Book Review- Rubbish Belongs to the Poor- Hygienic Enclosure and the Waste Commons. Written by Patrick O'Hare. Pluto Press, 2022.

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In his book 'Rubbish Belongs to the Poor– Hygienic Enclosure and the Waste Commons,' writer-anthropologist Patrick O'Hare presents a comprehensive ethnographic study on Uruguayan waste pickers and their close connection to the landfill. During the summer of 2014, O'Hare engaged in participant observations, immersing himself various waste-picking sites, including COFECA, Pedro Trastos cooperative, a landfill, a recycling yard, and Planta Aries, a formal sector recycling plant. Employing an apprenticeship methodology and an ethnohistorical approach, he explores the notion of waste as commons and argues that waste should primarily be owned by vulnerable groups, specifically the poor. O'Hare examines the idea of waste as commons for the poor, caregiving and kinships through waste and hygienic enclosures as a means to prevent waste pickers' access to waste. He also explores the precarious conditions experienced by waste pickers in Uruguay. O'Hare has maps the evolution of the concepts and practices of waste management with the backdrop of the socio-political and economic history of Uruguay which helps the reader situate the issues discussed. This book contributes to the literature on waste, to conceptualize waste as commons and waste as a means of caregiving.

O'Hare is vocal against zero-waste and circular economy concepts, leading to the dispossession of waste pickers of the Global South and further waste recovery in the Global North. He critiques the Montevidean municipality's approach of classifying everything that is discarded as waste and enabling infrastructure that prevents access to and utilization of discards by clasificadores (waste-pickers) by purposeful destruction of waste. Based on these ontological considerations, O'Hare puts forward three main arguments regarding municipal control of waste. First, waste as a discard approach allows the municipality to prevent the waste-pickers access to the waste by contaminating or shredding the waste. Second, he describes the process of "' hygienic enclosure', whereby discarded materials are enclosed at various scales, through the use of various technologies…and legal procedures…" (O'Hare, 2022, p. 37). Here, he considers containers, trucks, and fenced landfills as technologies and the municipal property rights over waste as a legal procedure. However, it is incorrect to classify the latter as a legal procedure as municipal authority over waste is a statutory duty and not a legal procedure. Third, he frames the work of waste pickers as a contribution towards the waste infrastructure specifically as a *shadow* of the state infrastructure and as taking advantage of waste as commons. He also raises the issue of unions of the waste pickers and their demand to be able to circulate through the city on their horse-drawn carriages, including access to the affluent parts of the city. The formalization of a few selected clasificadores and the dispossession of the remaining ones of their livelihoods

make it tricky for the unions to negotiate on behalf of clasificadores. According to O'Hare, the enclosure of waste, makes it easy to prevent the poor from circulating in the centre of the city, a trend which is being seen in other countries of Latin America as well.

While O'Hare claims that he has approached waste from a "municipal perspective," (O'Hare, 2022, p. 69) his arguments are heavily influenced by the clasificadores' perspective. He even seems to be displeased with the approach of preventing materials from entering the landfill and seems to be little concerned with the polluting effects of landfills on neighbouring communities. O'Hare's work does not acknowledge the fact that for the municipality, waste management is an essential activity that they view predominantly as a function of maintaining the urban metabolism (Guibrunet, Calvet, & Broto, 2017).

O'Hare also explores the Montevidean wastescape as a case for commons, comparing it largely with 18th and 19th century English commons with five defining characteristics shared between the two cases. First, he defines commons as resources that are not in open access and claimed by particularly vulnerable populations of the society. Therefore, he also emphasizes that waste does not belong to everyone, but rather to one particularly vulnerable group: the poor. Second, he suggests the focus of the use of the commons is on subsistence and not on market exchange. Third, waste commons and rural commons are an alternative from wage labour. Fourth, there exists a blurred line between work and play in both cases. And finally, the commons are facing enclosure, which is resisted by its users. The landfill functioned as a 'safety net' for the people who did not have any other social security. Despite Uruguay being Latin America's first welfare state (Pendle, 1952), its welfare benefits did not "adequately cover women, racial minorities, rural migrants, ex-convicts, or the long-term unemployed" (O'Hare, 2022, p. 83). O'Hare argues the need to expand the definition of commons to modern landfills as he demonstrates that it is a place where the poor and vulnerable groups continue to "claim, practise, and defend access to urban resources today," (O'Hare, 2022, p. 98). He presents how urban poverty can be studied from the perspective of care-making practices that occur in the waste commons at the landfill. He mentions several cases: a family-run waste yard where people could just show up for work, the consumable materials from the discards being shared by the waste-pickers and the practice of raising abandoned children along with one's own children, to name a few. He discusses waste intimacies and kinships in great detail in the book. He describes the maternal-nurturer status the *clasificadores* have given the landfill. The waste pickers referred to the landfill as the quarry (*la cantera*), ' a giant playground', 'the big free shop' (O'Hare, 2022, p. 72), and also as mother (*la madre*) and the mother dump (la *madre cantera*). While the author notes that there are conflicting opinions of care-giving through waste (altruism versus self-interest in procuring more labour), there appears to be no doubt in viewing the landfill as a sustainer.

The book is remarkable in how it makes use of ethnography as a method and analyses the observations in the context of socio-political and historical realities of the city, the country, and the world, in general. It makes a compelling argument for considering waste as a 21st-century commons. O'Hare pushes the ontological understanding of waste and argues that contrary to the existing value attached to discards which are

linked to its potential to be transformed into a commodity, we “must also account for their potential to constitute relations of care, intimacy and patronage” (O'Hare, 2022, p. 14).

While the author’s study does acknowledge that even within the clasificadores community, there are different levels of vulnerabilities and access to resources, it fails to ask seriously the questions of gender equity and duties towards one’s employer, which in this case is the state. For instance, while O’Hare does criticise the municipality for its attempts at formalising waste-picker labour, saying the formalisation of the few waste pickers led to the dispossession of many waste pickers, he is not too critical in his approach towards the waste pickers who quit the formal workforce for reasons like feeling emasculated, inability to stay away from work for long periods and so on. He cited the case of men who refused to carry out jobs like cleaning toilets, which they considered to be women’s jobs. These men were also unhappy that women were becoming outspoken and taking up leadership positions. The formalisation of the clasificadores was a citizenship project that provided an opportunity for women and men to be regarded as equals. It entailed rights as well as responsibilities and had little scope for projecting excessive masculinity, tardiness, or absenteeism. While O’Hare is vocal about the discrimination faced by the clasificadores, he does not critique the discrimination within the community.

The author feels strongly about the kinships and caregiving through waste, but fails to consider environmental injustice i.e., higher exposure to pollution and related problems faced by communities living near the landfills (Vásquez, Lukas, Salgado, & Mayorga, 2018) and gender inequalities (Ogando, Roever, & Rogan, 2017) among informal waste workers. Nevertheless, he does question the dominant conceptions of waste in today’s world and puts forward a compelling case against the approach of viewing waste primarily as a hazardous risky matter/ discard and the commodification of waste. O’Hare argues that this leads to the making of environmental policies that paradoxically advocates the destruction of values that cannot be measured in the market place such as waste’s value as an enabler of caregiving practices to the clasificadores and thereby taking away the right of the poor to the material excess of the capitalist world. The argument though virtuous leaves one pondering whether the advocacy here is for an unsustainable form of solidarity.

References

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