



## The Second Half of Leonia. Waste, Morality, Power and Reputation in a Highland Alpine Valley.

Riccardo Maniscalco

Independent Researcher. e-mail <[riccardo.maniscalco@edu.unito.it](mailto:riccardo.maniscalco@edu.unito.it)>

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper is the outcome of three weeks of fieldwork in an alpine highland valley, conducted within the framework of the master's degree in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna. Adopting a political ecology perspective grounded in the notions of waste regime (Gille 2007) and mass waste (Reno 2014) the paper analyses the disposal system of the valley focussing on two groups of workers that were primarily engaged with waste: dustmen and municipality workers. The findings show how morality, surveillance and reputation were features that both groups had to deal with, despite occasionally adopting different strategies with different outcomes, that also shaped the disposal system and waste conceptualisation within the valley. In the conclusion it is eventually proposed to reformulate Gille's notion of waste regime, especially considering not only how waste is perceived but also how it is enacted and to extend the political aspect of garbage to encompass all dimensions of everyday life.*

### There, on the high peaks

In 1972 Italo Calvino's book "Invisible Cities" (1978) was published in Italy for the first time. The text mixes poetry and prose in a collection of small fantastic city portraits, each one standing metaphorically for an aspect of contemporary life in the Euro-American world. One of those towns is Leonia. To be precise it's not entirely correct to define it as just *one* city, since the two halves that compose it couldn't be more different. The first one doesn't differ much from all the cities we are used to, with the exception and peculiarity that every object is used one time and one time only before getting disposed of. The second half is where all those discarded objects end up: its landfill, practically.

This essay is aimed at presenting the results of my journey through the second side of Leonia. In my case, however, Leonia<sup>1</sup> wasn't a city at all. The general framework in which the research took place was in fact the mandatory fieldwork training I had to undergo as master student in cultural and social anthropology [Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie] at the University of Vienna. From mid-November to early December 2019 together with other eight students and the organising professor, I left for a

<sup>1</sup> In order to protect the privacy of my interlocutors I chose to substitute real names of people and places to anonymised ones. When I name them I also highlight which kind of relation the person had to waste and waste management in the valley, since I think those were important elements that influenced the opinion of my research partners.

highland valley in Northern Tyrol, Austria. Once there every student was expected to engage with a topic of choice in the area of political ecology. The arguments and methodologies of research were disparate but all were joined together in an attempt to investigate one side of the political aspect inherent to human-environment relationship.

Leonia was indeed suited for a wide range of investigative choices in this area. The valley was one of the many that flow into the Inn valley [*Inntal*] and the Tyrolean lowlands and that derive one of its main sources of income from tourism and ski-resorts. It was divided into four municipalities, increasingly more sparsely populated as one got closer to the mountain range. Our accommodation was in the fourth of those, not far from the spot where the road ended in a rocky slope crowded with pine trees.

As suggestive this and other sceneries were, they didn't characterise my research much as I spent most of my time in Leonia dealing with garbage and rubbish. My research interest was, as a matter of fact, guided by the attempt to understand how waste treatment and waste management manifested in Leonia. Those two operations can be understood as a complex procedure -a circulatory system or chain- that is made up of several different processes and passages, in which ultimate goal is the final elimination of the disposed objects (Gille 2007; Brunclíková 2017). In my Leonia, the fourth municipality, organic waste and non-recyclables were collected weekly, house by house. All other kinds of waste had to be carried to the civic amenity site [*Bau- und Recyclinghof*]<sup>2</sup>, or Bauhof as it was commonly called, where they were stored in enormous containers according to their typology. Those in turn were removed, once full, by the company to which the municipality entrusted waste collection and disposal. This operation did not have a fixed schedule and the number of times the containers were emptied changed according to the type of material, the season and other factors, but it can be generally stated that at least one container per week had to be taken away. The valley itself did not have any kind of landfill or recycling facility, which meant all waste was taken away out of the valley to be processed further. Adopting a "follow the things" perspective (Marcus 1995), it is evident that waste management as a complex system extended outside the singularity of the valley. Unfortunately, my technical resources didn't allow me to investigate in that direction. What I did, instead was to focus on the specific form the system assumed within the valley, specifically in the fourth and most dispersed municipality.

This implied technically working with two different groups of people: the dustmen conducting house-to-house collection and the municipality workers supervising the Bauhof. Even though the two might appear similar because both engaged in waste treatment for working reasons and were all white Tyrol-born<sup>3</sup> men<sup>4</sup>, their differences are maybe more important than their similarities to locate them properly in the valley's social and waste management system. If the municipality workers at the Bauhof were acknowledged as members of the valley community and only had to attend to the operations within the Bauhof a couple of times per week, the dustmen had daily interactions with waste on a translocal level. Indeed, their company covered a huge part of Northern Tyrol and they were working in a different place each day, and many weeks could have passed before they got back to Leonia. Furthermore, their work always remained the same, it didn't matter where they were in Northern Tyrol. On the contrary the municipality workers faced different kinds of tasks each day,

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2 In the next pages I opted to call this place with its abbreviated German name to save space.

3 Only one dustman I interacted with came from southern Bavaria, Germany, and moved to Austria to work.

4 Qll the community workers and dustmen were males. Three dustmen told me about how a couple of women once worked in their same company, but this was no longer the case when the research was conducted. Municipality workers also told me there were no specific reasons for this kind of gender selectivity: they just assumed no woman ever asked to work in their position, even though imagined things might be different in the future since there seemed to be no explicit restriction in this sense.

of which the Bauhof was just one among many. Anyway, their work there remained a non-qualified one and it is likely that taking part in the Bauhof's activities a few times was enough to understand how to do it correctly. Only the treatment of dangerous materials [*Problemstoffe*] and the necessary knowledge about federal and state laws represented an exception. Workers told me, however, that the right procedures were quickly learned with a short training and adopting reasoning and good sense. On the contrary, the work of the dustmen - especially that of the drivers<sup>5</sup>- required a not irrelevant amount of ability. The mountain roads were in fact often extremely narrow, slippery and not exactly suited for a big waste collection van. Of course, this fact influenced the way dustmen did and evaluated their jobs. Finally, the future perspectives of the two groups differed. In fact, while the community workers expected to keep on doing the same job in the valley for the rest of their lives, the dustmen were very often very young men that hoped for better working possibilities in the future.

### **Waste as Conflictual Matter**

As mentioned above, the research framework was a three-week-long university project dealing with political ecology. This subject positions itself at the crossroad of interests about environment and society, very often with a strong attention to social conflicts about land and environmental resources (Karlsson 2015). In this framework waste appears as a very suitable topic for research. Recent years saw, in fact, a widespread increase of awareness for ecological related issues in vast parts of the European population. A recurring discourse of the present-day wave of ecological concern envisions waste as a problematic item. Plastic straws and their pollution of oceans, especially their harm to wildlife (Brunner 2020; Deutsche WWF-Abteilung 2020) is nothing but an example of this heightened awareness. It is thus widely acknowledged in European lay discourses that garbage can potentially have a very detrimental impact on the environment and it represents an actual source of conflict. Furthermore, as some of my interlocutors noticed, we have to keep in mind that another dimension exists, where garbage might become a source of conflict: in its understanding as a resource for profit. Investigating waste through the lens of political ecology should thus bring us to pose the following question: what are the main interests at stake here and what methods are used in order to pursue them? In the present work I precisely attempt to answer this question for Leonia.

After such an incipit, a reader approaching the following paragraphs might be surprised in noticing the scarce presence of the environment as a clearly physical and material phenomenon. This is mainly ascribed to the perspective I chose to adopt: a symbolic-structuralist one, according to O'Hare's (2019) classification of scientific contributions to the analysis of waste, and which identifies in Mary Douglas (1966) its foremother. I followed an investigative preference for the communicative and symbolic dimension of waste, instead of considering its physical effects on the valley and on the life of its human and non-human dwellers.

I have here also to admit, as my interlocutor pointed out several times even if in a too optimistic fashion maybe, that the way garbage was locally processed was in line with all the European, national and local rules and laws<sup>6</sup> and that the damaging effects on the valley were very scarce, if none at all. I know this was the perspective of a very specific group of people, which was very likely to have a strong interest in defining the valley as clean -for touristic goals, for instance. In agreeing with them, however,

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5 Dustmen always worked in pairs: a driver and a collector [*Fahrer und Aufleger*]. The first one used to sit inside the cabin all the time driving the van, while the second used to remain outside, carrying the dumpster to the mechanic arm that emptied them in the van container, also activating the arm itself.

6 As I will explain clearly in the next sub-sections, it is possible to trace back this kind of situation to the notion of Mass Waste formulated by Reno (2014). A precise and almost perfectly efficient system of waste disposal should as a matter of fact precisely be one of the main features of Mass Waste (Reno 2014).

I have no interest in downplaying the damaging effects of waste. I am aware that the costs of waste production and disposal might have affected some other part of the world and several kinds of garbage were still to be found on the valley's roads and pathways. But still not in the amount representing an immediate threat to environment's well-being.

This way of understanding and perceiving the environment among the valley dwellers must be considered carefully, because it affected the way people thought and spoke about their surroundings and consequently acted. This vision however was not by any means shared by all valley inhabitants. This fact implies, for a political ecology investigation, to examine who defined what was dirty, what was at stake with this definition and what happened when different definitions met each other. Attempting to answer those questions necessitates confronting the notion of morality more accurately.

Morality is indeed a very political topic: it is the cornerstone of all political initiatives and actions. In the moment it gives human beings a framework with which to judge the world it is also pushing some of them to fight for what they deem to be good and right. An increase in tensions and conflicts with people that have different worldviews is a possible development deriving from moral standpoints. And exactly the feature of conflict is what defines, in my opinion, the "political". Conflict indeed occurs when two different interest groups start to act in order to impose their particular view as the dominant and normative one. Situations ranging from everyday arguments to international diplomacy all fall in this category. The implication of this understanding is that morality and ontology are strictly interconnected. In order to grasp what is at stake it is thus fundamental to understand how the parties involved judge and define the subject of the confrontation, because the way we define things influences our orientation towards them, moulding our expectations and motivating our behaviours. The definitions of waste and its morality stand in a very close relation and need to be considered together.

Something immediately striking of conflicts around waste in Leonia is that it usually disregarded any kind of group belonging. Possible tensions could have arisen at any level and inner group conflicts weren't less likely than with unrelated or out-group people. As it is typical of "mass waste regimes" (Reno 2014) every person was as a matter of fact left free to choose their own individual orientation and engagement towards waste in matters like recycling, littering and so forth.

This kind of approach to waste is nothing but one of the possible constellations that waste management assumed through the world and through history. Gille (2007) defines them as "waste regimes". In the scholar's opinion they represent the pattern that defines the management of waste in a specific time and place. This definition should allow for an understanding of waste processing as a fully social process influenced by social institutions that define production and distribution of waste. Each waste regime might be broken up in three main dimensions: „productions, representations and politics of waste" (Gille 2007: 34). In addition, each of these dimensions is to be understood as made up of the joining together of three primary qualities of waste: its materiality, its spatiality and its temporality. Where possible and sensible I have tried to engage all those aspects trying to establish a dialogue with Gille's conception, also trying to understand how my experience with waste workers might be reflected in, and influence her conceptualizations. Indeed, the definition of waste morality and the self-definition of waste workers' identities appear to agree with her notion of "representations", while the practices concerning surveillance and its working around should belong to her "political" level, even though this last phenomena are present on a daily basis and not at the level of written laws as Gille (2007) seems to mainly mean.

## **Waste and Morality**

The topic of waste morality can be traced back to the work of Hawkins (2006). In his reflections, he notices how garbage is located at the centre of many moral economies, where it always stands for something “bad”. The European campaigns targeting waste reduction usually adopt a language that is based on notions of guilt, care and obligation, environmental awareness and individual responsibility (Brunclíková 2017). The result is a situation where an individual is esteemed or despised according to the way s/he interacts with waste (Hawkins 2006, Brunclíková 2017).

I have experienced this same situation in Leonia too. It was evident how every valley dweller was judged by the others according to the way they interacted with their own waste. Stupid [*blöd, dumm*] or even pig [*Schwein*] are words that I heard at the Bauhof or in the interviews to describe those people that didn't sort out their waste properly or that left it lying around. Since this moral perspective has proved to form the basis for tensions between dwellers, municipality workers and Bauhof users, I deemed it important to take it as a first step of a political ecology analysis of Leonia's waste regime (Gille 2007).

But I also tried to do a further step. Since Hawkins & Muecke (2003) proved a connection between waste disposal rules and ethical and moral principles of self-evaluation, I wanted to investigate which those were in the perspective of the valley inhabitants, and how and why some behaviours were judged negatively.

A sensorial, or better still, optical dimension came then to the fore. When the valley dwellers were en route and they saw garbage, they had a concept of cleanliness and order at their disposal which allowed them to classify the things they saw: decide if those were waste or not. It was not really important here if something stunk or had other specific physical characteristics, but rather if it was possible to ascribe a specific function to that object in that setting. With this remark it is possible to get back to the beginning of Discard Studies (O'Hare 2019). “Matter out of place” (Douglas 1966) was indeed the way Mary Douglas used to define waste. What I would like to add here is that this definition would not be possible without a previous moral evaluation based on the sensoriality of the body, especially its ability to see: to understand if something belongs to a specific context it is necessary to see that specific object and the surrounding setting first.

Sight was the evaluative criterion for an aesthetic sense that pervaded and grounded the morality of waste in Leonia. The valley dwellers associated in fact the “Beautiful” with the “Good”, and in turn with their notion of order. The realization of the “Beautiful” was the motivation that urged the valley dwellers to keep clean. At the same time it was a moral justification for actions aimed at taming the chaotic power of waste and its contagious features (Sosna 2017; O'Hare 2019). The importance of eyesight is maybe better understood, when inserted in the broader European context. Indeed, as Pálsson (2003) argues, sight has historically contributed to a paternalistic and orientalist relation to the environment; an understanding that is well explained in Reno's (2014) conception of “Mass Waste”.

Working with garbage required for my research partners also the daily intercourse with two more physical and sensorial dimensions: sense of smell and fatigue. The first one was especially relevant in the case of organic waste [*Biomüll*], while the second can be easily associated with the features of work “in the weather” (Ingold 2008). The latter represented a core element of the jobs concerned with waste, which were almost exclusively practised “en plein air”. This condition implied a tight connection with the aspects of seasons and time, representing the two other actors in a mutually influencing triplet: in summer it was very hot and in winter very cold, which implied in extreme weather conditions that the content of the dumpster either froze inside, sticking to the dumpster walls and getting impossible to extract, or fermented faster because of the heat, stinking much more than usual. As inferable,

dustmen were those exposed the most to strong bodily perceptions and this had consequences on the reputational hierarchy of waste workers. The implication of these insights is a small rethinking of Gille's (2007) framework. The time of waste should be in fact understood not as a single linear one, but as the coming together of the personal time of individual valley dwellers, of the objects themselves and of the circular -the seasonal events- and linear time that characterise life in the valley.

The definition of garbage in Leonia was also based on a second concept: value. One more time we face here a classical problem of waste concerned anthropology, ever since Thompson's (2017) reflections inaugurated an analytical direction interested in the materiality of waste instead of order or classifications, as Reno (2014) and O'Hare (2019) have highlighted. For valley dwellers it was thus not enough to find objects in the wrong context in order to define them as waste, but it was also necessary to not identify any possible value for them; a lack of value that motivated missing ownership demands and the original abandonment. An active renunciation of possible ownership rights is, as a matter of fact, the outcome of a value loss in the eyes of the owner. It is also the moment when waste circulation (Brunclíková 2017) starts.

The topic of value was for me most evident in what I have termed in an interview "Bauhof Supermarket" [*Bauhof-Supermarkt*]. With this I mean the habit of municipality workers to keep aside some of the objects that were brought to the Bauhof, because they were deemed to still be in pretty good condition. The goal and the hope were that some Bauhof user might have some day found them interesting and took them home (see Fig.1a and Fig. 1b). Through this action the value of the object would have been recognised anew, also showing how the definition of waste among the valley dwellers could vary widely from person to person. Important to note here also is that the community workers had an unbalanced role in this re-cognition process, since they had the final say in deciding what was worth saving and what was not. The value of the objects was however not fixed but changed over time. What the community workers had saved one day could always be chosen to throw away the next.

In the working of the "Bauhof Supermarket" we can connect to the work of Gille (2007), especially to two aspects she identified as fundamental for the working of waste regimes: time and space of waste. Every object has a life cycle. That begins with its production -if not even with the provision of raw materials- and doesn't end when it is disposed of, but continues till its final deterioration. It is a linear time. After its disposal, however, an object starts a totally new life made of processes and moments that will lead to its final elimination. The different stages leading to this final outcome are multiple and various, variably changing in speed. Each one of those has the possibility to lengthen or shorten the life of specific objects (Gille 2007; Brunclíková 2017). The "Bauhof Supermarket" belongs to the category of time giving phenomena, together with exchange circles, internet platforms and other recycling activities that took place in the valley.

When something arrived at the Bauhof was usually destined for the incinerator or other facilities aimed at converting it back into raw material. With their arbitrary selection, the community workers subtracted the objects from this process. This did not mean for the things to be re-inserted in a daily-life contexts and activities. On the contrary it started for them a period of time marked by uncertainty and which time limits were difficult to predict: it could be a matter of months before somebody decided to take them home or throw them away. In this undefined time the future of the objects remained uncertain. In the best option a Bauhof visitor would get interested in them taking them back home, prolonging in this way their life cycle by employing them again.

This process had however to deal with limitations, as my interlocutors told me in the interviews. First of all, space. Municipality workers might in fact have had the best motivations, but if they didn't have enough space to store new objects, they would have just refused to pick them up, regardless if they were in good condition or not. And since the space was not much at all, the actual number of objects that were kept aside was very low. If the community workers noticed new more valuable objects arrive at the Bauhof, the most common choice was to throw away something they had previously saved. Whenever possible however the choice was to take the new valuable arrivals home instead.

Space was also a selection's criterion for the users themselves: nobody brought somehow valuable stuff to the Bauhof, that was not possible to store at home. What happened on the contrary was that many people tried to maximise their acquisition of useful and valuable objects. The Bauhof helped in that. Sometimes there were people coming to the Bauhof with the intention of looking inside the containers to see if they could find some objects they might have needed. This would have spared them the time required to drive the whole way out of the valley just to buy them. This kind of behaviour is precisely what invited me to name this system "Bauhof-Supermarket".

But what has the "Bauhof-Supermarket" to tell us specifically about the morality of waste?

First of all, that the victims of moral judgment were not the objects themselves but the human beings that did not handle them according to what was assumed to be the proper way by the valley dwellers. Being lazy [*faul*] and wanting to live comfortably [*bequem leben wollen*] were the major accusations that were aired towards the transgressors, that is, the people that made mistakes in waste sorting or left garbage on streets and mountain pathways. Dogs' excrement [*Hundekot*] was the main motivation for criticism and among my interlocutors it was often the cause of strong excitement, sometimes even reaching shades of moral panic. Laziness [*Faulheit*] and comfort [*Bequemlichkeit*] are personal characteristics of individuals that question and confirm a vision of responsibility centred around individuals and their waste. This understanding resonates with the idea of recycling ideology, as has been described by Hawkins (2006) and Brunclíková (2017). Indeed, everyone in the valley was held responsible for his or her waste and its disposal, also because it was perceived to be something individuals did for their own good. And when people did not seem to match with this mainstream view they were met by strong critics and other social sanctions.

At the roots of such situation the valley dwellers identified not a personal inclination, but the social system they lived within. Affluence [*Wohlstand*] was in fact recognised as the main cause of laziness and comfort-seeking practices in waste management. A sign of that should have been evident in the fact that some preferred to pay more for Bauhof and other waste disposal services instead of making any effort to keep clean, as my interlocutors stated many times in the interviews. This situation was so striking for my interlocutors because it contrasted in an essential way with the shared memory about the past of the valley. Affluence was still judged as a relatively new situation for the valley dwellers, even though only the older generations still remembered a time when the lifestyle was much harsher. This meant that some elderly people found it very hard to adapt to the implications of this new condition. For this reason, all municipality workers were fast to identify the elderly as the group of people that caused the most troubles with waste, but were also ready to justify them and admonish them kindly whenever they made some mistakes.

Affluence was recognised as a problem from the dustmen too and here too connected to laziness. Especially criticised was a fussy sense of disgust [*Ekel*] derived from this condition and that should

have led many to prefer to leave even valuable objects that had touched waste inside the dumpsters instead of taking them back out and washing them. Differently from the municipality workers at the Bauhof it was however impossible for them to take those home because constantly under the surveillance and scrutinising gaze of their hiring company: our next topic.

### **Sociability and Surveillance**

A key feature for Bauhof workers was the interaction with users. The task of the Bauhof director was exactly to guide people: check that they disposed of garbage correctly, admonish when they did something wrong, sort out waste properly if somebody did some mistake. Practically, he almost never engaged with waste on a physical level, touching it, and when he did, he always used rakes, shovels or other tools that physically kept him at distance from it. His job is better understood thus as belonging to the category demanding contact with users and so attention, availability and helpfulness towards them: “emotional labour” (Hochschild 1983). The role of personal relations was so important that the work itself might have been influenced by external affinities and antipathies: a worker once told me, how somebody refused to come again to the Bauhof because of a previous quarrel with a municipality worker<sup>7</sup>. Such a prominent role of social relations in the working of the facility was possible because local social life was still primarily moulded around small community numbers and rural social relations, as the municipality workers themselves recognised.

In this frame Bauhof workers have to be regarded as powerful figures. The personalisation inherent to valley relations built around waste implied that municipality workers with their actions were steering and influencing the valley waste management and disposal. This kind of outcome was possible because they were empowered and legitimised in telling others what to do exactly in the very definition of the work at the Bauhof: the workers’ task was envisioned as directing waste collection in the valley.

It is possible to identify in such understanding of waste management some characteristics of what Reno (2014) termed “mass waste”. The defining feature of that is the failing connection between waste and the bodies that produced it. Garbage is here mixed and unreferential; characteristics that bring people to create a depersonalised disposal system, where waste can be removed from people’s everyday life and brought to places where it remains invisible. Only a meticulous organisation and continuous controls allow for such a system to keep running.

The coming together of an efficient disposal system and small communities’ social relations meant for the Bauhof the adoption of Panopticon characteristics (Foucault 1979) under a thin veil of sociability. The very motivation to have such a professional figure as the municipality worker at the Bauhof was indeed originated in the fundamental mistrust towards the way people sorted out their waste when left without monitoring. And even though this surveillance aspect remained very often unperceived, because people spent their time joking and laughing with the workers, it became immediately apparent as soon as a municipality worker started giving directives and admonishments in a serious manner (see Fig. 2). In this sense it is possible to perceive and understand the community workers as the “human face” of recycling and waste laws: their bodily realisation, the aspect those concretely took for Bauhof users.

The surveillance tasks meant municipality workers had to have a broad awareness of the situation

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note here that the argument actually took place within the Bauhof precincts, and that the topic was the too inaccurate sorting out of the user. This kind of judgment might in turn be seen as motivated and strengthened by the moral dimension of waste.



and of what was going on. Jürgen (municipality worker) expressed this idea in the notions of intuition [*Gespür*] and sensitivity [*Gefühl*]. Due to municipality workers and community members being people who all recognised the others as such, the implications of this broad sense of awareness were to make the surveillance milder. Since the controlled people were very often acquaintances and friends it was important for the community workers to interact cleverly with their working role in order not to cause some kind of tension and antipathies with other valley dwellers: something that would not only have made their work harder, but also influenced their private life. Additionally, this same rhetoric of sensitivity was used in order to manage the sorting with more liberty. In the view of my interlocutors this was identified as a kind of pragmatism or social intelligence and was expressed in the idea that it was not possible to “follow the law point by point” [*nicht genau nach Punkt und Bein nach Gesetz gehen*] (Jürgen, community worker). This notion of pragmatism was sometimes used as a tool to break the rules without really having to break them: do only the minimal that is expected from you, maybe bringing up some other considerations like the tolerance of the disposal company for slightly unappropriated sorting or the bad weather as motivations and excuses.

The Bauhof and its workers might also be considered as powerful for another reason: information distribution. The Bauhof was, as a matter of fact a place, where nearly all valley dwellers came on a regular basis and spent quite a long time chatting and interacting among themselves and with the workers. This implied that the Bauhof was a central node for information exchange in the valley. Since the community workers had to remain there for the whole opening time, it is possible to imagine they had more possibilities than other valley dwellers to interact with people and so to get to know more and decide how to distribute their acquired knowledge to the other people coming. I assume that there were several other mechanisms in the valley that were used for the same gossiping goal. However, for waste related issues the information from the workers was unique, having the strongest and most immediate effect, since expressed in the most legitimate place from the most legitimate individuals and with the following requirement for users to follow them.

But waste itself is also a very rich source of information (Brunclíková 2017; Sosna 2017). According to Reno (2014) waste has a semiotic dimension, that creates an indexical relation between discarded objects and their former users and owners (Sosna 2017), telling something about them. This feature brings him to propose the consideration of waste as a “sign of life” (Reno 2014). For the municipality workers the immediate information that waste gave resided in its quantity. A high amount of garbage was in fact considered to stand for a thriving state of the local economy, while on the other hand was also judged as problematic for its effect on the local environment and the planet.

The topics that have been discussed so far in this section concern in part the dustmen too. Just like municipality workers acted as an interface between laws and users, so the dustmen negotiated between their service recipients and their hiring company. In order to do that, they had to adopt “emotional labour” (Hochschild 1983) too and always show themselves as kind and ready to help, predict what possible conflicts might emerge and do as much as possible to avoid them. The motivation for such behaviour was the idea that at work they were not acting in their names, but as spokesperson for their hiring company. The consequence was that they always felt somehow paternalistically protected from their employer which took care of all possible troubles. On the other hand, however they also needed to constantly justify their actions to the company every time they adopted a behaviour that didn't match with the company's expectations, like forgetting to empty a dumpster or having an argument with a customer.

At the end of the day the situation was a double layer of control where the dustmen monitored the actions of the users and were in turn monitored by the company. Very efficient technical equipment

made such situation possible. Specific devices immediately warned when something wasn't going as planned, that is when somebody was somehow abusing its position in the disposal chain: every dumpster had a microchip that allowed dustmen to read on a screen in the van's cabin how many times this had been emptied (Fig. 3a and Fig. 3b), and every truck had GPS-tracking that permitted the company to know where that was during the working shift. It might be assumed all those measures were taken because of a fundamental situation of mistrust, maybe caused by a necessity of control and capillary organisation that has characterised modern industry in general, and "mass waste" (Reno 2014) specifically.

At the same time, albeit the suspect, the dustmen were very willing to help the users and even do them small favours. In his research on a North American landfill, Reno (2014) noticed how the workers used to appropriate themselves of some thrown away objects as a method to subtract personal time to their hiring company and so gain it back for themselves. Similarly, Scott (1989) speaks of everyday acts of resistance, by which he intends ordinary and daily actions that are put into practice to attack a formal source of power, against which open actions can have only counterproductive and self-damaging effects.

This was what dustmen did when letting customers get rid of their extra-waste for free<sup>8</sup>, or "granting them a small favour", in dustmen's expression. Usually those were just minimal amounts and very often the dustmen could justify very well to the company why they collected them. Some other times however they had some form of private agreement from which they could profit. An example for that was a restaurant manager in the valley that let them eat for free on the condition that they did not scan his dumpster's microchip: emptying it for free, practically. Usually, it was however not so clear what the actual dustmen's benefit was in these series of courtesies. The main goal that the dustmen seemed to follow was the avoidance of unpleasant situations, which motivated them to entertain the best relation possible with their services' recipients. This happened through small favours, that were very often justified as excuses for some former errors they or some other colleagues made, the most frequent situation in this being someone forgetting to empty some dumpster.

Municipality workers too in acting pragmatically enacted some practice of time re-appropriation. I witnessed once how the director profited from a quite lazy moment of Bauhof operation to substitute a wheel to his car. Another time it was a hair dryer that needed to be fixed for a friend. To use the tools of the Bauhof workshop to repair some personal good or other objects during the working time at the Bauhof was a very common experience indeed and fits with the pictures depicted by Reno (2014) and Scott (1989).

The dustmen's willingness to help others could have backfired at any moment, if they were not able to justify themselves to the company or if the users abused of their good intentions. Usually, this second case was the situation that caused more conflicts. When dustmen noticed behaviours like:

"we empty the dumpster, he makes it full again, and then calls the company to say it was forgotten" *wir leeren den Kübel aus, er macht ihn wieder voll, und ruft an, mein Kübel ischt vergessen worden*

(Martin, dustman, driver)

they stopped immediately with the favours. The reaction in those situations was usually to start working again in a pedantic manner, renouncing to possible grey zones where it would have otherwise

<sup>8</sup> In the village where I stayed and where the Bauhof was each person had to pay a specific sum of money for every time the dumpster was emptied. It is only one of the different strategies that are adopted in Northern Tyrol at municipal level to tax the operation.

been possible to be a bit more flexible: no more extra emptying or acceptance of more garbage as prescribed. This was furthermore by no means reduced to the singular dustmen pair. The dustmen had as a matter of fact put up a word-of-mouth system that warned them when driving to a specific place if they had to pay attention to some specific person that has treated another pair unfairly. Similarly, as in the Bauhof the knowledge of the users helped dustmen to organise their work on an individual personalised basis. The anonymity of waste that has been recognised as typical of a mass waste regime (Reno 2014) and the connected idea that dustmen usually interact with users only on the basis of their group and corporate identity seems to get challenged and questioned in those last observations.

### Identity and recognition

The contagious character of garbage and the following stigmatisation of those that interact with it frequently has long been at the centre of the anthropological reflections concerning waste (Sosna 2017; O'Hare 2019). Having to justify their own position was a central concern for dustmen and Bauhof workers, even though they adopted two very different strategies to solve this quandary.

For the community workers the solution was very easy to find, mainly relying on their rootedness in the local community. A rootedness which was partly granted by their work. The implicit sociability of the Bauhof allowed them as a matter of fact to have constant contact with other valley dwellers and very limited contact with waste. Their direct employment from the municipality also helped them manage any identification issue, since their activity at the Bauhof usually didn't correspond to their only or main task. When they had to present themselves to others then, they could just say they were workers from the municipality and easily dismiss the whole waste side.

For the dustmen this was not so easy and they often had to deal with situations where they felt offended or belittled because of their job. Martin (dustman, driver) told me in our time together of at least three different episodes when somebody has highlighted his relation to waste in a quite rude way. Such situations motivated a constant effort to justify and legitimate their position. A discursive strategy used in that was to highlight the necessity of waste collection to let people conduct their everyday life, a fact that was also recognised by the community workers in their interviews. Another motivation dustmen gave to sustain their desire for social recognition was the actual technical competence that was required for such work. Niklas (dustman, collector) for instance told me when recounting his experiences:

“you don't have the final high school diploma, you are stupid. You are already automatically a stupid person, because you collect waste, because you don't need apparently any kind of ability here, but sometimes are the people that say that, when you let them collect it, they don't have any kind of idea of what they are actually doing”

*du hast nicht den Schulabschluss, du bist dumm. Du bist schon automatisch ein dummer Mensch, weil du Müll auflegst, weil man da angeblich keine Fähigkeiten braucht, aber teilweise sind die Menschen, die das gesagt haben, wenn du sie auflegen lässt, haben keine Ahnung von dem was sie eigentlich tun*

(Niklas, dustman, collector)

An alternative -and somehow opposite- strategy was to highlight the most physically disgusting elements of their work and the consequent extraordinariness of dustmen, turning this way their endurance into a motivation for pride. This notwithstanding, as a worker of the touristic promotion agency [*Tourismusverband*] told me, “this is of course another level” [*Das ischt natürlich eine andere Liga*] (Theodor, employee of *Tourismusverband*), a sentence from which it is possible to understand

that in the valley there was a stratification and hierarchy of different waste workers, based on the amount of interaction with waste each category had. And although the valley dwellers showed themselves sympathetic towards the dustmen's situation, the chaotic and contagious quality of waste still remained attached to those anyway.

The valley dwellers were indeed aware of the possible contamination inherent in the contagious quality of garbage and judged it morally. This caused behaviours like willingly taking garbage away from the streets or the yearly spring-cleaning rounds, carried out exactly in order to contain waste contamination effects. The underlying mentality resembled a softer version of the "Broken Windows Theory" of Wilson & Kelling (2004). Both assume the existence of non-written behaviour rules, that can be deduced from landscape and the characteristics of the objects that make it. When the dwellers then valued an object as abandoned waste, they preferred to take it with them, because they feared that would have brought people to think that this specific place might have been one devoted to waste. At the level of municipality and touristic promotion agency [*Tourismusverband*] this meant also to imagine which places might have attracted waste because of their characteristics<sup>9</sup> and arrange dumpsters and bins there in order to avoid that. In a waste regime framework (Gille 2007) it is possible to acknowledge here the influence of the materiality and agency of waste on the actions of individuals, and how this is in turn inserted in a semiotic system (Sosna 2017). The places of waste identify automatically their content as garbage (Brunclíková 2017) and show this way to have agency. A part of this agency is derived from the physical shapes and characteristics that places and objects have: the work of the Bauhof is influenced by the physical presence of their containers and their position, just like a bench might have invited people to leave more garbage there than where there was none, as Theodor (employee of *Tourismusverband*) told me. Affordances (Gibson 1972) are thus also a relevant defining element when speaking of waste, its places and its materiality.

Similarly, to other valley dwellers when en route, the search for order is a defining element of the Bauhof too and its functioning is dependent upon a classification effort. Waste itself is indeed the outcome of a classificatory action (Brunclíková 2017). In a mass waste regime (Reno 21014) however the research of precision is even more important. The municipality workers noticed in fact, how no disposal and recycling would be possible if the objects were just lying messily around. The ordering principle they adopted was primarily the materiality of waste, since things were valued only for their material sides, as Sosna (2017) noticed for landfills. It is thus possible that municipality workers had to deal with identification problems when new materials came to the Bauhof, making it necessary to contact the disposal company to understand how to act in such cases. I experienced this situation with Heraklith, a kind of material composed of several layers of mineral bonded boards made of wood and wool. The most important thing was however that the very own places where the most chaotic materials were stored made an enormous effort in ordering them and so helped maybe the community workers in keeping their social image flawless (Fig. 4).

These last examples resonate with Gille's (2007) notion of "representations". Interestingly when translated to German this concept is divided in two very different words: *Vorstellungen* and *Darstellungen*. The first term refers to a mental frame, something akin to imagination and perception, while the second on the contrary implies some kind of enactment, or staging resulting from a specific action. I believe that when we are talking about representations of waste, we have to consider them not only as an individual or group perception but as the outcome of a laborious effort staged for a specific audience: as being both *Vorstellungen* and *Darstellungen* at the same time. The care and cleaning of the valley is thus exactly to be understood as an attempt to convey a specific image of cleanliness that

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9 For example camping and picnic zones.

might work as a possible “bait” for tourists.

I have in conclusion here to mention how all the attempts to keep the valley and the Bauhof clean and my considerations about “representations” might be very easily connected to Ervin Goffman’s perspective, where people try to escape from a stigma and maintain their self-representation through an interaction articulated in front and back stages (1978; 2009). The connection to a dirty place and the following avoidance, was exactly perceived as a quality that can be transferred to the self and so led people to try to keep clean the environment where they dwelt. The critics of some of my interlocutors to people that only care for their backyard and not of the whole valley are to be considered in this analytical lens and suggest that the appearance of the valley is perceived as a collective task with collective effects.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have presented the results of a three-week research project on a highland valley in Northern Tyrol dealing with waste and waste management. To conduct the investigation, I engaged with two working activities that granted a more or less direct access to garbage and the interaction with the people that carried those out on an everyday basis: Bauhof municipality workers and dustmen. Moreover, I also interacted and discussed with other valley dwellers, partially obtaining a different perspective on my research topic.

The conclusion I have reached after the research process was the identification of a moral system based on the sense of sight, which was used in the valley to locate people according to the amount of interaction they had with waste, but especially according to the way they behaved towards garbage. This system set the responsibility for the different actions concerning waste management on the individuals alone and confirmed this way Hawkins (2006) and Brunclíková’s (2017) remarks about a Euro-American waste ethic and waste ideology. The presence of such an understanding in the valley implied the appearance of conflicts, motivated by behaviours apparently moving away from the prescribed normative morality.

Many of the conflicts arising around waste saw the presence of waste workers as active actors in them, mainly because they were primarily engaged with waste for working reasons. For the dustmen the majority of those situations revolved around a matter of accountability, of having to justify to their employer why waste collection didn’t go as planned. It followed an enhanced interest on their side to monitor the correct operation of the disposal chain and to urge people to comply with sorting out and collection rules. Similarly, Bauhof workers had to make people respect their indications. Both working groups had thus to interface with power, be they those practising or experiencing it. Indeed, mass waste (Reno 2014) waste regimes (Gille 2007), that are based on the abolition of all possible connections between waste and the bodies producing it, cannot renounce to forms of control in their meticulous organisation, making the surveillance of all actors, processes and objects engaged in waste disposal the necessary cornerstone of their functioning. Control and surveillance however were not just accepted passively but brought in Leonia to the adoption of what Scott (1989) termed “weapons of the weak”, especially in the form Reno (2014) recognised of workers trying to seize back their personal time from their working schedule. The same reasoning might have motivated the softening of control measures, especially at the Bauhof when the workers tried to work intelligently in order not to ruin their personal relations in the valley. Such an outcome is also understandable as enmeshed in the “emotional labour” (Hochschild 1983) features that brought waste workers of all kinds to be more indulgent towards the beneficiaries of their services -that is weakening all possible surveillance- even

though such thoughtfulness sometimes backfired at them.

Finally, a third area of conflict was the management of one's own identity and reputation. The rootedness in the local community and the kind of interaction workers had with waste -if very direct or not so much- made for some the task of presenting a respectable identity less troublesome. Generally speaking, however all valley dwellers were involved in practices that aimed at the transmission of an image of the valley as clean, trying this way to avoid the social sanctions that a connection with waste might have caused, especially concerning the influx of tourists. I believe Goffman's (1978; 2009) notions of stigma and stage are a good explicating framework for such behaviours. This brought me to reconsider what Gille (2007) termed the "representations" of waste. I believe, we shouldn't just understand here how garbage is perceived -what is termed *Vorstellungen* in German - but also how it is enacted and staged - corresponding to the German word *Darstellungen*. A very renowned book from Ingold (2000) titled "The perception of the environment": I believe we shouldn't limit to perception but also consider the *enactment* of the environment. It could be contested that focussing on morality and adopting a symbolic-structuralist perspective (O'Hare 2019) isn't that far from perceptions but actually morality is not perception at all: it is an *impression on the environment*, a shaping system valid for both people, behaviours and waste.

Another point where I think Gille's (2007) framework could be revised is in her ideas of "politics" of waste. As I have explained above, I consider the "political" to be crosswise applicable to all different dimension of everyday life. An analysis of the politics of waste should thus transcend written laws and formal political bodies to consider the scalar social levels where tensions can appear and escalate. When adopting this reading key this paper can be easily inserted in a political ecology framework. The environment might actually be quite invisible because of my main concern with the social side of waste, and I admit, I myself didn't have the opportunity to directly engage the "environment", even though all waste works happen "in the weather" (Ingold 2008) and are exposed to its changing. One of the main goals of waste collection and management in the valley was however exactly this separation from the environment -like culture from nature- which is a fundamental features characterising "mass waste" according to Reno (2014), but also recognised from Pálssons (2003) in the importance of the eyes in the European context and the following understanding of the relation joining together humans and environment. Therefore, I would argue here, that it is exactly in such situations that political ecology is a useful analytical tool: the environment becomes evident exactly in the moment when it is hidden and denied.

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## Images



*Fig. 1a: Objects that have been left aside for the Bauhof-Supermarket. Photo by Riccardo Maniscalco.*



*Fig. 1b: Objects that have been left aside for the Bauhof-Supermarket. Photo by Riccardo Maniscalco.*



*Fig. 2: A sign at the Bauhof that informs the precincts are surveilled with cameras. The sign reads: "The Bauhof is surveilled by cameras! It is forbidden to deposit waste outside the opening times!" Photo by Riccardo Maniscalco.*





*Fig. 3a: Screen from the van cabin, where it is possible to check how many time a dumpster has been emptied and how much do they weight. Photo by Riccardo Maniscalco*



*Fig. 3b: The microchip the dumpsters have and that get automatically scanned every time they are emptied. Photo by Riccardo Maniscalco*



*Fig. 4: The Bauhof director cleans the organic waste dumpster as preparation for the soon opening of the Bauhof gates and the arrival of users. Photo by Riccardo Maniscalco.*