perceptual between action perpetrated on the environment and perception of the damage that this action generates, complexity is a basic problem-solving tool, and problem is here defined as any threat to desired continuity, that is, to sustainability. Confronted with problems, we often respond by developing more complex technologies, establishing new institutions, adding more specialists or bureaucratic levels to an institution, increasing organization or regulation, or gathering and processing more information. This cultural attention comes by developing sensitivity over the sustainability issues in social, economic terms, and not only among scholars and institutions, but also in public opinion. I remember that waste has become the most widespread product of industrialized societies; the huge amount of

materials dispersed in the ecosystem raises concerns about the damage environmental, economic and social consequences. Waste and energy are critical points for the pursuit of a sustainable development choice as a contrast to the ongoing climate change.

An efficient solid waste management system must necessarily set itself some general goals, indispensable to guarantee its full sustainability: protection of human health and the environment; conservation of resources (materials, water, energy, water and territories); throughout solutions that do not cause problems for future generations; economic sustainability. If the idea of zero waste is a utopia, the zero landfill goals can instead be reached through reasoned choices. The problem, for example, of separate waste collection is the basis of the whole management system municipal waste, and it is implemented in a quantitative, but also qualitative levels. However, its operation requires the involvement of all citizens, institutions, industrial and commercial activities. We know that separate collection allows a better treatment of waste in the treatment phases, and therefore to the recycling chain, biological and thermal treatments; thus it allows to send to landfill only the minimum technical quantities of stabilized waste, and to save precious landfill volumes. But this is evidently a topic of high complexity in communicative, cultural and regulatory terms. However a separate waste collection is not the ultimate goal of a management system, the main and irreplaceable step through which to improve the recycling chain but also those of biological and heat treatments in order to obtain the maximum material recovery, and above all, reduce the consumption, which is the real goal to aim above all within a view to combating climate change. In this perspective, in this frame the deepening crisis of contemporary, reflected in the growth of bureaucracy, the commodification of social life, the destructive impact of industrialization and pervasive feelings of alienation and disempowerment, should be considered.

Waste constitutes a real world, complex and symmetrical to that of consumptions: a world which, behind the mirror in which the consumer civilization loves to reflect and become aware of it, gives us back the truest nature of the products that populate our daily lives. Waste is the "dark side" of one unique reality, which inextricably connects resource and refusal. We cannot throw anything away, because there is no "way", however much the materials may change form certainly cannot disappear. Smog, garbage, sewage, and scrap are the normal flow of urban waste but also buildings are abandoned, moved or demolished, and whole areas are cleared and rebuilt. The materials degrade and age, are crushed, reused, and mostly diverted to marginal areas. The need to remove what we are talking about from our daily lives we no longer desire or need it is, in fact, usual and regular practice that often determines the devastation

of the territory. The freedom enjoyed by the consumption is reflected in the constraints and in the regulations to which waste is subjected which cannot be “abandoned” without clogging and make the space unusable, physical, cultural, and social. Again, the problem of waste is not only related to its disposal, waste management, planning, technologies, financing and location of the plants. In fact, the problem does not arise neither from the lack of funding, nor from the lack of facilities, nor from the opposition of the communities to their location, but, first of all, by the fact that waste is produced. Too much waste is produced and it is produced even when it would be relatively easy to avoid producing it. The problem is cultural, of a culture without utopias, without imagination, without an inclusive vision that excludes instead of including. In this context, among the many services combined with goods, the recovery of materials and the energy potential incorporated in it could also be included, a living vision that some companies have already adopted: waste in a managerial view has many of the characteristics similar to a living system, an instance of complex adaptive system. Complex adaptive systems interact with their environment and change in response to environmental change [12]. These policies, however, must be associated with “upstream” interventions aimed at reducing waste production, for example:

- Developing a hierarchy of actions for waste management;
- Financing for the research of new production technologies with lower environmental impact;
- Develop incentives for industries that introduce “closed” production cycles;
- Provide strategies to enhance separate waste collection and incentives for the design of production technologies based on the recovery of recyclable materials [13].

Social Vulnerability within the Risk Society

It is appropriate to plan beyond the production, inserting the waste in the configuration of the value chain. This integration inserts a new dimension between the use value of a commodity and its exchange value, the environmental value that is the final destination and environmental compatibility of a product, after the exhaustion of its use value as such. All this requires a process of social and cultural negotiation aimed at redefining roles and responsibilities, cancelling privileges and redistributing the burdens, working to reduce the social vulnerability. The idea of a waste society, the climate change are two side of the same problem, of a certain social vulnerability that «has become a key dimension in the social structural analysis of world Risk Society: social processes and conditions produce an unequal exposure to hardly definable risks, and the resulting inequalities must largely be seen as an expression and product of power relations in the national and global context. Social vulnerability is a sum concept, encompassing

means and possibilities, which individuals, communities or whole populations have at their disposal, in order to cope-or not-with the threats of climate change (or financial crises)» [14] with two sides: the external side of risks, stress and shocks to which human being is subject, and the internal side which is defencelessness. The waste management response is, in other words, a possible measure of social vulnerability, an aggregate measure of human and social welfare that integrates environmental, social, economic and political exposure to a range of potential harmful perturbations. If the attention would be shifted in terms of social vulnerability, waste would become one of the cornerstones of the virtuous circle for socially sustainable development by reactivating the balance between man and the environment, between men. The current management model of the human-biosphere relationship removes resources and transforms them into waste, thus contributing to a worrying subtraction of territory, concentration of resources, while instead the processes of “reterritorialization” should be started.

There are, therefore, complex and delicate balances that oversee the relationship between human settlement and the environment and, to ensure the maintenance of these balances over time, it is necessary to take as a guide a “culture of the limit”, an explanatory principle which allows the self regulation and reproducibility in a system where the stakeholders are aware that they belong to a complex and interdependent system. The culture of the limit should be the guide for building energy balances in cities, knowing and, therefore, not compromising the generative and regenerative capacities of sources energy, thinking of a more balanced use of the same and, consequently, non dissipative; it is also essential to think of a limit to the production of waste, also identifying how to recover energy quotas and limit the introduction of polluting substances into the ecosystem. The discourse focused on the limit it must also provide for the limit to the artificialization of the territory, to the consumption of the soil, thus focusing on the concept of carrying capacity of the territorial systems [15]. The cyclical crises in the waste management system are an indication of an increasingly frequent overcoming of the acceptability and sustainability thresholds of the system itself; the major problems that often result in an emergency arise from concentration, from the incorrect accumulation and disposal of waste and effluents. In the perspective of the culture of the limit, a rethinking of social research is desirable which should be committed and interested in knowing and promoting imagined and practical social forms, towards the critical value of thought on the possible.

A Concluding Remark

In the context of a thought of the possible, where every configuration of the social is one of the possibilities of

interaction, always changeable and always changeable, «the possible is what exists in power», in which the imagination towards certain desirable changes plays a role meaningful, as Jedlowski [16] points out as «a faculty that accompanies us daily», which transforms the world into a possible world by increasing «our ability to attribute meaning and meaning to the existing» [16]. Every point of reference must be called into question, consequently modifying, even out of all proportion, the possible meaning of what it means to orient oneself in thought, and, above all, in the world of the possible. And, the profound and continuous transformations of experiencing the world, force us to rethink all the practices that make up the production and management system of waste. Inequalities related to production and distribution exists today in many systems and is the source of social vulnerability for a significant part of the population and for the biosphere.

The main critical issues highlighted in the culture of the limit as a contrast to social vulnerability require the overcoming of the emergency issue, systematic with respect to widely predictable environmental problems, and the conceptual, social and communicative dimension of waste stimulates reflection through the ecosystem analogy, on how to integrate and reduce waste, instead of hiding it.

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