

WASTE, WATER AND THE URBAN ENVIRONMENT: Go with the Flow

Robin Nagle

New York University

OVERVIEW

Waste management and water processing are among the two most pressing challenges that any city must confront. Waste is generated every day, in countless ways, by every citizen, by every visitor; a competent city must have a system to collect and move that waste away from the places where people live and work. The system must be efficient, economically palatable and – at least for now – mostly invisible. Good solid waste management insures that the “waste stream” never stops moving.

Water, of course, is essential to the very existence of life, but it plays complicated roles in urban settings. Clean water must flow in, while dirty water must flow out; until this two-part need is met, no city can thrive. This concerns the basic infrastructure of water management, but water can also be a force that shapes the very foundation of a civilization. It is no accident that many of the world’s greatest urban centers sit on the edges of harbors (New York, Tokyo, Buenos Aires) or along significant rivers (London, Paris, Cairo). Water can also cause the end of a civilization, as floods bring down a city all at once (New Orleans) or poisoned supplies bring it down little by little over time (ancient Rome).

First we’ll study themes relevant to waste, then themes relevant to water, and then the two together. We will look at definitions, logistical concerns, historical dilemmas, social attitudes, and political controversies involving both subjects. We will see where they are dependent on each other, where they cause problems for each other. We will explore these topics through a variety of media, including books, articles, films, visits from guest speakers, and at least two tours. One of these we will do as a class, the other you are responsible for doing on your own (details are below).

BOOKS – on reserve at Bobst and available for sale through the NYU Book Centers.

Rathje, William and Cullen Murphy. 2001. *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage*. U Arizona P.

Royte, Elizabeth. 2008. *Bottlemania: How Water Went On Sale and Why We Bought It*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Rogers, Heather. 2005. *Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage*. New York: The New Press.

Sullivan, Robert. 2004. *Rats: Observations on the History and Habitat of the City’s Most Unwanted Inhabitants*. New York: Bloomsbury.

ASSIGNMENTS/RESPONSIBILITIES

Reading & Questions

Readings are due by the date assigned on the syllabus. By noon on Monday, you will post to the discussion pages of our Blackboard website three questions based on the week's reading.

Writing

You will write three response papers; these are due at various points throughout the semester. They will address specific questions that I'll give you, based on the readings and class discussions we've had so far. You will also write one 12- to 15-page research paper due at the end of the semester. The final paper will be based on your own original research, but I must approve your topic before you embark on it. Assignments to help you organize your final paper are built into the semester.

Presentations

Near the end of the semester, you will make a presentation based on the work you've done for your final paper. This lets your colleagues learn something about the subject you've been researching.

PRACTICES

During the semester we will save every piece of trash we generate for a 72-hour period, and then we will bring that to class for an excavation. At another point in the semester we will track every ounce of water we use, also for a 72-hour period, and prepare a report to share with the class.

INTRODUCTION

1. January 26 – What is this class, who are we, what shape will the semester take

PART ONE: WASTE

2. February 2 – How to See, What to Look For

Brekhus, Wayne. 1998. A Sociology of the Unmarked: Redirecting Our Focus. *Sociological Theory* 16 (1):34-51.

Douglas, Mary. 1970. Introduction and first three chapters, *Purity and Danger*. New York: Pantheon.

O'Brien, Martin. 1999. Rubbish-Power: Towards a Sociology of the Rubbish Society. In J. Hearn and S. Roseneil, eds., *Consuming Cultures: Power and Resistance*. New York: St. Martin's.

3. February 9 – Urban Contexts

Melosi, Martin. 2004 (1981). Introduction to *Garbage in the Cities: Refuse, Reform and the Environment 1880-1980*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press.

Burnstein, Daniel. 2006. Chapter 2 (and notes) of *Next to Godliness: Confronting Dirt and Despair in Progressive Era New York City*. U Illinois P.

Calvino, Italo. 1993. “La Poubelle Agréé” in *The Road to San Giovanni*. New York: Pantheon

------. 1972. “Cities & the Sky 2” and “Continuous Cities I” in *Invisible Cities*. New York: Harcourt.

4. February 16 – Garbage as Truth?

Rathje, William & Cullen Murphy. 2001. *Rubbish! Toward an Archaeology of Garbage*. Tucson: U Arizona P.

Guest lecture: Samantha MacBride, Ph.D. candidate, NYU Sociology
Author, “Diversion: The Progress and Promise of Recycling in the United States”

5. February 23 – Garbage as False Consciousness?

Due: Response Paper One; paragraph abstract describing final paper

Practice One: Save every piece of solid waste you generate for 72 hours (we’ll discuss this at length on Feb. 16 so you’ll know the parameters)

Rogers, Heather. 2005. *Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage*. New York: The New Press.

PART TWO: WATER

6. March 2 – Water-Works

Visit the Museum of the City of New York exhibit “Growing and Greening New York” (see the link in our website)

Spend time getting to know the New York City Department of Environmental Protection website: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dep/html/home/home.shtml>

Koeppel, Gerard. 2006. The Rise to Croton. In *Water-Works: The Architecture and Engineering of the New York City Water Supply*. Kevin Bone, ed. New York: The Monacelli Press.

Guest speakers: Samar Qandil and Karen Murphy, DEP archivists

7. March 9 – The option we *don't* do this week we'll do on March 30

Option One: Water-Rage

Watch Parts I and II of Spike Lee's documentary "When the Levees Broke."

Petterson, John S., et al. 2006. A Preliminary Assessment of the Social and Economic Impacts Associated with Hurricane Katrina. *American Anthropologist* 108:4, p643-70.

Option Two: Library

We'll meet with a subject specialist at Bobst, where we'll learn research techniques that will dazzle and amaze you.

8. March 16 – No class/Spring break

9. March 23 – Water = Profit

Due: Outline of final paper

Royte, Elizabeth. 2008. *Bottlemania: How Water Went on Sale and Why We Bought It*. New York: Bloomsbury

Guest speaker: Elizabeth Royte

10. March 30 – Water-Rage or Library (see March 9)

Due: Response Paper Two

PART THREE: WASTE & WATER

11. April 6

Sullivan, Robert. 2004. *Rats: Observations on the History and Habitat of the City's Most Unwanted Inhabitants*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Guest speaker: Robert Corrigan, Ph.D., rodentologist with the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene

12. April 13 – What's Place Got to Do With It?

Due: preliminary bibliography for final research paper

Cantwell, Annemarie & Diana diZerega Wall. 2001. Building the City: The Waterfront. In *Unearthing Gotham: The Archaeology of New York City*. New York: Yale UP.

Engler, Mira. 2004. Excerpts from *Designing America's Waste Landscapes*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP.

Nagle, Robin. 2008. To Love a Landfill: The History and Future of Fresh Kills. In *The Handbook of Regenerative Landscape Design*, Robert France, ed. New York: CRC/Routledge.

13. April 20 – The Plastics Gyre and the Evil of Nurdles: Where Waste Becomes One with Water

Visit the website for the Algalita Marine Research Foundation (<http://www.algalita.org/>)

There will be additional reading assigned for this week; stay tuned for updates

Practice Two: You have kept track of every ounce of water you've used for a 72-hour period and have uploaded to our discussion pages a report about your findings.

Due: Response Paper Three

14. April 27
Student Presentations I

15. May 4
Student Presentations II

May 8: Final Research Paper Due in my office by 4:00p