INVIDIOUS DISTINCTION: WASTE, DIFFERENCE, AND CLASSY STUFF

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The concept of waste, or non-utilitarian expenditure, has been central throughout the twentieth century to theories about the values of things. One genealogy would run from Veblen’s functionalist account of useless and envy-based social differentiation through to Bourdieu’s concept of distinction; another would encompass the anti-functionalist theories of Bataille and Baudrillard. I align myself with the former, since the latter fail fully to break with the insistence of function; I nevertheless seek to retain some of Bataille’s emphasis on the gratuitousness of the uses of things. More generally, I oppose a theory of uses, which are productive or supportive of a value relation between kinds of things and kinds of persons, to a theory of consumption and of consumerism; and I seek to theorize the multifunctionality of objects and their irreducibility to social taxonomy.

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Displays or uses of things within social exchange are moves in subtle games, messages about the social categories to which I belong, the categories to which I claim belonging, and the categories I refuse. Our infinitely complex and delicate knowledge of these moves, including our ability to read the strategic sense of new ones, organizes the transactions through which the kinds of things I possess or use tell you who I am, or who I want to be thought to be. A major strand of twentieth-century thought has been concerned with the ways in which such systems of symbiotic use, apparently supplementary to the norms of the rational calculation of utility which dominate political economy, in fact render those norms unworkable. In this paper I explore, very briefly, several points in the formation of a theory of value within cultural theory, and in particular the centrality of the concept of waste to this theorization. Waste is the degree zero of value, or it is the opposite of value, or it is whatever stands in excess of value systems grounded in use. For Locke it is thus the limit of property rights: faced with the abundance of nature, a person may appropriate whatever – but only – what he or she can use before it spoils. Yet waste is at the same time constitutive of the structure of value: on the one hand it is residually a commodity, something from which money may still be made (think of the commercial potential of the rubbish heaps in Our Mutual Friend, or of the garbage disposal
business that defines American gangster-capitalism in Underworld.\(^1\) On the other hand, the category of waste underpins any system of social distinction, as the principle of uselessness that establishes a non-utilitarian symbolic order.

I begin my account with a forerunner, Thorstein Veblen, whose major work, The Theory of the Leisure Class (1899), is often cited but rarely read. For all intents and purposes a theorization of the rise of an aristocratic class in the United States in the late nineteenth century, Veblen’s essay is cast as a general theory of ‘the leisure class’, with its origins in the earliest stratified societies and its culmination in high feudalism. Characteristically, the leisure class is embodied in a caste of warriors or of priests who are exempt from what Veblen calls ‘industrial employments’; and who engage instead in a series of occupations which he groups together as practices of ‘government, warfare, religious observances, and sports’ (2).

At the basis of this exemption is a strong primordial distinction between women’s work, which is productive, and men’s work, which is unproductive and therefore honourable (5); this distinction derives from an initial ownership of women by men, and is then extended to include the kinds of objects produced by each sex (22–24). Veblen’s governing differentiation, then, is between two kinds of practices and two classes of objects corresponding to them: some employments are worthy, others are unworthy, and ‘the worthy employments’, he says, ‘are those which may be classed as exploit; unworthy are those necessary everyday employments into which no appreciable element of exploit enters’ (8). The distinction persists into modern industrial communities, where ‘the utilization of non-human things’ is classified as industrial activity, whereas ‘the coercive utilization of man by man is not felt to be an industrial function’ (10).

All developed human cultures are thus divided between forms of work, of persons, and of objects which have dignity and those forms which don’t; this distinction is central to the organization of class hierarchies (15), and it corresponds to a series of other distinctions: between men and women, and between men’s work and women’s work; between ‘exploit’ (8) (that is, adventure, risk, daring, ‘predatory efficiency in war’) (30) and everyday useful toil; and between work applied to raw materials, and work involving the control of other human beings (10). In turn, it corresponds to a series of distinctions between kinds of objects: for example, ‘wealth acquired passively by transmission from ancestors ... becomes even more honorific than wealth acquired by the possessor’s own effort’ (29).

These distinctions are not merely the marker of an objective social structure, they organize and are the consequence of a structure of human subjectivity. Against the assumption that human action is structured by calculation about the satisfaction of needs, Veblen stresses the symbolic utilities of wealth and ownership. Ownership is driven by emulation – by a quest for honour rather than mere physical possession and consumption. It is thus based upon what Veblen calls an ‘invidious distinction’ (26): ownership of desired objects, and the ability to be wasteful with them, is at once driven by rivalrous emulation, and in turn inspires it in others; and it is in this sense of comparative achievement, and especially in the failure of others to possess and to waste what I possess and waste (a structure that may recall Nietzsche’s account of the workings of resentment, as well as René Girard’s notions of mimetic rivalry and triangular desire), that Veblen locates the dynamic force of status differentiation. Because the standard of social esteem is always comparative and emulation is therefore intrinsically unsatisfiable, any system of invidious distinction thus normalizes a state of chronic dissatisfaction (32); and, as in potlatch, the display of wealth
in conspicuous consumption transforms comparison into competition. At a dinner party, for example,

The competitor with whom the entertainer wishes to institute a comparison is, by this method, made to serve as a means to an end. He consumes vicariously for his host at the same time that he is a witness to the consumption of that excess of good things which his host is unable to dispose of single-handed, and he is also made to witness his host’s facility in etiquette. (75)

At the core of aristocratic leisure is ‘a non-productive consumption of time’, the deliberate and ostentatious wasting of time. Here another set of distinctions, reflecting Veblen’s own anti-aristocratic values, comes into play: not just between productive and unproductive work, but between material and immaterial production. Leisure-class activity is conducive to the production of immaterial goods. These include what Veblen rather ambivalently calls ‘quasi-scholarly or quasi-artistic accomplishments and a knowledge of processes and incidents which do not conduce directly to the furtherance of human life’ (45); that is, knowledge about the arts, esoteric knowledges, knowledge about fashion, sports, gaming, and so on... Despite the qualifications, it’s clear that Veblen associates aesthetic and scholarly knowledge more or less directly with the specialized forms of upper-class connoisseurship, as well as, more generally, with those stylized relations of condescension to inferiors and conventionalized subservience to superiors and equals that he calls ‘decoration’ or a ‘code of proprieties’, and which are acquired only through a ‘laborious drill’ (50); indeed, the whole business of invidious distinction becomes, increasingly with the social division of labour, ‘a more or less arduous application to the business of learning how to live a life of ostensible leisure in a becoming way’ (74–75).

A complication to the system of invidious distinction is that at a certain level of civilization men of honour begin to double their own display of leisure and of wasteful consumption with a vicarious leisure and consumption on the part of subsidiary leisure classes, particularly that of servants: not the ordinary, productive household servants but an upper caste of decorative functionaries who act as surrogate consumers (of livery, for example); such vicarious sumptuary consumption takes place ‘only on a basis of sufferance’ (72). It is this displacement downward that explains the vicarious leisure still performed by the wife in those nineteenth-century middle-class households where the husband nevertheless works: her obedience to a ‘canon of propriety’ that requires such ‘evidences of wasted effort’ as decorative handwork. Ceremonially consuming the goods that her husband produces, the wife is marked as being of inferior status, since although the surface structure of her relation to her husband seems to be that of honorific non-producer to non-honorific producer, in fact the delegated and secondary nature of her idleness inverts the surface relation; the principle that effects this inversion is that ‘the habitual rendering of vicarious leisure and consumption is the abiding mark of the unfree servant’ (83).

From these two examples – ceremonial servants, and unemployed wives – Veblen then extrapolates a chain of displacements from the leisure class as such, displacements which descend right through the social order – and do so, paradoxically, because of the very flexibility of modern class structures:

In modern civilized communities the lines of demarcation between social classes have grown vague and transient, and wherever this happens the norm of reputability imposed by the upper class extends its coercive influence with but slight hindrance down through the social structure to the lowest strata. The result is that the members of each stratum accept as their ideal of decency the scheme of
life in vogue in the next higher stratum, and bend their energies to live up to that ideal. On pain of forfeiting their good name and their self-respect in case of failure, they must conform to the accepted code, at least in appearance. (84)

At the core of Veblen’s argument is the notion of a code or ‘canon of reputability’ which establishes a standard of living conventionally appropriate to a class position and thus draws a dividing line between what counts as necessity and what counts as waste. This is to say that ‘waste’ is an entirely flexible category, predicated on a necessity which doesn’t preexist a particular social order; it means, further, that the moral basis for Veblen’s analysis of waste has no grounded basis — no basis outside a particular class morality — and that it rests, in ways to which it is itself blind, on a classically utilitarian distinction between, to put it crudely, material production on the one hand and aesthetic consumption on the other.

For Veblen, the effect of the code of honorific waste (a code which naturalizes waste as necessity) is to contaminate almost all domains of social life; it ‘may, immediately or remotely, influence the sense of duty, the sense of beauty, the sense of utility, the sense of devotional or ritualistic fitness, and the scientific sense of truth’ (116).

Religion is very directly affected: ‘Devout consumption is of the nature of vicarious consumption’ (120), and the clothing of priests, Veblen nastily observes, corresponds to the livery worn as an act of vicarious sumptuary display by ‘body servants’ (183); similarly, aesthetic taste is almost always ‘in great measure a gratification of our sense of costliness masquerading under the name of beauty’ — that is, it is of a ‘superior honorific character’. Although ‘the requirement of conspicuous wastefulness is not commonly present, consciously, in our canons of taste’, it is ‘none the less present as a customary norm selectively shaping and sustaining our sense of what is beautiful, and guiding our discrimination with respect to what may legitimately be approved as beautiful and what may not’; although the difficulty here is that of discriminating between ‘serviceability’ and ‘wastefulness’ (128), and between what he thinks of as an intrinsic aesthetic value (for example that of gems) and the value of distinction, which is a rarity value and hence ‘invidious’ (129–130). An example is the books hand-produced in limited editions and according to pre-industrial codes of workmanship by William Morris, where the aesthetic use value of the books is in direct contradiction with the rarity that prices them out of the market for all but the wealthiest consumers.

What is radical here, at least historically, is a critique which questions whether aesthetic value can be differentiated at all from this value of rarity. ‘Any valuable object’, writes Veblen, ‘in order to appeal to our sense of beauty must conform to the requirements of beauty and of expensiveness both’; but ‘beyond this the canon of expensiveness also affects our tastes in such a way as to inextricably blend the marks of expensiveness, in our appreciation, with the beautiful features of the object, and to subsume the resultant effect under the head of an appreciation of beauty simply. The marks of expensiveness come to be accepted as beautiful features of the expensive articles’ (130).

A limit case of this structure of disavowal built into aesthetic judgement is the marks of crudeness, the lack of finish, the potter’s thumb print on hand-made objects in a world of machine production, marks which serve to rank these objects as more wasteful and therefore more honorific than standardized machine-made goods. We may recognize here the structure of value that Benjamin used to designate precisely the authenticity of works of art produced in the state of pre-industrial singularity that
allows them to partake of the aурatic; and Veblen’s argument at once anticipates this
nostalgic structure; and reverses it.
Veblen initiates within sociology a tradition of analysis of sumptuary systems: not
those of the premodern era, which are closed and highly codified, but the quasi-sumptu-
ary systems of the bourgeois era which are relatively open, at least in theory, and
which are rarely formally codified, except in the writings of sociologists. His analysis
is drastically undermined; however, by its moralism. Although the concept of ‘waste’
is said to be used in a technical rather than a normative sense (97–98), it is quite clear
that it has the kind of moral force that the concept acquires within the ethos of the
late-nineteenth-century industrial middle class, radiating a gentle contempt that then
marks not just ceremonial activities but aesthetic and even intellectual activities as
profligate, in excess of some core of human necessity. A similar moralism is of course
to be found in Marxism, in the distinction – originally a technical one, but one that
quickly becomes normative – between productive and unproductive labour, a dis-
tinction grounded in an anthropology of human needs, and always in conflict with
that different tradition within Marxism of analysis of the social and historical
variability of standards of need.
Many of the themes enunciated in Veblen inform the work on the sociology of
distinction of Pierre Bourdieu (although from memory Bourdieu doesn’t ever rec-
ognize a lineage). We find in Bourdieu’s work no explicit psychology, however:
rather, on the one hand, there is the set of class-based dispositions that Bourdieu calls
*habitus*; and on the other an implicit psychology of pursuit by actors of their interests
in either economic capital and/or symbolic capital, a (self-)interest which is an
absolute, although not a presociological, given (it is defined ‘by the complex structure
of overlapping sociological fields to which the actors must be blind in order to act’).

There is no place in Bourdieu’s thinking for this game *not* to be played: he repeatedly
stresses that withdrawal, the refusal of the rules of the game, itself counts as a
prestigious activity: it’s the ease with which the aristocrat disregards the rules of
etiquette, or the person of deep learning dispenses with the correctness of taste of
the autodidact; that marks them as more fully in control of the game of distinction.
As in Veblen, this game is rivalrous; and, because Bourdieu’s concern is with an
open sumptuary system, it involves not just the assignment of consumption and
display to fixed social orders, but the dynamic of class aspiration. That is, Bourdieu
describes a game of pretences, of *claims* to status which are intrinsic to the acquisition
and maintenance of status: prestige is acquired not by actual possession of cultural
capital but by virtue of one’s ability to make a claim to possession of cultural capital
stick.

Finally, like Veblen’s, Bourdieu’s work is informed by a moralism that I shall call
’sociological’ because it derives, not, as with Veblen, from an unreflected class
prejudice, but from the postulation of a space outside the social order from which to
observe dispassionately the games and the pretences of status played within it. Paul
Rabinow describes it this way:

Fundamentally there are only two types of subjects for Bourdieu: those who act
in the social world and those who don’t. Those who do, do so on condition that
fundamentally they are blind to what they are doing, they live in a state of
*illusio*... The other possible subject position is the sociologist who studies those
who act, those beings who take their lives seriously, those who have ‘interests’.

The scientist, through the application of a rigorous method preceded and made
possible through the techniques of asceticism applied to the self, frees himself
from the embodied practices and organized spaces that produce the illusio and sees without illusion what everyone else is doing (they are maximizing their symbolic capital, while mistakenly believing they are leading meaningful lives). One effect of this postulate is a functionalism that, first, assumes that all moves belong to the game of distinction, and second, assumes that all objects mobilized within this game serve the singular function of representing possession of cultural capital. There are important differences here between some of Bourdieu’s early positions and his later view of, for example, aesthetic practices; let me merely note, however, that in his major work, it’s the aesthetic that counts as perhaps the primary medium of the bad faith of the social game; I’ll return to this point later.

Let me turn now to a major alternative tradition of thinking about the structure of social value: the work of Georges Bataille (and, following him, of Jean Baudrillard). One way of describing Bataille’s work would be to say that it follows a pathway not taken by Veblen: the possibility that, rather than confining the category of waste within a moralistic condemnation, he might have sought to theorize the role of destructiveness and gratuitous expenditure within a system of differential envy. Bataille’s analysis of value, challenging the very notion of a closed or ‘restricted’ economy directed to the accomplishment of communication or of social or economic utility, takes up as its privileged figure a rivalrous practice also allegorized by Veblen, that of the potlatch, the ‘monster child of the gift system’ as Mauss calls it.

Recent revisionist anthropology indicates that the category of potlatch was to a great extent the creation of an administrative and legal apparatus which drew together very disparate practices on the basis of an equation of a system of investments and mutual obligation (Horatio Hale makes the analogy with benefit societies and loan companies holding deposits on trust) with gratuitous and wasteful giving or with gambling.

This tension between gift and obligation is of course to be found at the heart of Mauss’s analysis of the gift form. In his reading of potlatch he closely follows the work of Franz Boas, for whom potlatch is that form of total pretension in which the obligation to return is manifested in the negative form of rivalry. Mauss describes it as an agonistic form of gift exchange peculiar to the First Nations of the American North-West – the Tingit and Haida of Alaska, and the Tsimshian and Kwakiutl of British Columbia; ‘essentially usurious and extravagant, it is above all a struggle among nobles to determine their position in the hierarchy to the ultimate benefit, if they are successful, of their own clans’ (4–5). The system Mauss describes is that of a ‘war of wealth’ in which a chief will, on various ceremonial occasions, demonstrate his social and religious standing by a ‘reckless consumption of everything which has been amassed with great industry from some of the richest coasts of the world’ (33).

The point of this ‘extravagant’, ‘exaggerated’ and ‘wasteful’ consumption (72) is the humiliation of the recipient; the gift of wealth is a challenge which must be met if one is not to lose face, but which imposes crippling burdens on the receiver, particularly since the potlatch must be repaid with interest, at rates ranging from 30% to 100% a year (40). At its extreme, the potlatch may be a pure act of destruction: ‘one destroys simply in order to give the appearance that one has no desire to receive anything back’, and in this case ‘whole cases of candle-fish or whale oil, houses, and blankets by the thousand are burnt; the most valuable coppers are broken and thrown into the sea to level and crush a rival’ (35).

In Bataille’s thought (which is – and it would perhaps be anachronistic to expect it – unaware of the extent to which this supposedly singular institution is the negative reflection of European categories of property right), the potlatch is at once the essence...
of the gift and the opposite of the principle of reciprocity (understood as equilibrium or equivalence); it is the very form of the unreturnable gift, and as such institutes the possibility of transgression of any material or symbolic economy. Instead of reciprocity there is waste, loss, whatever breaks the closure of a system of balanced exchanges. The nonproductive expenditure (dépense) of potlatch is the figure of an antieconomic and anti-utilitarian excess, a negation that cannot be recuperated through the dialectics of negativity since it is 'a sacrifice without return and without reserves'.

The concept of dépense brings together a series of different activities which lie outside the utilitarian calculus, and which include 'luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexuality (i.e., [sexuality] deflected from genital finality)...' All of these constitute a loss or 'waste' (gaspillage) against which there is no balance of credit; they involve the expulsion of waste matter, la part maudite — shit, the social surplus, the sacrificial victim; what Lacan will call the objet petit a, bodily waste or wealth doomed to uselessness. One of the strengths of Bataille's analysis is thus that the category of 'waste', rather than simply referring to activities which fail to be useful (waste in Veblen's sense of 'wastefulness'), also takes on the stronger sense of desire centred on tabooed bodily matter. From this follows a different kind of psychology of emulation, driven by revulsion and self-hatred as much as by rivalry, or rather as complex components of rivalry. When it is read in the context of Bataille's pornographic texts, this reading links directly with a dynamics of abjection, understood as a central element both of artistic creation and of the desire for power.

Waste in all its senses is a gift, then, in the strong sense that Bataille gives to the concept of potlatch. Distinguishing (as Mauss seems to) between donative and destructive forms of potlatch, he posits the logical (and perhaps temporal) priority of destruction. In this pure form the gift is absolute loss, consumption without profit, a sacrifice of the parti maudite which substitutes for the sacrificial gift of the donor's own life. (In Baudrillard's work it is the category of death that plays the role that dépense does for Bataille: death as the limit of any economy, whatever can't be incorporated into a system and thereby renders any system incoherent, undoing the structure of value itself.)

Let me note two general points about the destructive potlatch as Bataille conceives it. The first is that as sacrifice it restores the primordially intimate metonymic link between the thing and its owner, a link supposedly destroyed by the instrumental rationality of the world of work. The second is that the activities of dépense, which 'have no end beyond themselves' ('Notion', 118), are in that Kantian sense aesthetic activities.

The ascription to them of gratuitousness runs into theoretical difficulties, however, within the framework of Mauss's description of potlatch. The paradox Bataille must confront is that, although giving is, in a certain sense, losing, yet 'the loss seems to profit the one who suffers it' — both in the immediate sense that the gift is returned with interest, and in the indirect sense that the giver acquires power from the act of giving. Bataille's solution to this problem is to distinguish between economic gain and the achievement of social prestige (rang), in such a way that only pursuit of the former is said to be calculating, whereas the latter involves 'an unconsidered expenditure of vital resources' ('La Part maudite', 74). But this distinction is a sleight of hand; prestige is as much a social interest as is wealth. Mauss's recognition of the
coercive and calculative dimension of all gift is surely more rigorous in its theorization of the gift’s constitutive ambivalence.

The implications of Bataille’s esposal of ‘prestige’, the pure generosity of wasteful expenditure, emerge clearly if the category is compared with Veblen’s equivalent category of ‘exploit’, which encompasses the aristocratic uselessness of men’s work (and which is defined by explicit contrast with women’s work). Even more starkly than in Veblen, Bataillean prestige is grounded in a principle of misogyny which ties together his anthropological and pornographic texts. Here I follow Anne Freadman’s incisive analysis: discussing the theorization of prostitution in L’érotisme, she writes that

If the Lévi-Straussian analysis of social cohesion depends on his analysis of the circulation of women as tokens of exchange in a kinship system, its alternative within Bataille’s logic, I suggest, is Bataille’s analysis of women through whom men circulate non-productively and non-cumulatively. These women, or rather the mythology of these women, is the space in which is projected the thematic of transgression, revealing it as a phantasmatic structure in which the body of woman provides the ground not only for a general anthropology, but for a generalized anthropos.¹⁰

Thus Madame Edwarda, in the novel of that name, is no more than ‘the threshold required for the logic of transgression to perform’,¹¹ a logic of the honorific perversity of the ‘work’ of privileged men.

What seems to me to be demonstrated by the failure of Bataille’s radical attempt to find a way out of the restricted economy of social interests is the impossibility of imagining a point that exists outside of economy. No object can be withdrawn from its uses, isolated in a space beyond social interest, and indeed even the absolute loss that Bataille envisages can and will ultimately be put to the ends of gain.

There are, however, other ways of putting to work the concept of waste as a way of thinking about the limits of utilitarian and functionalist theories of value, whilst retaining Bataille’s central insight that waste, far from being excluded from social value, is precisely what triggers rivalrous emulation. One of them can be found, at least in outline, in Michael Thompson’s Rubbish Theory.¹²

For Thompson, waste or what he calls ‘rubbish’ is central to a theory of the formation of value. Rubbish is a zero-degree of value; and as such it’s either the invisible limit point of social value, or it’s something that we actively conspire not to see. It is thus in an asymmetrical relation to the two major categories of value, which Thompson calls the transient (this is the normal state of things: a state of decreasing value) and the durable (an exceptional state in which objects have permanent and increasing value). Consumer goods are the paradigm case of the former: works of art, perhaps, of the latter.

The assignment of things to one or the other of these categories is a function of a social game with fixed rules, in which those with control of time, space, and knowledge perform the assignment and thus ‘can ensure that their own objects are always durable and that those of others are always transient’ (9). The third and anomalous category of things with zero and unchanging value, ‘rubbish’, is, however, ‘not subject to the control mechanism (which is concerned primarily with the overt part of the system, the valuable and socially significant objects) and so is able to provide the path for the seemingly impossible transfer of an object from transience to durability’ (ibid.).
Thompson’s major examples are of a particular kind of Victorian kitsch, the Stevengraph, which lacks almost all market value for the best part of a century until in the 1960s it quite suddenly regains both economic and aesthetic value; and of decayed inner-city housing stock which undergoes a process of gentrification. These processes of value shift are characterized by their abruptness: “The rubbish to durable transition is an all-or-nothing transfer. An object cannot gradually slide across from one category to the other as is the case with the transient to rubbish transfer. The transition involves the transfer across two boundaries, that separating the worthless from the valuable and that between the covert and the overt” (26). It involves a loss of the polluting qualities of rubbish, and at the same time an increase in aesthetic value; it also tends to involve a shift from control by women to control by men. More generally, the system of value transfer between the categories of the transient, rubbish, and the durable permits the uneven distribution of power and status within our society and is the basis for the cultural differences between the classes that are ranged along that distribution. The permissible, but carefully controlled, transfers between these categories allow the degree of social mobility sufficient to modify these classes so that they accurately reflect the inevitably changing distribution of power within our society. That is, they permit the continuous realignment of power and status (109) –

although I’d want to say, rather, that negotiations of status are an aspect rather than a reflection of struggles over power. Crucially, however, rubbish in Thompson’s argument is the condition of possibility for any revaluation of worthless things to the category of highly valued durability. What we might add to Thompson’s account, in order to retain Veblen and Bataille’s insight into the structure of invidious emulation, is the supposition that the desire to possess is not just the desire to accumulate things which are durable and highly valued but also, and more perversely, a desire to make waste: a desire to buy prestige at the expense of one’s rivals by means of profligate expenditure but also, perhaps – treating one’s things as metonyms of oneself – to substitute a sacrificial destruction or loss of objects for one’s own mortal person. This oscillation in the structure of value corresponds to a proposition that value is a process, a movement, a cycle, rather than a quality of things or a structure of cotemporal relations. We might say that whatever has once been rubbish keeps a kind of memory of that state, an awareness of the possibility of relapse into it, such that the newly aestheticized object, the kitsch silk drawing or the gentrified house, are valued precisely because their value is insecure and is only precariously maintained within a market built upon the magical transmogrification of rubbish.

One of the premises that Thompson shares with any sociology of things, then, is that the transformation of value is not grounded in the intrinsic properties of objects (and indeed, in the case of the decayed housing stock, those properties are substantially modified as the framework of value changes). What I extrapolate from this is an argument that value is an effect of the circulation of objects between regimes of value, a circulation which may be, but is not necessarily, driven either by wastefulness, the transformation of valuable matter into waste, or by the reverse process which Thompson describes whereby a zero degree of worth generates new and unexpected structures of value which then modify the rules of the game of distinction. This circulation is always excessive to the singular market supposed by any reduction of use value to intrinsic properties.

Regimes of value are those manifolds in which judgements of taste crystallize and
take hold: conflictual apparatuses which decree that in one context and for one social group a particular house is a derelict slum, and in another context and for another social group is a stylish worker’s cottage with infinite potential for restoration. It’s precisely the relativity of regimes to each other – that is, their irreducibility, and thus the clash of grounds of value between them – that generates the structure of rivalrous emulation. As Thompson’s schema implies, and as Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff have argued, objects have trajectories, careers which take them potentially through multiple regimes of value, with waste or rubbish playing a crucial role in this movement; but the corollary to this view of function as a matter of use rather than an entelechy of intrinsic properties of the object is that objects are likely, in a complex world, to have a number of actual or potential overlapping uses. No single game exhausts their function: no single description exhausts the uses to which their properties might appropriately or inappropriately lend themselves. Indeed, objects don’t simply occupy a realm of objecthood over against the human: they translate human interests, carry and transform desires and strategies. This is perhaps most clearly visible in the case of technological things, which, bearing inscribed within them the delegated qualities and intentions of humans, are in themselves neither dead matter nor human souls but rather the transient solidification of a relation between the human and the nonhuman as well as of the various and conflicting interests of those who put them to use.

Within any complex system objects are functionally fluid and heterogeneous; if they return with a certain inevitability to the codes of invidious distinction they nevertheless reach this point by way of complicated circuits, the traces of which inscribe within things the virtuality of other uses. This is to argue, against Bataille, that complexity, the imbrication of an object in a multiplicity of games, is itself sufficient to break the patterns of closure against which his theory is directed, and which he can only imagine disrupting through acts of transgression that ultimately affirm and rely upon the very Law that they contest. The concept of waste, as I have used it in this paper, is the figure of this virtuality, of its generative dynamic in the destruction and formation of value, and of its central role in distinguishing common rubbish from classy stuff.

Notes


11. Ibid.


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