Disposability

By Victoria Oana Lupascu | August 17, 2017

The concept of disposability is intimately connected to the notions of waste and consumption. Gavin Lucas engages with the notion of a "throw away" society developed in the 1960s United States and contrasts it with waves of consumption and overconsumption promoted by multinational corporations and the state. The "throw-away society" represents an instantiation of consumption habits that have been changing since the beginning of late 19th century, as well as, in Susan Strasser's theorization from *Waste and Want* (1999), a new interpretation of cultural codes and domestic practices. Strasser argues that in the Western society popular understanding of cleanliness, gender, class, modernization and national identity became closely connected with daily life habits of consumption. While Lucas specifically tailors his argument around material culture and theorizes the trash/waste bin as "the siphon for more than our unwanted objects, but for every need to no longer want objects: to make the objects alienable again," his argument can be extended from objects to people (19) when corroborated with Strassen's argument. The waste bin contains redundant objects, the material aftermath of consumption, and because of its intermediary position between household and garbage dump, it brings to actuality the waste trade alongside the cultural discriminatory practices of equating waste with ethic groups and economic classes, subtly highlighting colonial practices of othering. Thus, the transition between waste produced by humans and humans as waste appears as a long cultural, political and economic process within which plastic cups and human lives share the same economic potential of any other commodity, albeit at a different scale: the first is of personal use, the second is intended for the development and spread of global capital.

Susan Signe Morrison in *The Literature of Waste, Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter* (2015) furthers both Lucas and Strasser's arguments by analyzing the social composition of the Western European societies in terms of waste. She argues that "material garbage collection intimately mingles with the stockpiling of human existence. Those who literally pick up our filth become filthy in turn. The rhetoric of othering constructs unprivileged races, religions, and ethnicities as unclean or inhuman. Wasted humans can be anyone- no one is immune. The rich become poor, the powerful weak, and the young old" (97). While showing the elasticity of the "becoming waste, thus disposable" framework, Morrison also emphasizes the more quotidian (in contrast to the more abstract ruminations by Agamben) notion of garbage picking, bringing into discussion the association between cleanliness as a form of modernity and forwardness that is in contrast to filth, as an instantiation of backwardness and something that must be disposed of before it pollutes everything around it. The permeability of the framework subtly brings forth the implicit precariousness of "becoming waste" and indicates political, socio-cultural and economic forces that play into transforming one's status from a citizen to a disposable human. As an illustration, the sequence of unemployment due to privatization, disappearance of certain professions and the forced international migration in search for any time of work resulted in

highly educated, Eastern European migrant workers becoming garbage collectors in countries in Western Europe, and being associated with filth, crime, and garbage in general. Moreover, the trope of "humans as waste" absconds the mutually reinforcing connection between the garbage collectors (the waste and the filth) and the urban dwellers (the clean): there can be no cleanliness without the garbage collectors. Therefore, the disposable, the waste as objects and humans, inhabit a place of exclusion from society which provides not only an unrecognized space of reinforcement for society itself, but also the fuel and the labor for maintaining the status quo. Morrison draws on Zygmund Bauman when tackling the issue of Othering and social hierarchization based on the concept of "waste" and "disposability". She agrees with Bauman's claim that society produces "wasted lives", in other words humans who are rendered redundant for the present stage of the economy and, as a consequence, are not supported anymore by the state (Bauman 2004, 6). The fear of becoming redundant at any moment fuels city dwellers to render the "wasted lives" invisible, powerless in their daily lives, and, for that matter, ontologically non-existent, argues Bauman. When talking about city dwellers, Bauman uses the inclusive pronoun "we", marking a false barrier between the "wasted lives" and the "we" whose fear of contagion renders invisible entire groups of people. He does not account for the societal and international forces that deconstruct such a barrier, subjecting the city dwellers to different types of structural violence. Morrison, in contrast, shows how each individual can be rendered disposable through a dynamic process characterized by flows of capital production and reproduction. She destabilizes the seemingly stable category of "we", and even the passive connotation the words "disposable" and "wasted" have, in order to emphasize the fragility of economic status, identity formation and social inclusiveness.

Zygmund Bauman in his book, *Wasted Lives, Modernity and Its Outcats* (2004), highlights a temporal tension between the end point represented by humans becoming "wasted lives" and the possibility of surpassing such a state and reentering the capitalist market through labor. This tension is further elaborated by Melanie Beacroft in *Bauman, 'Wasted Lives' and the Eclipse of the Political* (2004) where she draws attention to the ways in which human thinking about life is conditioned by the concept of productivity, which translates into a "market based understanding of the human condition" (9). But she is quick to avoid Bauman's conceptual limitations brought about by his exclusion of freedom, agency, humanity, and subjectivity from the theorization of the concept of "wasted lives". Beacroft argues that people are both free and constrained by globalization and consumerism, forces which simultaneously impact them: "people are both consumers and consumables" (6) without the opportunity of choosing one or the other, but with the possibility of adopting a type of behavior that does not entirely erase their subjectivity or humanity.

Regardless of any personal choice regarding different types of behavior, the financialized global market requires from its nation-state participants to implement buffer mechanisms when entering and participating in the market activities, that is groups of population that can be disposed of in order to shoulder any consequences of speculations the national actors have made on the global market. This market mechanism, requires in Christian Marazzi's view, "processes of dispossession to create and maintain a population of 'surplused' people as monetized aggregates of disposable life" (40). In this capacity, the said groups of population enable a constant speed of capital circulation with minimal monetary losses for the state or the financial agency spearheading the economic processes, but with catastrophic

consequences for the monetized, disposable groups of people. This way, “capitalism turns bare life into a direct source of profit” (40), a source that protects other assets from risks and financial losses just as the garbage pickers, in Morrison’s theorization, protect the city dwellers from being suffocated by their own production of garbage. Thus, from Marazzi’s perspective, it is imperiously necessary to maintain the existence of a poor economic class that can be disposed of at any time in order to support large scale privatization through imposed austerity programs, to develop new ways of capital financialization and, at a national state level, to be able to comply with structural adjustment programs imposed by the International Monetary Fund and/or the World Bank.

People’s labor and lives contain different purchasing power, as Neferti X.M. Tadiar argues, and become synonyms with money as means of exchange. The rules dictating the value of lives and labor have to obey the fluctuating rates of exchange dictated by unequal political and economic relations between the global market and different individual states. People are not in control of their future, Tadiar argues, since the market and the state deem them as “exchange values extractable in the present” (12). The disposable populations’ value can only be noticed in large-scale, aggregate form. Since human existence in its disposable form rests at the center of global spread of neoliberalism, then the implementation of structural adjustment programs and neoliberal agendas in the Global South could have not gained traction without the state and the international market’s intervention into the people’s present and the future, without making poor people’s lives disposable. While this is not a phenomenon exclusive to the Global South, and suffice to think about the indigenous people’s treatment in countries such as Canada or United States of America, its theater of operation becomes broader in the Global South context. In the Global South, Tadiar further argues, becoming disposable represents a mode of being for the poor, and no longer an event; the surpassing of the “wasted life” state cannot happen anymore, solving, thus, the tension in Bauman’s argument, although still without any mention about agency, resilience and humanity.

The notions of *disposability* and *disposable people* have been connected to the colonial enterprise and reinterpreted to describe the contemporary context by Kevin Bales in his book, *Disposable People. New Slavery in the Global Economy* (2004). As the title indicates, Bales equates the condition of *disposability* with a new type of slavery in the globalized, neoliberal economic context. The points of differentiation between the conditions of slavery in the 20th and 21st century and the colonial context reside in the almost worldwide acknowledgement of slavery’s illegality, and the inexistence of legal ownership exercised by a human being over another. However, Bales argues that in the 20th and 21st century, the slave-owners, have become slave-holders who obtain their slaves through trafficking networks without having to worry for the livelihood of their workers (5). Bales claims that during the colonial period, slaves were an expensive commodity, that required just enough food and care to be kept alive and productive in order to produce profit, while in the contemporary period, since the unemployment and poverty rates are constantly on the raise, the number of people who can be tricked or coopted into slavery is infinite. Consequently, because acquiring labor force is almost free as is its maintenance, there is a short term, often seasonal, relationship between the worker and the holder (15). Drawing on this comparison and conceptualization of economic relations, Bales argues that one of the major characteristic of the new slaves is *disposability*: they are people whose labor-capacity is used

for one specific task and then abandoned. The one-time use of labor capacity is not temporally bound to a season, but depends on the social, economic and cultural contexts that accommodate the owners' profit ambitions expanding it from a few years (for prostitution or housekeeping, for example) to a few months (for charcoal making in Brazil, for instance). However, Bales does not detail the economic conditions which, corroborated with intense globalization, have created the logistic and moral possibilities for what he calls "new slavery". The transformation of people's lives into "soft currency" (Tadiar 2013, 29), in other words, a medium of exchange rather a measure or holder of value, in tandem with the constant migration from rural areas to urban spaces, as well as to international locales, are indicators of neoliberal practices that are symptomatic of the production of "wasted lives". Also, Bales' "new slaves" are part of transnational kinship and familial networks that help subsidize the unemployed relatives left behind who form the stagnant, poor population the state deems redundant through privatization of the state industries, age and disease. Therefore, once again, the term *disposability* and *disposable* people paints a much intricate picture of mutual dependence of different social and economic groups than initially perceived.

In an attempt to understand the process of exclusion from the public sphere of different groups of population, Giorgio Agamben theorized them as *homo sacer*, those can be killed, but not sacrificed. In other words, the excluded layer of the population can die as a result of structural violence, but their death is not publicly recognized as a sacrifice for society's existence or advancement of any kind. Agamben ties his conceptualization to the notion of *zoe* and *bios*, and explains the concepts of *bios* and *zoe* in relation to state's sovereignty. *Bios* represents the political rights a citizen has inside society and that is more than *zoe*, since *zoe* represents the animal life, the instinctual impulses of survival. In a societal context, *homo sacer*, the human that can be killed, but not sacrificed, has been reduced to bare life, to *zoe*, while his *bios (*his political rights) have been taken away. *Homo sacer* exists outside society, and such a distinction emphasizes the dichotomy of included-excluded groups of population in different parts of the world. Adding the biological dimension of illness and extreme poverty, all human beings become *zoe* with political rights. Their bodies, the *zoe*, can be exploited and can determine the awarding of political rights, as well as the exclusion from such an order. Agamben indicates an interesting paradox, however, in his distinction between *bios* and *zoe* that characterizes the *homo sacer*: the *homo sacer*, although excluded from society's political order, remains in an undetermined state of inclusion through exclusion. If *disposability* also indicates the quality of being available for use, then the indeterminate state of exclusion through inclusion is maintained by this availability and privileges once more the states' overpowering agency over the *homo sacer's* agency. His *disposability* is not absolute since, rhetorically, he can always be reintroduced into the political discourse of the time for political and economic gains. Thus, I infer that the *homo sacer* can be characterized by his capacity of being disposable for the state (his labor or existence can be used and then thrown away), and, by his continuous state of *disposability*: his availability towards exploitation with no ethical implications.

In conclusion, following different conceptualizations of disposability and its correlatives, such as "wasted lives" in Bauman's view, "new slaves" theorized by Bales, human lives as "soft currency" or "surplused people" proposed by Tadiar, or *homo sacer* defined by Agamben, it become increasingly clear that this concept describes a permanent relationship, albeit in the

negative, between certain layers of the global population, the neoliberal state and the global capital market. The state relies on the poor to diminish the risks it tasks on the global financial market by bearing the brunt of increased taxes and very low employment opportunities, in the same way city dwellers rely on the garbage pickers to keep the city clean without being seen. The disposable population is excluded from participating in the political sphere and has no place in the public discourse, but they, in the subsidiary, enable the production and reproduction of capital. Thus, after these considerations, the concept of disposability unveils a dynamic relation between uneven social strata and neoliberal development and invites us to explore further what Tadiar calls "genealogies of understanding" (43) of different modes of being in the world, of the subterranean histories that produce the world as we experience it every day.

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How to Cite

Lupascu, Victoria Oana. August 17, 2017. "Disposability." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.