metropolitics

Reconsidering Wasteways from Boston to Seattle

Lisa Jean Moore

Reviewed: Lily Baum Pollans, *Resisting Garbage: The Politics of Waste Management in American Cities*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2021.

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, with disposable masks and endless testing, garbage proliferates. It is extremely difficult to resist our own participation in creating more single use trash. Fortunately, Lily Baum Pollans' book, Resisting Garbage: The Politics of Waste Management in American Cities*, is an excellent analysis of our individual and collective consumptive habits that produce waste. Through her comparison of two different American cities, Pollans offers incisive commentary on the creation of urban wasteways.*

Sweetening a latte from your neighborhood coffee bar, stirrer in hand, facing three different bins for "recycling," "compost," and "landfill" signifies a sign of the times, perhaps: the convergence of a reputable business concerned with the climate with a principled consumer who takes care to dispose of their ethically sourced goods in a responsible way. But this mundane morning routine of tossing the trash in a bin is also scaffolded by decades of governmentality animated by individual actors, corporations, and nongovernmental organizations. In fact, the "choice" of where to put our trash might actually dull our critical thinking about garbage; the "choice" cools us out. In 1952, the symbolic interactionist Erving Goffman wrote an article called "On Cooling the Mark Out: Some Aspects of Adaptations to Failure," which borrows the phrase from criminal subcultures where the "mark" is "the sucker," or "the victim of a planned crime," and "cooling out" means "calming the sucker down" (Goffman 1952). Goffman's explanation of cooling out the mark can be expanded to describe a situation where people on the receiving end of oppression or victimization call for some kind of justice, and the oppressive force arranges a situation where they act as if they've gotten justice. In fact, they have not. It's a trick that secures power by feigning a small relinquishing of the power, which is, ironically, a function of the power.

Urban planner and scholar Lily Baum Pollans' work provides a necessary interruption to our collective cooling-out and calls for radical reconsideration of our individual consumptive habits and importantly our meta-level municipal waste policies. Her fascinating book *Resisting Garbage: The Politics of Waste Management in American Cities* is an analysis of years of research on two American cities of relatively similar size, Seattle and Boston, and their distinct practices of managing trash and the city's relative agency to mitigate or reproduce "capitalist and colonial socioenvironmental relations" (p. 16). A clear writer who has a knack for describing complex bureaucracies with lively and well-paced prose, Pollans coins the term *weak recycling waste regime* (WRWR). Our WRWR is the everyday management of garbage that supports the extraction–manufacturing–consumption–waste chain; the WRWR, she convincingly argues, encourages overconsumption that exponentially outpaces planetary carrying capacity, with no corresponding increase in quality of life.

Her methods rely on developing a wasteways framework, where a wasteway "is a city-scale negotiation among citizens, public servants, and the political economy processes through which waste is produced and represented" (p. 10). Pollans insists that not all actors are equal in the construction of a wasteway, and powerful social and political actors produce conditions where most individuals have no choice. "By deciding what residents can put in the trash and what is prohibited from the trash, city-scale waste managers directly inform household decisions about value" (p. 13). The book, then, is primarily concerned with a comparison of Boston, a compliant wasteway which, Pollans argues, is conventional in terms of how our contemporary cities operate, to Seattle, a defiant wasteway, and also a more unusual system. Her accessible style, use of theoretical concepts, and detailed storytelling will appeal to sociologists, urban planners, historians, geographers, and scholars of science studies. There is a potential for a crossover audience as lay people interested in climate change, city politics, participatory governance, and waste management will be riveted.

Chapter 1 offers a contextualization through the history of waste regimes in the United States, including a remarkable deconstruction of the invention of "pollution." Pollans chronicles how the invisibilization of garbage operates in concert with industrial actors' historic and contemporary encouragement of people not to worry about garbage: "As sanitary engineers made it easier to throw everything away, Americans lost expertise in reusing materials and self-provisioning" (p. 22). Her work brings to mind agnotology, or the study of the production of ignorance—an ignorance that is often the result of a protracted and strategic historical struggle of crafty political and cultural actors (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008). We have forgotten how to repurpose and refashion our detritus. One quibble that should not diminish this stellar chapter is the sentence that begins, "Women reformers were among the first to actively represent garbage in cities as an aesthetic problem" (p. 19). Much more could be made of the rich history of social housekeeping as linked with municipal housekeeping in the late 19th to the early 20th century (Oakley 2018) and it seems a missed opportunity to shed some light on the gender dynamics of waste-management policies. Beyond this, bringing attention to "women reformers" suggests that all other waste-management policymaking is gender neutral, when it appears a great many decision-makers are men. This raises the question, could masculinity have something to do with the legacies of waste management we inherit?

Chapters 2 and 3 trace the past few decades of the development of Boston and Seattle's WRWR. In the early 1980s, both cities dispensed with using incinerators, framed briefly as a waste-to-energy opportunity and diverged from somewhat similar paths. Boston, described as a city with Yankee thrifty sensibilities, starts to export its waste to other regions whereas Seattle, the land of Western landscapes and technophilia, "abandoned an incinerator plan in favor of aggressive recycling and waste reduction—defying the dominant logic of privatization and techno-managerialism that characterized both solid-waste practice and many other arenas of public administration at the time" (p. 101). Seattle, in a move Pollans attributes largely to a vocal citizenry, bucked the trends of invisibilizing garbage and increasing use of disposable goods and rather encouraged people to become increasingly attentive to their relationship with waste. Readers begin to get a sense of the potential of Seattle's resistance in the face of neoliberal market ethics.

Chapter 4 takes up a more detailed comparison of the two cities' wasteways from the 1990s–2000s. During this period, urban decision-making in Boston justified the "producer–disposer interests" (p. 110) where slight increases in recycling did not disrupt or change the endemic WRWR of the city's past. By comparison, there is much to appreciate in Pollans' interpretive framing of Seattle's wasteway; her work reveals a rather uncommon and hopeful story of human collaboration, innovation, resilience and ingenuity to manage waste. Here we see how the people of Seattle, variably situated vis-à-vis formal power, change and grow to insist on radical revisioning of humans' relationship to waste.

In her final chapter, Pollans offers a way to employ her wasteway analysis to assess a city's location on the continuum of compliant to defiant. In one example, she provides an evidence-based explanation of how New York City is faring better than Houston. The book ends with a

foreshadowing of what may come next from Pollans. Attuned to our current anxieties, Pollans gestures toward the future management of marine plastics. As the public continues to express environmental and public health misgivings around plastics, the plastics lobby has already "become adept at encouraging state legislatures to pass preemption laws that make it illegal for municipal governments to regulate plastics consumption" (p. 137). The strategies of cooling the mark are already in place for plastics. We are told, through industry-inspired claims, that it is our individual responsibility to be ecologically minded when disposing of plastics. If only we are responsible, we can stop the floating island of plastic in the Pacific.

Fortunately, Pollans has supplied analytic tools that aid in sifting through the discourses shaping perceptions of waste—what it even is, to start with, as well as understandings of individual and institutional responsibility for the problems it causes. Her work can help us to determine if we are (intentionally or not) acquiescing to the extraction–manufacturing–consumption–waste chain or transgressing and resisting it.

Bibliography

Goffman, Erving. 1952. "On Cooling the Mark Out: Some Aspects of Adaptation to Failure", *Psychiatry*, vol. 15, no. 4, pp. 451–463. DOI: 10.1080/00332747.1952.11022896.

Oakley, Ann. 2018. *Women, Peace and Welfare: A Suppressed History of Social Reform, 1880–1920*, Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Proctor, Robert and Schiebinger, Londa L. (eds.). 2008. *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Lisa Jean Moore is a medical sociologist and professor of sociology and gender studies at Purchase College, State University of New York (SUNY). She lives in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. Her books include *The Body: Social and Cultural Dissections* (Routledge, 2014, with Monica Casper), *Buzz: Urban Beekeeping and the Power of the Bee* (New York University Press, 2013, with Mary Kosut), *Gendered Bodies: Feminist Perspectives* (Oxford University Press, 2010, with Judith Lorber), *Missing Bodies: The Politics of Visibility* (New York University Press, 2009, with Monica Casper), *Sperm Counts: Overcome by Man's Most Precious Fluid* (New York University Press, 2008), and the edited collection *The Body Reader: Essential Social and Cultural Readings* (New York University Press, 2010, with Mary Kosut). *Catch and Release: The Enduring Yet Vulnerable Horseshoe Crab* (New York University Press, 2018) explores the intraspecies relationships between humans and *Limulus polyphemus* (Atlantic horseshoe crabs). Her most recent forthcoming book, *Our Transgenic Futures*, is about spider goats and synthetic biology.

To cite this article:

Lisa Jean Moore, "Reconsidering Wasteways from Boston to Seattle", *Metropolitics*, 1 February 2022. URL: https://metropolitics.org/Reconsidering-Wasteways-from-Boston-to-Seattle.html.