

## Waste is Yours and Mine

Citizenship in Garbage Bin

FRANSESCO OBINO

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Francesco Obino ([francescobino@gmail.com](mailto:francescobino@gmail.com)) works with Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group, New Delhi.

Waste is one of the few things urban dwellers—rich and poor—have left in common. Through a theoretical exploration of waste and its implications, the author proposes how our politics and practice with regard to waste can come together.

The English language is well known for its economy of letters and line space. Think of the different meanings of *go*, *put* and *do* in a sentence, and how frequently we use them on a daily basis. There remains no doubt that they come tremendously loaded.

When used in written or spoken English, these words speak of intimate actions, spaces and emotions that define our world. Without them, we would not be able to recognise and speak of our lives. If you are still not convinced you should try the word—waste.

### Basics of Waste

Waste is something left over, but it is also something consumed, or at times it is something useless. It can be something precious but may be used unconscientiously and carelessly. Waste can also be something superfluous, of no substantive value, or something that is lost. Waste is all of these, and it is always something we leave behind—for good.

This multiplicity of meaning would not be that interesting if it were not for the nuance we employ when we talk about “waste” and “wasting.”

This is where the deception with what waste means for each of us originates. It is generally accepted that one’s own waste should not invite shame. However the waste of others is not desirable. It is this ambivalence that deserves our attention.

To explain this better we need to go back to semantics. There are three key, interlocking ideas constantly at play when we talk about waste, across all its nuances.

The first is actually the least obvious one—the necessity of waste. Whatever we do, we have no choice but to constantly generate things—parts, wrappings, wholes, peels, scrap, more or less bulky—that we would not need at all in the long term, and often not beyond a few

moments.

The second idea is the banality of waste. Generating waste is easily—almost naturally—a mindless exercise, an unconscious routine, at its worst careless arrogance. We neither think nor reflect on the waste we generate.

The third idea is the sense of loss that comes with waste. It comes from knowing that what we discard could have been of use to someone else.

These are starting points to rethink the place of waste in contemporary societies, and our life and cities in particular.

## **Commonalities of Waste**

Does waste speak to disparate social backgrounds differently?

Waste is one of the very few things that we—as urban dwellers—have left in common. All of us generate waste within the same shared boundaries. If solid waste is not taken care of, things like moving and breathing would, irrespective of who we are, look much different to us.

Most of us end up literally consuming waste, particularly whenever we fail to manage it carefully. Experts assure us that solid waste left to burnt, dumped, and left to leach into the ground comes back to us much quicker than we expect—on our plate through the food chain, in our glass through ground water and in the air we breathe.

The critical point in this debate is that the least we think about waste, the more the question of waste throws us back and so without too many subtleties. It brings us to basic question of how to live together, thriving individually and as a society.

## **Italo Calvino and Waste**

Between 1974 and 1979, while in Paris, Italo Calvino wrote a short piece titled “La Poubelle Agreee” (“The Agreeable Trash Can”) in *The Road to San Giovanni* around the trash bin in the kitchen of his family house.

He ponders ironically (and yet never sarcastically) about the family rituals of “carrying the trash bag out of the front door,” every night. The action, he writes, is detailed, set, and familiar, uniquely humble and, for all of these reasons, secretly and surprisingly fulfilling. Calvino likes the idea that this action, in which he engages almost automatically every night, the fixed action that has somehow become his action before he could realise it, links him to every other Parisian who night after night does the same. It ties him to Paris along an invisible hinge that runs past every doorstep and every street.

Like Perle Abbrugiati wrote, what is most interesting about this piece is that for Calvino

writing about the trash becomes a pretext to talk to Paris, the city, not just about it. Bringing the trash out expresses Calvino's relationship with the whole city, it declares his belonging to it, in an oft-forgotten daily epiphany. What is more, for Calvino household waste wrapped in a bag and carried by hand carries the intimacy of household life, past its left-over sounds, tastes and colours, into the city, and makes Paris and his home extensions of each other.

In these habitual mechanics of subtraction, bag after bag and evening after evening, Calvino recognised his intrinsic belonging to a larger whole—a distinctly urgent and yet familiar logic of action, the need for a bureaucracy to support the metabolism of the city, waste professions to make it happen, and all of Paris' imperfections. He rediscovered his identity as part of that complex, fascinating and personal collective animal that inevitably cities are.

## **Impending Disaster?**

Before we resort to denouncing a future under the terrible threat of an impending ecological disaster (however realistic that might be), Calvino would suggest that we still have a chance to remind ourselves that waste is going nowhere, or at least nowhere very far. Waste will always stand as a strong and at most times uncomfortable reminder that as city dwellers, we share something fundamental and very tangible; and that we need to deal with this, learn how to recognise both ourselves and our lifestyles in it.

If waste defines both our life, particularly as city dwellers, and the limits of a city as a shared lived space, then rediscovering our shared identity as part of the cities we belong to, on one hand, and rethinking the place of waste in our lives, on the other, must necessarily go hand in hand. The most urgent task we face is therefore to embrace the necessity, the banality and the loss that waste stands for, and embrace them as opportunities, rather than as a three-pointed curse.

This is true anywhere, but particularly in India, as the country hangs between booming urbanisation and consumption patterns that are new and immensely appealing to the huge majority.

## **Not Wasted Enough**

What to do with our waste, then? There are three simple moves that we could help immensely.

First, if our habits, stakes and rituals around waste define us as belonging to the city, irrespective of who we are, we share at least the opportunity, if not the responsibility, to ask ourselves few key questions about the *necessity* of solid waste. The politics of solid waste lie not in the half-baked policies and rampant populism sweeping the country today, but in a collective prompting around basic questions.

How much waste we generate? What happens to it? Who takes care of it? Where does it all go? Ultimately, the answers to these simple questions will tell us whether we are gullibly breathing, drinking and eating our own waste or whether we want to be part a city as a shared space that is much more than the sum of its inhabitants.

Second, like many countries currently transitioning towards a “make-use-throw” economy, the waste of Indian cities will burn. But incineration-based technology in India can only be a last resort.

Indian households are familiar with source segregation. Up to two thirds of the solid waste generated in Indian cities is wet and biodegradable, and the rest is recyclable for half, and inert for the rest (stones and dust). In both cases there are better uses for it than trying to burn it. We must recognise that waste, its composition and what we do with it, from the households to the landfill, is ultimately very far from banal. Though most people are yet to discover that dividing wet and dry waste right inside the home has an enormous potential to boost the economy and represent a livelihood for waste workers.

Finally, the loss that waste embodies is only as big as the opportunity waste offers to feed resources back into the economic system. Recycling or composting can impact climate change many times more than producing electricity with an incinerator, and India has a unique chance to make the most of its waste.

This will prove to be beneficial to both parties—the manufacturers who purchase waste for converting them to finished products as well as the people involved in the city’s waste economy.

Solid waste management is as close a question gets to defining contemporary urban life and our place in it: unavoidable and, in a city, urgent by definition. The politics of urban life could begin with and be defined by our trash bin.