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“Men and Waste: Scavenger in a Big Dump”

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ABSTRACT

From “far outside” to “close to home”

Day to day, and in any part of the world, as human beings we all have a direct relation with our waste, residues or refuse; with all those things that we no longer want, those that don't work anymore, with the most useless things in our lives...that is, with garbage.

That is why every society deserves to be judged by its relation to garbage. To a large extent, that relation gives us important insights as to how any particular society is and works, how developed it is, and which are the solutions it has found for such an ordinary problem, shared by all human beings.

Chaff, deadwood, dross, dirt, junk, litter, refuse, ruffraff, rubbish, scrap, trash, waste: these are all derogatory synonyms to name the same thing; a cancer that slowly spreads over the face of the earth. This disease seems even more terrible, unavoidable, and dreadful when you think of its growth and how it fills the already-polluted water sources with mud, soiling air and land all over our planet. Yet, and thinking of what we could call an ecological perspective, one could argue that garbage is a part of being human, that from any possible vantage point carrying a load of garbage along with you has always been part of being human.

But that is not everything. As long as towns and cities were “small” and the space around them was “big” there did not seem to be any problem. Perhaps, the first thought human beings ever had regarding how to get rid of their waste was putting every unwanted thing “far outside” the cities. Doing this prevented the stench, the ugly looks and the risk of pollution as well. That is how it was back in the days of the Aztecs, and that is how it remained for the following five centuries.

Today, along with demographic growth and the geographic expansion of cities, the problem of garbage has acquired unimagined proportions. How far and out can a place, any place, be in relation to the nearest population? Where do “far” and “out” end without encroaching upon the next space?

We should not forget that all of us, absolutely all of us, live in a “closed system” called the environment. In it, whatever you do in one place or deposit in another will appear again somewhere else. Thus, the questions to be asked are: where and how will it reappear? Under what shape or quality will it come back to our environment?

In contemporary societies, people always talk about the “consumption of goods,” as if they were actually consumed and disappeared (Small, 1970:11). Yet we may ask: who has actually consumed a can of beer, or construction rods, a car, food packaging or yesterday’s newspaper? No one, no human being has ever done that. In that sense, we are merely “users” of the products, not consumers. “Modern economy is entirely based on extracting natural resources, turning them into ‘consumable products,’ selling them, and then forgetting all about them” (*ibid*:12)

Perhaps, if garbage was nothing but that, garbage, some smart invention to make it “disappear” could have been one of mankind’s greatest inventions. Yet, and as a matter of fact, garbage is not just garbage, and getting rid of it is not that easy. Actually, “garbage” is increasingly becoming more than refuse, and it is constantly being endowed with newly found potentials. Hence, high-tech developed countries keep on finding ways in which new recyclable materials can be recovered.

On the other hand, in third world countries, “high-tech” waste recovery devices are substituted by legions of men, women, and children who live amongst garbage and recover materials by hand. These people have established a wide network of relations with other groups; and whether these relations are formal or informal, dependent or independent, aimed at subsistence or at gaining political power, they are all useful for society as a whole.

Thus, the question to be asked is: what is the extent of this problem?