Trash Studies

by Theodore Dalrymple

Archaeologists are interested in the rubbish left by past civilizations: by their detritus shall ye know them. What people throw away reveals as much about them as what they buy in the first place.

But we don’t need to await the passage of three millennia before the study of what people discard becomes instructive. My country, Britain, is now the litter bin of Europe, a kind of vast rubbish dump, and I have been interested in British litter, and littering, for a number of years. The thoroughness with which the country has been befouled, from the grandest city thoroughfares to the most remote country lanes, is astonishing. It is as if it had been host to evangelists of litter who wanted to spread it everywhere, as missionaries once traveled to the farthest islands in the Pacific to spread

the Gospel.

I began paying attention to the phenomenon of rubbish on my daily walk between the general hospital where I worked in the morning and the nearby prison where I worked in the afternoon, a matter of a few hundred yards. What should have been clear to me already from the observable behavior of my fellow citizens then became obvious: an Englishman's street is now his dining room.

The vast majority of the litter was the discarded packaging of food eaten on the hoof, or of the containers—cans and plastic or glass bottles—of drinks, both soft and alcoholic. By contrast, used condoms were few and far between.

Apart from its sheer quantity, what most struck me about the rubbish was that even when it was strewn into people's front gardens, no one bothered to remove it. It was as if the residents of those houses were blind to it as they went in and out of their front doors, and didn't mind crunching it underfoot. Most of the homes were publicly owned, and most of the tenants doubtless largely dependent on welfare; but the houses themselves and the little gardens in front of them, while not pretty, were by no means inherently hideous, either.

I examined the packaging and the cans and bottles en route to the prison: they offered an insight, and not a reassuring one, into the local diet, which seemingly had no use for fresh ingredients. I recalled an experiment carried out at a detention center for young delinquents, whose rates of bad and aggressive behavior went down significantly soon after they arrived, when multivitamins were added to their diets. In other words, though not undernourished, they were malnourished.

From my work as a doctor in the area, I knew the insides of the houses that I passed. Though often fitted with TV screens as big as a cinema's, they contained no piece of furniture

around which people could sit to eat a meal together and no kitchen equipment—at least none used—beyond the microwave. Meals involved a dialectic between the fridge and the microwave; they were taken in solitary fashion, as and when the mood took, which was often. In the prison within the shadows of which these houses crouched, I met prisoners who told me that they had never eaten a meal at a table with other people.

It is unsurprising, then, if children soon graduated from domestic foraging to eating in the street. For them, there was a time and a place for everything: the time was now, and the place was here. They dropped the packaging of what they ate as a cow defecates in a field: without awareness of an alternative. Not only the pattern of their eating but also the content of their diet helps to explain the epidemic obesity that has made the British the fattest people in Europe. Their food is fatty and their drink sugary, designed to produce instant, crude gratification. Knowing nothing else, they rarely extend their choices to foods that gratify in a subtler manner.

Theoretically, it should be possible to eat in the street without littering, merely by holding on to the packaging until one can dispose of it in less unsightly a manner. But in Britain, at least, many people do not bother to do this, the effort either beyond them or its worth not apparent to them. I have often observed people littering within easy reach of a trash bin.

The problem (I assume that it is a problem) is not confined to the underclass. After all, the underclass generally does not travel far from where it lives, so its diet and eating habits cannot explain why practically every prospect in the country, no matter how beautiful or historic, is bespattered with the evidence of visitors' incontinent consumption.

Man's—or, at least, Britain's—need for refreshments seems to

have grown almost continual in recent years. People seem hardly able to cross the road without gulping something. Even medical students now attend their exams with bottled water in hand, as if global warming had somehow transformed medical-school classrooms into the Sahara desert. How the students dispose of the plastic bottles afterward is a question of importance, and to judge by the areas of towns and cities in which students (mostly the scions of the middle class) congregate, they are none too scrupulous about it.

Litter has spread even to remote places in the country mainly visited by those with adequate disposable income. See a beautiful landscape and throw a vividly colored can or bottle of some chemically concocted drink at it: such seems to be the motto of British domestic tourists. Either they think that someone will or ought to clean up after them, or they do not care. In all, they have littered many thousands of miles of lanes, roads, and hedgerows with a thoroughness worthy of a better object.

From time to time, my wife and I exhibit some civic duty: we take a large garbage bag and try to remove trash from a short stretch of the beautiful lanes near our house, in the countryside of A. E. Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*. Recently, for example, we cleared about 400 yards of roadside litter. It took us an hour, by the end of which we had filled two bags almost to bursting with what had been tossed from car windows.

Most of the trash was the packaging of refreshments. But we also picked up a mobile phone, its battery and SIM card removed. And we came across the smashed remnants of a motorcycle involved in a fatal accident two weeks before, along with some memorial messages to the deceased that had become detached from the cellophane-wrapped flowers now rotting at the actual site of the crash. These messages offered evidence of a vague and shallow nonreligious belief in the afterlife held by young people in Britain. "You were my best mate, Baz, miss you forever. Good night." Death is now

conceived of, it seems, as a slightly longer, deeper sleep than usual.

It is alarming to see how much alcohol is drunk en route, though whether by drivers or only by passengers it is impossible to say just from defenestrated cans and bottles. One sees in them signs not of poverty but of abundance, or at least of economic insouciance: we found bottles of spirits a third full and cans of beer almost entirely undrunk. Particularly revolting, from the litter-collector's point of view, were the congealed, half-eaten fast-food meals slung out of cars on to the verges, still in their styrene containers. As for the cigarette packs with the legend SMOKING KILLS in large black lettering, the litter-collector cannot help but think: "Yes, but not quickly enough."

Collecting trash, one begins to hate certain brands—in my case, a fizzy, sugary drink called Lucozade, which comes in bright-orange plastic bottles and was once sold to convalescents as an energy restorative; and also a drink that its young consumers suppose to be an antidote to hangovers, containing carbonated water, sucrose, glucose, citric acid, sodium citrate, magnesium carbonate, taurine, caffeine, xanthan gum, natural and artificial flavors and colors, and a few B vitamins. The success of this drink, as illustrated by the frequency with which its cans are thrown from car windows, represents the triumph of marketing over taste and good sense. It is when you see close up what people are prepared to consume that you begin to wonder if the marketplace is like democracy, working best where powers of discrimination are in place.

An hour to clean 400 yards, after which we stopped: I cannot claim any heroic status for our labors. On a fine day, the work itself is not disagreeable (we have instruments to pick up the trash); and, unlike much human labor, it is immediately rewarding. One can see the results at once, however slight they might be in the context of the overall litter problem.

The work is mildly instructive, too. Clearing a length of lane between hedgerows, for instance, one experiences a practical refutation of the ancient philosophical doctrine that no man does wrong knowingly: for some people push cans or bottles or wrappers of which they want to disembarrass themselves deeply into the hedge, making them hard to extract. Why should they do this unless they were aware that disposing of trash in this way were wrong?

Another way of disposing of litter that has become lamentably more frequent, and that I have seen employed nowhere else in Europe, is to gather all one's unwanted remains in a plastic bag, knot the bag's handles, and then tie the bag to a hedge, so that it looks like some fat, repellent fruit hanging down, waiting to fall and rot on the ground. Those who do this have clearly gone to some trouble, again suggesting an awareness that litter should not be strewn—their conscience, however, not being strong enough to overcome what they consider their convenience. Freeing the inside of their cars from trash is more important to them than keeping the countryside free from it; and they probably think that, in confining all their garbage in a bag and tying it to a hedge, they have reached a reasonable compromise and done their bit for rural conservation.

Why is the trash not collected? It is, after all, one of the tasks of local governments. But far from fulfilling this duty, they often seem themselves to add to the mess. When contractors repair roads, for example, they put up temporary metal notices on folding frames, weighed down with sandbags to keep them upright, to warn oncoming traffic. When the roadwork is completed, the contractors do not always remove the iron frames but sometimes push them flat on the ground, leaving them where they are; they don't invariably remove the sandbags, either, with the result that British roadsides are strewn at not-infrequent intervals with rusting iron frames and sodden sandbags. This, too, I have seen in no other

country in Europe, whatever the state of its economy.

This slovenliness—both of the private contractors and the local councils—preceded any difficulties with funding. It is highly unlikely, in any case, that purely economic considerations would lead anyone to leave metal frames and sandbags from a worksite behind; if anything, the economics would point in the other direction. There is an obvious lack of pride in the contractors and lack of diligence in the councils. Nobody cares—nobody, that is, whose job is to care.

As far as litter in the strict sense is concerned, there would be no problem in the first place if hundreds of thousands—or, more likely, millions—of people did not behave so badly. And the problem is now so far gone that it would take a new Hercules to clear out this Augean stable. Even if the local councils were to become models of conscientiousness, rather than giant organizations dedicated to the preservation of their salaries and pensions, the task would probably be beyond them. And in times of financial stringency—the seven lean years following the seven fat ones, as they always do—the councils can claim that more pressing priorities weigh on their reduced resources.

You rarely *see* anyone littering, despite the countless pieces of trash on the ground. The surreptitiousness of its deposition is another indication that many litterers do wrong knowingly. And if you do see someone committing the act, you have to play at being Cesare Lombroso (the Italian criminologist of the late nineteenth century, who believed that certain facial features bespoke criminality) in estimating whether it would be safe to reprimand him. One must always remember the case of Evren Anil, a 23-year-old man who was sitting in his car with his sister when one of two youths threw a half-eaten chocolate bar at the car's window. Anil protested, and a fight ensued with the youths in which he was punched to the ground, hitting his head on the curb and dying eight days later. The youths received a sentence of four

years' imprisonment, of which they served just 18 months (one was so guilt-ridden that he appealed, unsuccessfully, against his short sentence).

I have long wondered whether litterers see the effect they have on the landscape or townscape. Are they so enclosed in their own personal bubble that nothing beyond its confines registers with them? Is it that the virtual world of their smartphones, computers, and tablets is now more real to them than the physical world around them? But one has no reason to think that the British live more, or much more, in a virtual world than people in other nations in Europe. And since some take the trouble to go to the remote places that they litter, they must have some interest in the real world. The capacity of the human mind to screen out what it does not want to see is formidable.

The trash epidemic, which has arisen over the last two decades, raises the question of the legitimacy of public authority. I believe that the epidemic indicates a profound social malaise, and even political crisis, of far deeper significance than the more publicized agonizing over Britain's membership in the European Union. Each piece of trash represents either an act of indifference to, or defiance of, civic or public order. Margaret Thatcher famously (or infamously) said that "there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It's our duty to look after ourselves and then also to look after our neighbour." Whatever she may really have meant by this, the litterers act as if it were really true.

No one, I imagine, behaves in any fashion simply because a political leader says something—in Thatcher's case, in an interview with *Women's Own* magazine. But the litterers act as if it were indeed their duty to look after themselves first, even in minute particulars, such as ridding themselves of

rubbish. Their neighbor can pick up after them or not, as he wishes; but it is no concern to them because they do not belong to society, which is nonexistent in any case. They belong to no district, town, city, or country. They belong only to themselves, as sovereign as particles in Brownian motion. That is why no public authority has the right—or the moral authority—to tell them how to dispose of their garbage.

The entire population is not like this, of course; but enough people are to set the trend, the tone, the atmosphere. Such activities as removing garbage from 400 yards of road become more futile, like Canute commanding the tide to withdraw. As the litter mounts, those with a civic conscience are likely to withdraw more and more into their own private worlds.

The archaeologists are right: the study of what people abandon (and how they abandon it) tells us a lot about them. The study of litter in Britain shows us how people live and eat, why they grow fat and become diabetic in unprecedented numbers, and how a country falls apart for lack of an authority seen by the population (or a large proportion thereof) as having legitimacy. You could hardly ask more of mere rubbish.

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