

QUEER/WASTE

Waste is a matter of an economy. It is a matter of use and value, flow and exchange, organism and organization. Inseparable from production, it is – in a Deleuzian perspective – intimately bound up with desire. “To create value [and, consequently, waste], all that is necessary is, by whatever means possible, to create a sufficient intensity of desire” (Jean-Joseph Goux quoted in Bauman 86). Evaluation is always attached to devaluation, a gain in value is always a loss in value, a designation of waste. As Dominique Laporte points out in, summarizing Freud’s views, civilization “fashions socially useful values and goods,” but it is also

always driven by another aim: the gain-in-pleasure, which can never be reduced to its pragmatic dimension. *Waste* is caught in the crossroads of these “two converging goals.” The necessary outcome of socially prof-itable production, it is the inevitable by-product of cleanliness, order, and beauty. But that which falls out of production must also be put to use; the gain-in-pleasure must be made to *enrich* civil-ization in a *sublimated* form. (14)

The two tendencies – one towards the multiplication of values and goods, and the other towards gain-in-pleasure – are culturally associated with, respectively, the figure of a heterosexual and that of a “queer.” The latter’s pleasure, useless from the point of view of heterosexual economy, would usually be expected to find socially acceptable, sublimated forms of representation. Like waste, queer is “the

necessary outcome of socially profit-able production," or rather reproduction, and it is strongly expected to "*enrich* civilization in a *sublimated* form." The queer figure is as much produced by the social system as the heterosexual is, though perhaps in a more clandestine manner. Perceived as sexually "unproductive," the queer figure (mandatorily alienated and unhappy) is expected to prove its social value through an extra amount of sublimation, an exceptional artistic or intellectual contribution, or some "marked social interest," as Freud has it; otherwise, the queer figure is condemned to abjection and waste. As Guy Hocquenghem notes, "our world of social relationships is largely built on the sublimation of homosexuality" (94-5); it is a rejection of this imperative of sublimation that truly condemns the homosexual to abjection, to "a descent towards the abyss of non-personalised and uncodified desire" (95). Disconnected from a "civilizational mission" and unapologetically devoted to the pleasure principle, queer existence borders on irredeemable waste.

Let me note parenthetically that if one posits the social production of queerness, one can also conceive of its *overproduction*. As Derrida suggests (in a different context), the social system can be imagined to organize "the overproduction and overgeneration of Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals [...] so that [...] they could be destined in always increasing numbers for the same hell" (394-5). As I see it (in keeping with systems theory's insight that the production of entropy is necessary for the creation of any organized system), the overproduction of waste / queerness can be explained through the system's urge to strengthen and enhance itself. The logic behind this process is that the more waste a system produces, the purer (more refined and sublimated, more "organized") it becomes. Those who subscribe to that old hackneyed argument that highly developed civilizations collapse because of the "spread" of homosexuality seem to inadvertently confirm this logic: more "civilization" produces more waste (both in the environmental and social sense) to the critical point where the latter "overthrows" the whole social organization.

There is a scene in the original British version of *Queer as Folk* (1999), a ground-breaking TV drama featuring the lives of a number of queer characters from Manchester, which addresses the queer-waste connection very directly. At a wedding party one of the main characters, Stuart, talks to the bridegroom, Adrian. To be precise, he tries to seduce Adrian, which would turn the heterosexual ritual into a rather queer event. He seems to be on the right track: Adrian compliments Stuart's best friend, Vince, on his good looks, but then he adds, "Such a waste." Stuart explodes: "A 'waste'? Go on, what's a 'waste' exactly? What is wasted? What, a waste of cock, a waste of spunk, a waste of

a fuck -- what? And you, you're not wasted; you get vagina, you get Judith. You get to fuck the front, and that's better." Then he gives Vince a passionate French kiss and concludes: "That's not a waste." What Stuart opposes is the heteronormative, Oedipal economy of pleasures and relationships which – no matter how "tolerant" it may grow of queer existence, in the best liberal tradition – posits queer lives as wasteful and/or wasted. Paradigmatically, "the front" is (re-)productive, "the back" is wasteful; the front is the future, the back must be denied and left behind. For Stuart, the incorrigible hedonist, pleasure is the gauge of value, not the heterosocial notions of a "useful life."

In a system predicated on binary oppositions, the queer figure finds itself *structurally* in the zone of ambiguity, not unlike waste, caught as it is between positive value (identity, usefulness) and negativity or formlessness. Once she begins to claim recognition, the homosexual can be re-inscribed into the social system only within certain parameters, such as couplism or the active/passive division, i.e. only if queerness itself is "castrated," reduced to a set of rigid binary oppositions, which are thus reinforced. The system wins again: when the time is ripe, it is ready to accommodate queerness only to reaffirm its own *modus operandi*. As a figure of abject ambiguity, the homosexual is not properly differentiated from the "opposite" sex, and perhaps, more fundamentally, from "the animal" (how possibly can s/he live up to the proud category "human"?). In my view the "neither this, nor that" formula summarizes queerness well enough: the queer is neither a man, nor a woman, neither an animal, nor a human being (where a human being is understood as a product of what Giorgio Agamben calls the "anthropological machine" of modernity); neither a child, nor an adult (I will come back to this point); neither rubbish nor positive value – the queer is always something else.

There are many ways in which queer existence and practices are culturally coupled with waste. Gay men's lives, for instance, are often posited as "wasted," because by wasting their seed in non-procreative sexual practices, they waste the fatherly inheritance and break the clan's lineage – not unlike the biblical prodigal son who "scattered his substance, living riotously." The refusal to procreate is one of the reasons why gay men are so persistently linked to death, with the AIDS epidemic – quickly dubbed a "gay disease" – as the final, almost divine, confirmation of this link. Many queer initiatives aim to counter the logic that equates their existence with waste, for example by emphasizing the productive/creative potential of sexual pleasure.

But is a simple assertion of the productivity and usefulness of gay lives a desirable line of argument? Or does it entrap queer subjects in

the logic of modern regimes of capital, knowledge, and power to the point where any marked *difference* disappears or turns into a secondary attribute, an "acceptable stylistic or cultural variation on the theme Human," as Stephanie A. Smith puts it (189)? The universalistic logic of liberal humanism will always press for a reduction of the so-called "human condition" to a set of common features, a shared model of subjectivity, a consensus regarding social and political life, leaving little room for the unsanitized, abject entities falling out of this conceptual grid. As Laporte remarks in his *History of Shit*, "the incapacity of [the modern] system to manage its own filth is lucidly betrayed by its intrepid fantasy of an elimination so complete it leaves no trace of waste" (13). The elimination may take the form of either rejection and expulsion, or (re)appropriation. The queer movement of the last two decades may be seen as an attempt to counteract this totalitarian fantasy, to acknowledge the "waste" or "excess" aspect of queer existence and to resist both the forces of incorporation ("proper utilization") and those of physical or discursive elimination.

But, again, can the association with waste become solid ground for queer counter-politics? Is it subversive enough, so to speak, to challenge the social machine of the modern state that strives to produce uniform subjects? In their discussion of waste as an element of cultural economy, Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke argue that

Loss, waste, and the unproductive are antieconomic. They disturb the logic of "general positivity" [which] defines an economy: the production of positive value, gain, or benefit. In this framework the negative cannot escape the drive toward general positivity even when it claims to. The negative exists in a state of constant vulnerability to recuperation; it cannot transcend fields of exchange and transaction. (xi-xii)

In other words, the "general positivity" of cultural economy, in its omnivorousness, will sooner or later attempt to incorporate waste into its logic of positive value. The question is, then, can anything escape this process of recuperation? Is all waste ultimately recyclable, or is there a residue that can and will resist the logic of redemption? Lee Edelman's recent book, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, is a provocative exercise in the politics, or rather anti-politics, of queer negativity.

Edelman opposes the "general positivity" or "structuring optimism" of politics, based on what he calls "reproductive futurism" and represented symbolically by the figure of the Child. Instead, he proposes to embrace "queer negativity" which, as he says, "can have no justification if justification requires it to reinforce some positive social value"

and whose value "resides in its challenge to value as defined by the social, and thus in its radical challenge to the very value of the social itself" (6). Occupying the structural position of "the social order's death drive" (3) queerness "figures the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form" (9). This model of oppositionality – an oppositionality that "would oppose itself to the structural determinants of politics as such" (4) – promises "the undoing of the Symbolic, and of the Symbolic subject as well" (27), the undoing of civil society (17). He concludes his elaborate argument in the following way:

It is we who must bury the subject in the tomb-like hollow of the signifier, pronouncing at last the words for which we're condemned should we speak them or not: that we are the advocates of abortion; that the Child as futurity's emblem must die; that the future is mere repetition and just as lethal as the past. [...] And so what is queerest about us, queerest within us, and queerest despite us is this willingness to insist intransitively—to insist that the future stop here. (31)

"The tomb-like hollow of the signifier," let me note in passing, brings to mind the tomb-like hollow of the rectum, which, Leo Bersani once claimed, should be celebrated, as "the grave in which the masculine ideal [...] of proud subjectivity is buried" ("Is the Rectum a Grave?" 222). In his book *Homos* Bersani also argued for "an anticomunal mode of connectedness" (10) that homo-ness can offer. But futurity as such is not the target of his criticism, and waste is conceived of in terms of its redeeming value: "In a society where oppression is structural, constitutive of sociality itself, only what that society throws off—its mistakes or its pariahs—can serve the future" (180). Edelman's project (which he calls hopeless and impossible) goes further: in his account waste is not so unambiguously regenerative, and he calls for a shattering of "narrative temporality" represented most forcefully by the Child. As he succinctly summarizes his argument, "Fuck the social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized" (29).

Edelman seems to advocate the cultural association of queerness with waste – the kind of waste which remains unapologetically unredeemptive. To claim that the death drive, however disavowed, is a structural necessity in any social organization, is to foreground waste as a negative principle constitutive of that social organization. "The death drive," let me quote again, "marks the excess embedded within the Symbolic through the loss, the Real loss, that the advent of the signifier effects" (9). In the trade-off in which we "give ourselves" over to the

Symbolic, we condemn our bodies, and indeed, alternative modes of being, to "waste" – a fact to which heterosexual subjectivity and sociality remain largely oblivious, but which re-surfaces with the melancholic figure of the queer. Queerness is an unpleasant reminder that life is, quintessentially, tantamount to waste. In an essay that apparently does not concern queerness, but is shot through with a queer sensibility, David Halperin insists that life is always wasted. It is wasted, he says, "not by making a mess of it, nor by failing at it. Life is wasted because it cannot be hoarded, or cashed in for something else, or fixed in some state of permanent meaningfulness" (6). If so, let me chip in, if life is non-exchangeable, despite all the attempts to barter it for "a higher cause" or some sort of immortality, then every economy must fail, in the end. The only choice we have, Halperin concludes, is "*how* to waste our lives," which opens up a different ethical perspective.

Keeping in mind Edelman's reasoning, we can go back to the argument that the cultural production of the figure of the child entails the production of queerness as its waste. (In Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* Transfalmadorians find out that human babies could not be born without male homosexuals; 82) "The sacralization of the Child necessitates the sacrifice of the queer" (Edelman 28). In short, the child kills the queer. But the reverse may be equally true: the queer kills the child, the social fantasy of childhood as the axiomatic element of our sociality. This symbolic murder takes place not in the name of a concurrent fantasy of adulthood, with all its markers, such as maturity, respectability or responsibility, but rather in the name of a more profound reconfiguration of our notions of age and maturity as structuring elements of modern subjectivity. "There are more important things than childhood," wrote Franz Kafka (286), and Milan Dolan extolls this sentence as "a most serious political slogan" in a time of "a general infantilization of social life" (182). One popular belief has it that a queer subject remains "an eternal child," stuck in the mythical realm of infantile, narcissistic sexuality. But there is no child in the queer, and there has never been, at least not the child imagined and narrativized in the teleological accounts of development psychology. There has never been a child, because "childhood" is only retroactively produced when the boundary between childhood and maturity is ritualistically drawn, when the child turns into the Symbolic procreator – a move that a queer figure will tend to resist. A queer is neither a child, nor an adult, but something else.

Acting against the child/adult dichotomy, queer advocates an ethos of unfinishedness and incompleteness; it resists closure, a rigid demarcation between childhood and adulthood (I think I find echoes of this ethos in the works of Witold Gombrowicz and Henry James, among others). There is no closure to desire and its productions. In the present social regime

adulthood stands for closure: sure, you may still change after you become "adult," but whatever you do, the gate to the Eden of childhood is shut fast, and any real flows between the so-called "childhood" and the so-called "adulthood" are forever barred, **leaving room for very specific and limited forms of exchange**. The bar involves sexuality in the first place, and it prevents the realization that sexuality is in many ways profoundly childish, just as the child is profoundly sexual. Children, Bernard Arcand ascertains, are "perverse polymorphs [...]. Child sexuality attempts to explore all the variations, and refuses to acknowledge barriers between the masculine and the feminine, the oral and the anal, or even the very limits of the species. [...] In short, child sexuality is an insult to civilization" (121). To "achieve" adulthood is to properly internalize all the normative parameters of social life (even if not all these parameters are always adhered to) so that one's life may count as *not wasted*.

The infantilization of citizens is what the modern State needs to legitimize its paternalistic control over them. If one of the first parental functions is cleaning the infant of its excremental waste, state power seems to be predicated on the promise that it will clean its subjects of what Laporte calls, after Goethe, the *Erdenrest* (the earthly remnant). "Without a master, one cannot be cleaned," says Laporte (2). Neither can one be cleaned *with* a master, after all. If the State's role is, as it were, to wipe the citizen's ass, it can never wipe it clean enough: shit remains, however camouflaged, sanitized and deodorized. Heteronormative subjectivity, my argument goes, is predicated on the belief in the purifying power of the master and so it will not smell its own faeces; rather, it will point at the queer neighbor and the shit which so evidently clings to him or her, beyond all washing. That is why even such utterly unobtrusive images as those of young, middle-class, urban, same-sex couples displayed in Polish public spaces as part of the "Let Them See Us" campaign against homophobia, aroused so much indignation and disgust: apparently, in their perceived obscenity, the photographed couples had anuses instead of faces and they stank, nearly contradicting Barthes's dictum that "shit, when written, does not smell."

The key idea in Laporte's book stems from Freud's famous observation that in psychic economy faeces are often identified with gold or money. While Laporte does not make any homo-/heterosexual distinction, the figure of the homosexual is significantly invoked in Freud's text:

The original erotic interest in defecation is, as we know, destined to be extinguished in later years; it is in these years that the interest in money is making its appearance as something new which was unknown in childhood. [...] If there is any reality in the relation

described here between anal erotism and this triad of character-traits, one may expect to find but little of the 'anal character' in persons who have retained the erotogenic quality of the anal zone into adult life, as for example certain homosexuals. (50)

"Normally" anal sexuality is traded off for a money-based economy; one of the threats posed by queer subjects (whose sexuality, arguably, derives from anality) is that they relish "the real thing," so to speak, rather than the substitute abstract means of exchange, and thus they refuse to believe in the fantasy of an accumulative "positive value" whose function is to divert our attention from the fact that our lives are inevitably wasted. Shit is the first gift, the gift of gifts: what we give each other is, fundamentally, shit, whereas love is just a sublimation thereof. (In a scatological joke about a gay couple one man shits on the other profusely, while the other only produces a small turd in return. "You don't love me anymore," says the first man reproachfully.) Excrement and anality evoke the horror of undifferentiation, a dreaded dissolution of "private persons" clean and proper into an impersonal mass of the non-social, not unlike in this vision from Allen Ginsberg's poem:

Under the world there's a lot of ass, a lot of cunt,
a lot of mouths and cocks,
under the world there's a lot of come, and a lot of saliva dripping
into brooks,
There's a lot of Shit under the world, flowing beneath cities into rivers,
a lot of urine floating under the world [...]. (255)

The anus stands for non-identity, it is the grotesque "reverse" of the face, which – in turn – serves as an index of identity. The ass mocks the face and neutralizes its "human dignity," it faces the wrong direction, so to speak. (Paradoxically, however repressed and disavowed, the anus – that "desiring machine" – is in fact *productive* of the face.) At the level of the anus so-called "in-dividuals" turn out to be, indeed, infinitely divisible.

Shit is profoundly ambiguous: it is dirty but it purifies, it is death, but it fertilizes; it dramatizes a loss of meaning which is negatively constitutive of meaning. As pure, dead matter shit is dreaded ("I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me," says Thoreau confronted with "some hard matter in its home," 93). Defecation is a constitutive emptying, a re-enactment of our escape from dead matter (perhaps the archetype of all heroic quests after a spiritual reward), while socialization is largely based on

the denial of "real" exchanges with the environment and a shift to symbolic exchanges. (An example of this denial is the bourgeois displacement and disavowal of production, of "working bodies," and thus – of desire.)

Gay men's anuses are a particularly hot issue. ("Try not to think about the arse thing," one mom tells another talking about their gay sons in an episode of *Queer as Folk*.) Anal sex is what makes gay men irrevocably dirty, if not literally smudged with shit. One may get the impression that on gay men's anuses the fate of the family, society and civilization itself is hanged. Gay men's fascination with anality seems to threaten the patriarchal constructions of the male gender, and particularly the masculinist imperative of self-control, territorial/corporeal sovereignty and impenetrability. In a brilliant reading of the architecture of public water closets, Lee Edelman considers the restroom as

the site of a loosening of sphincter control, evoking, therefore, an older eroticism, undifferentiated by gender, because anterior to the genital tyranny that raises the phallus to its privileged position. Precisely because the phallus marks the putative stability of the divide between "Ladies" and "Gentlemen," because it articulates the concept of sexual difference in terms of "visible perception," the "urinary" function in the institutional men's room customarily takes place within view of others—as if to indicate its status as an act of definitional display; but the private enclosure of the toilet stall signals the potential anxiety at issue in the West when the men's room becomes the locus not of urinary but of intestinal relief. For the satisfaction that such relief affords abuts dangerously on homophobically abjectified desires, and because that satisfaction marks an opening onto difference that would challenge the phallic supremacy and coherence of the signifier on the men's room door, it must be isolated and kept in view at once lest its erotic potential come out. (161)

The wounded hero of Hemingway's "A Very Short Story" may serve as an example of this "sphincter anxiety": before a surgery he and his nurse/lover joke about "friend or enema," thus equating the anal intervention with an enemy. Then "[h]e went under the anaesthetic holding tight on to himself so he would not blab about anything during the silly, talky time" (141). The passive "going under" clearly threatens his sense of self-control and his reticence is evocative of his tightened sphincter; for the sake of the operation, the war hero has to surrender, i.e. render the body vulnerable to penetration. Gay men's anuses, on the contrary, are open. Ginsberg (who is a rather a blabby poet, as Whitman was before him) describes his sphincter as

active, eager, receptive to phallus
 coke bottle, candle, carrot
 banana & fingers—
 [...]

 eager to serve—
 unashamed wide open for joy (365)

Gay men's open anuses threaten society with a flood of shit. They offer different kinds of flows and exchanges, a different social economy, beyond the axiom of scarcity and toward the principle of excess.

There can be no excess, however, without an acknowledgement of waste as waste, rather than as raw material for further "useful" production. This requires, among other things, a revision of our notions of time, as wasting (as well as redemption) is a thoroughly temporal process. As Laporte points out, the noxiously filthy human excrement can be redeemed through the workings of time – "only time can release its fertilizing spirit" (36). If time can deliver you from filth, then the idea of absolute cleansing needs the idea of absolute time, with a view to eternity. It needs, at least, a cheap copy of eternity, such as the fantasy of an endless genealogical succession, the eternity of transmittable seed. By resisting the "hierarchical succession" inherent in heterosexual reproduction and moving to homosexual production, which "takes place according to a mode of non-limitative horizontal relations (Hocquenghem 109), queer lives may counteract the powerful mythos of patrimonial continuity, of "inheritance" both in its genetic and property-related sense. (Narratives such as *Queer as Folk* provide many examples of an alternative notion of temporality, which refuses to be linked to the law of inheritance and changes the time vector from a vertical to a horizontal orientation.) "The future stops here," and the anus appears to be an apt symbol for this "dead end" of hereditary history, of evolution itself.

In their crusade against the "familialism" of psychoanalysis, Deleuze and Guattari summarize the Oedipal mechanism of the reproduction of social life:

at one end the Oedipal bond is established by the murderous identification, at the other end it is reinforced by the restoration and internalization of paternal authority ("revival of the old state of things at a new level"). Between the two there is latency—the celebrated latency—which is without doubt the greatest psychoanalytic mystification: this society of "brothers" who forbid themselves the fruits of the crime, and spend all the time necessary for internalizing. But we are warned: the society of brothers is very dejected,

unstable, and dangerous, it must prepare the way for the rediscovery of an equivalent to parental authority, it must cause us to pass over to the other pole. (80)

A queer life can act as a wedge that blocks the smooth operations of the social machine. The male homosexual, for instance, paradigmatically (if not always factually) refuses to be a father and a patriarch, to internalize paternal authority, i.e. he does not simply refuse to apply or obey the Law, but, scandalously, to be the Law, to occupy the prescribed position of the guardian of the law (and we know from Kafka's parable "Before the Law" that the guardian of the Law is the Law). That is why queer subjects may enjoy "the fruits of the crime" and develop community bonds which are not simply temporary, subject to a compulsory oedipalization after the period of latency, but permanently "horizontal," unstable, unsanctioned. I see variations on this theme in Whitman's vision of a radical democracy of brothers based on "adhesiveness" and a network of rhizomatic and contingent relationships ("Do you know what it is as you pass to be loved by strangers?" 122) as well as in Gombrowicz's embrace of "Filistria" (*Syncyzna*) as opposed to "Patria" or the Fatherland. Guy Hocquenghem, in turn, speaks of "grouping" as a specifically homosexual mode of sociality:

Possibly, when the anus recovers its desiring function and the plugging in of organs takes place subject to no rule or law, the group can then take its pleasure in an immediate relation where the sacrosanct difference between public and private, between the individual and the social, will be out of place. [...] The anus's group mode is an annular one, a circle which is open to an infinity of directions and possibilities for plugging in, with no set places. The group annular mode [...] causes the "social" of the phallic hierarchy [...] to collapse. (111)

Outside of the family and the familial framework, one becomes a free-floating "pleasure machine," released from the clutch of paternalistic authority and the capitalistic logic of the "private property" of the body. A similar vision may be found in the untitled work of a young Polish artist, Karol Radziszewski. One can hardly distinguish one body from another, the face does not stand above the anus; there is only an undifferentiated mass of bodies, without a purpose, a direction, a productive use.

Reversing the axiom of the general positivity of all social production, one might agree with Laporte's statement that "to produce is literally

to shit" (131), that all socially profitable production – the production of positive value – is, indeed, producing faeces. How can one think capitalism other than as an enormous machine producing waste (where each product is by definition always already "rubbish" to be quickly replaced by a new, better model), ideologically legitimized as creating a better life, a better future, well-being and social good? This take on the "true nature" of capitalistic production brings to mind a famous installation by the Belgian artist Wim Delvoye, entitled "Cloaca." Delvoye constructed a complex machine which, when fed regular human food, produces ordinary human shit. Not only does the work question the relationship between the mechanical and the organic, the internal and the external; it may also be read as an allusion to the huge industrial-capitalistic machine that produces nothing but waste. Still, the installation is not simply accusatory, it is rather humorous and seems to celebrate the joyful wastefulness of life.

If, as Halperin claims, we all waste our lives, queer people may do so more consciously (and, perhaps, more artistically) than others. Gay men are reputed to waste their lives particularly lavishly, what with their mythical promiscuity and their wanton scattering of their "substance," tantamount to wasting their future. This may be one of the reasons why in the heterosocial economy they are one of the most expendable groups, as the sad history of the AIDS epidemic (or, more precisely, the social and governmental responses to it) attests. In an attempt to move beyond the framework of redemption, beyond the alchemical dreams of turning shit into pure money, queer subjects come close to the recognition of the wasteful productivity of desire. To waste one's life *deliberately* (paraphrasing Thoreau) is an ethical choice, a choice against the logic of accumulation and patrimonial transmission, a choice of a different mode of being; a mode which depends on creation rather than procreation, but is well aware that creation is, essentially, synonymous with waste.

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