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On: 24 September 2012, At: 03:52

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Social Movement Studies: Journal of Social, Cultural and Political Protest

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/csms20>

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Version of record first published: 09 Jul 2012.

To cite this article: Max Liboiron (2012): Tactics of Waste, Dirt and Discard in the Occupy Movement, *Social Movement Studies: Journal of Social, Cultural and Political Protest*, DOI:10.1080/14742837.2012.704178

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2012.704178>



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Tactics of Waste, Dirt and Discard in the Occupy Movement

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ABSTRACT *Both Occupiers and our opponents have used waste and discards—figuratively and literally—in strategies to create and cultivate a new social movement on one hand, and to maintain power and control over protesters on the other. This study will look at the roles trash, waste, filth and discards have played in tactical decisions by both sides of the movement from the point of view of a New York City Occupier. Overall, the examples examined of trash, filth, discards and their attendant transgressions make up an ongoing political debate about the ideal society by both Occupiers and its opposition. These are the terms over which contests about what counts as tolerable and intolerable conditions, right and wrong, citizenship and the Other, acceptable and unacceptable behavior and what constitutes ‘out of placeness’ have been waged.*

KEY WORDS: Occupy, waste, citizenship, discard, values, Othering strategies

Both Occupiers and our opponents have used waste and discards—figuratively and literally—as strategies to create and cultivate a new social movement and ideals on one hand, and to maintain power and control over protesters on the other. I will look at some specific roles trash, waste, filth and discards have played in tactical decisions by both sides of the movement from the point of view of a New York City Occupier. The first section outlines how the New York City municipal government and its police have used their power to designate what is trash and what is not. The second section considers several ways Occupiers have used waste to both protest an economic and political system that disenfranchises the public and use trash as a platform to enact just citizenship and imagine a better future. In all cases, waste and trash are the materials through which larger contests of belonging and values are played out (Figure 1).

Anti-Occupy Tactics

At around 1 am on 15 November 2011, police came into a tented Liberty Plaza and began handing out fliers. The fliers said Occupiers had to leave the park or face arrest. Shortly after Occupiers ran from tent to tent to spread the news of pending eviction and arrest,

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1474-2837 Print/1474-2829 Online/12/000001-9 © 2012 Taylor & Francis
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2012.704178>

compacted in the truck and dumped to the concrete floor, effectively destroying them. They had clearly been subject to identical treatment as regular trash.

While there were many shows of power by police and New York City Mayor Bloomberg during the eviction, including censoring the press, violating city laws and effectively privatizing public and semi-public spaces, I want to focus on the actions whereby taxonomies of trash were used as a conscious effort to restrict access to space and to define and discipline protesters.

The police's trashing actions ordered by Bloomberg on 15 November, as well as before and since that date, are a logical extension of the heavy rhetorical work coming from the Mayor's office and anti-occupy mainstream media claiming that Occupiers, Occupy camps and Occupy politics are dirty, filthy and unsanitary. This slippage between (imagined or real) unsanitary physical conditions and unsanitary politics and conduct is blatant in the evictions of Occupy camps around the world. In Philadelphia, giant front-end loaders plowed through tiny collapsible tents. In Paris, police in riot gear attacked tents and then rigorously guarded the piles of trash they made. In Los Angeles, crews dressed in full hazmat suits picked through park materials. In each case, the state is performing power, but they are also performing political repulsion. They are demonstrating their belief that such political gatherings are dangerous in their filth, regardless of material sanitary conditions. As Douglas so eloquently puts it, 'As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder' (1984, p. 2). And in the eyes of those in power, the essential nature of Occupy is disorder. It is dirt.

These symbolic rhetorics and actions are the mediums through which group subordination is generated and operationalized by those in power. Not only do the Mayor's office, police and dominant media control the terms of public conversations about Occupy in terms of sanitation so Occupiers have to constantly demonstrate their cleanliness in public, but more importantly, such derogatory symbolism rests on a binary: clean and dirty, safe and dangerous, us and them. This is the contest between Bloomberg and his police, and New York City Occupiers. The Mayor and police work to make the Occupiers Other, and Occupiers strive to exercise their rights as citizens to assemble and protest. This contest is often fought in terms of filth and waste.

For example, before the eviction of Liberty Plaza, Mayor Bloomberg told Occupiers that they would have to leave the park for cleaning. In response, the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) Sanitation Working Group called for a park-wide, OWS-initiated clean up. Bloomberg had ruled that the Occupation was unsanitary and so the city would have to clean up after them, while OWS maintained that they were good citizens and took care of their space. Hundreds of protesters scrubbed Liberty Plaza until it sparkled and there was no possible material evidence of unsanitary conditions. The 'cleaning eviction' was cancelled. When Liberty was raided one month later, Bloomberg claimed it was due to his mounting concern that 'the occupation was coming to pose a health and fire safety hazard to the protestors and to the surrounding community'.

The contest of filth and belonging is not new. The recorded history of those in power seeing threats to their social order as 'filth' stretches as far back as medieval times. More recently, Ezra Pound's *Cantos* regarded 'the multitudes in the ooze', citizens and their political leaders, as a flood of excreta, with democracy as a sea of swampy sewage. In contrast, Pound's description of his desired enlightened dictator was neat and tidy, even shining. In the last three centuries, the rhetoric of waste has usually been class-based, where the bourgeois '[condemns] the excremental working classes', a pattern suited to a

movement protesting the yawning gap between the rich and poor (Inglis, 2011, p. 216). In every recorded case described by Inglis, filth and waste are used to describe the inferior, unregulated, disorderly and dangerous Other that pose some threat to the system of rule.

Within this understanding of the role of waste in protest, the seemingly contradictory acts of Bloomberg, the police and other opponents to Occupy whereby they decry waste even as they create waste by turning entire encampments into trash make sense. They are methods to define and control what they see as dangerous disorder, specifically a danger to dominant social order. These are exercises in classing protesters as non-citizens. As Them. As Other. As Trash and Dirt.

Occupy Tactics

From cardboard esthetics to calling out ‘dirty’ money, OWS also uses waste strategically. I will focus on two related tactics of trash, dirt and discard as they relate to ideals within the movement. First, I will look at how waste functioned in the encampment and beyond, and secondly how waste has been used as a rhetoric for just citizenship when calling out unjust corporations, banks and governments.

One of the unique aspects of the Occupy movement compared to similar movements is the encampments. In these densely populated impromptu urban settlements, perfect strangers have to live together. In this context, ideals for how the world should work must be put into practice on the ground.

First and foremost, there must be toilets. There were hundreds, even thousands of people at Liberty Plaza on any given day before and after the eviction, and few accessible toilets in nearby businesses. Protesters had to figure out a way to rent, pay for and site sani-potties. In New York, this meant an alliance with the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) to place the sani-potties in the union’s loading dock. The UFT’s president said, ‘we are happy to help Occupy Wall Street to continue to be a good neighbor’. This language is telling, as we will see in a moment. There was also a laundry service at Liberty, recycling stations and, of course, the Sanitation Working Group, a facet of every Occupy encampment around the world (Figure 2).

These infrastructures for sanitation are part of a system of citizenship within the Occupy movement. Signs announced: ‘We are all part of the sanitation effort’, ‘We at Sanitation uphold the Good Neighbor Policy, which is a great guideline of our values and respect for each other in this community’ and ‘Thank your sanitation workers! It starts from the ground floor’. These services and signs were part of the rules and values of citizenship in the Zuccotti encampment, all of which mirrored what Occupiers expect and demand from the 1%. According to anthropologist Mary Douglas, ‘dirt’ is all about maintaining good citizenship, where beliefs and practices about filth and contagion uphold social values and what counts as acceptable and unacceptable behavior. The way Occupiers treat dirt and trash is symbolically similar to the City’s efforts to alienate them: in both situations, dirt is about maintaining a set of ordered relation, and rejecting inappropriate elements. For Occupiers, these ordered relations involved respect, sobriety and cooperation. One of the three community rules at Liberty Plaza, drafted through a consensus process, was ‘Keep it clean. This plaza and these flowers are important to the community. Our ability to uphold the beauty of this park well represents our commitment to a better world’. Very often, the cleanliness of the park was articulated as a direct testament to protester’s desires for just,



Figure 2. Good neighbor policy sign greeting anyone who enters Zucotti Park. 8 November 2011.
Photo by the author.

‘clean’ politics. Signs declared, ‘Today we clean up our community, tomorrow we clean up Wall Street’ and admonished, ‘If you can’t clean up after yourself, you can’t clean up this corrupt world’. This sentiment is so strong that one protester self-identified as a cleaner: ‘We [Occupiers] clean. It’s what we do. It’s who we are’.

Not only was basic maintenance part of the citizenship-building process of the Zucotti encampment, dirt, trash and discards were also used as the raw material to imagine a better world. At the height of the encampment, Zucotti boasted a greywater system as part of the People’s Kitchen, a bike-powered composter whose compost was cycled to several nearby community gardens, a recycling depot and a reuse station to fuel the movement’s cardboard esthetic. These environmental amenities, constructed from scratch for public use, were a concrete manifestation of the better world Occupiers seek. In this better world, waste and trash were a thing of the past, as citizens’ duties included using resources as fully as possible. In many conversations, prolific waste was seen as a necessary product of exploitative capitalist production (Figure 3).

Together, the rhetorics and actions of cleaning up and building a wasteless future come to bear directly on Occupy’s message for just citizenship from 100% of society. Not only is littering and leaving messes for others to clean a breach of citizenship in the park, but it is also an ethical breach in politics and finance. Not only is wasting, trashing and discarding an undesirable act in the park, but it is also undesirable and intolerable from institutions outside of the park. Wall Street is a notoriously bad



Figure 3. Occupier powering batteries at Zucotti Park. The greywater system and compost area is to the right. Photograph by the author.

housekeeper. It is worth noting that after the eviction of Zucotti, the ‘ethics of doing your chores’ continued as the Sanitation Working Group cleaned foreclosed houses for reoccupation, and cleanliness continues to be a goal in meetings and other shared spaces within Occupy, though in different forms.



Figure 4. The eviction of Occupy Philly. A front-end loader disposes of a collapsible pop tent. 30 November 2011. Photographer unknown.

A second way that trash, dirt and waste play into the tactics of Occupy is the argument that things that ought not be discarded have been wasted and trashed by the wealthiest 1% of society, banks, governments and corporations. Many Occupiers involved in the eviction of Zucotti whose belongings were ‘stored’ in dump trucks carry their crushed laptops to public gatherings as artifacts of injustice. The People’s Library called a press conference after the eviction and piled hundreds of trashed books in front of reporters to demonstrate the intolerable politics of trash practiced by Bloomberg and the police.

The same tactics are also used in a more symbolic sense. Members of Occupy Student Debt donned graduation caps and gowns made of garbage bags to symbolize how their degrees and earning power after graduation were worthless under the weight of their debt. Occupy Museums built a miniature model of a house in Harlem threatened with foreclosure out of discards and presented it to the Museum of American Finance, asking that the depreciated status of the property be ensconced in an elite cultural institution as part of the master narrative of how American Finance affects everyday people. Various testimonials on the ‘I am the 99%’ tumblr site make reference to how their lives, futures or degrees are ‘going to waste’ or ‘being wasted’ because of the corruption and inadequacies of institutions meant to support them. In each case, the rhetoric of waste, trash, filth and discards are used to critique the disproportionate power of a minority to discard the rights and livelihoods of the 99%. There is an implicit argument here that a citizen or resident of the USA should not be treated like trash by definition of what it means to be an enfranchised person (Figure 4).

In conclusion, to focus on the physical and material aspects of dirt and trash within Occupy or to keep a tally chart of when and where trash appears and whether or not it actually carried dangers of tuberculosis as some media claimed is to miss the point of the roles of waste, discard, dirt and filth within the movement. Instead, we must focus on the different logics of transgression attendant to waste and dirt. We can see that ideas about filth, waste and transgressions make up an ongoing political debate about the ideal society by both Occupiers and its opposition. While many new tactics that use trash and filth to argue for or against certain types of order have been innovated on both sides of the Occupy movement, these are the terms over which contests about what counts as tolerable and intolerable conditions, right and wrong, citizenship and the Other, acceptable and unacceptable behavior and what constitutes ‘out of placeness’ have been waged for centuries, and will continue to be waged.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the three New York City Occupiers who reviewed this article but wish to remain anonymous.

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