

Review of *Possessed: A Cultural History of Hoarding* by Rebecca R. Falkoff. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2021, 264 pp. ISBN 1501752804).

The idea that waste is a social construct was already suggested by Zygmunt Bauman in his 2004 *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* when he declared that the distinction between order and disorder is determined by human design, reason why items and waste can switch positions easily. In this essay, the sociologist discussed several ways in which, since modernity, and due in part to globalization and economic progress, several human groups have been declared redundant, becoming a category of ‘human waste,’ which includes surplus population—those who have no money to participate in the market—, demonized immigration—whether for economic or refuge-seeking purposes—, and minority populations. To these collectives seen as unfit, disposable, and obstructive, Rebecca Falkoff, in *Possessed: A Cultural History of Hoarding* (2021) adds the figure of the hoarder.

First included as a category in the fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association (2013), hoarding is defined as a disorder characterized by an enduring difficulty to dispose of personal possessions, irrespective of what their real value may be. Given that hoarding necessarily entails the accumulation (and, therefore, existence) of objects external to the patient, for Falkoff the hoard is an aesthetic artifact “produced by a clash in perspectives about the meaning or value of objects” (6). The book opens with an introduction of what the author names *hoardiculture*, a term that imperils idealizing a pathological condition that all too often entails loneliness and sheer incomprehension for those who suffer it. Yet, by transforming a disorder into a *modus vivendi*, she heads towards the similarities between unhealthy patterns of accumulation versus culturally accepted forms of enthusiastic collection. What these resemblances outline is that, as happens with the distinction between things and objects, the dividing line between insanity and health also depends, conceivably, on socially

determined and economic factors. Nevertheless, in respect of the ways economy fragments society, producing wasted communities, it might have been illustrative to present hoarders as evidence of the structural problem of classism that all too often goes unacknowledged in the US and elsewhere. Falkoff analyzes economic and psychological constituents that engender hoarders but does not delve so much into the category of class, which might prove a fruitful field of study, especially when linked with practices such as that of *necrocaptialism*.

Moving around sites where value is unsteady—and, therefore, where the line separating harmless collection from hoarding is blurred—the author outlines a panoramic overview that shows the evolution of this notion from a model of economic efficiency during the late eighteenth century up to a criterium determinant of mental illness in the early twenty-first century. Throughout four chapters, she shows how the dematerialization and deregulation of the market have resulted in the contemporary omnipresence of hoarding, describing a society where not only are personal possessions ‘wastified,’ but also their possessors. Those who refuse or simply cannot adhere to socially—and economically—acceptable trends in collection are deemed unhealthy and end up ostracized and ultimately disposed of. Thus, building on Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of the historical leftover, Falkoff seemingly aims at a philosophy of the social leftover.

Operating on the premise that, in exercising control over objects, we are similarly possessed by them, the library is the site chosen in chapter one to analyze the concept of ownership and its relationship to fears of powerlessness. Bibliomania reveals how the obsession with compulsively stockpiling possessions reflects a haunting anxiety towards agency emerging from the subject-object dualism and the power one exerts over the other, which already became evident in modern society. Falkoff suggests that the flimsy distinction between a fervent collector and an obsessive hoarder depends on who controls which: whereas it is the subject who dominates the object in the former, the latter is conversely subdued by an overwhelming lack of agency when facing the material world



represented by the objects amassed, due to an incapacity to distinguish between use and order. Given its direct influence on some current forms of assembling, perhaps the emotional factor could have been further emphasized, as it helps explain the emergence of figures such as Marie Kondo, who recently became popular for her patented KonMari Method: a system to order one's home and, by extension, one's life, based on an interpretation of waste as that which no longer "speak[s] to the heart" or "spark[s] joy" (KonMari, n.d.). Falkoff affirms that the problem lies not in value itself, but on the categorization of different degrees of value where obsessives find it difficult to define boundaries, given that every possession is exclusive and irreplaceable. Since the value of objects, particularly those being compulsively accumulated, is often the result of personal perspective rather than of quantifiable features, Kondo's parameter becomes particularly thorny in the case of hoarders, reason why the emotional attachment to objects might deserve further attention.

As illustrated in chapter two, subjective theories of value and its effects on the market emerged, in part, thanks to the act of recovery of waste objects by ragpickers. The marginality of these items, removed from their original histories of production, made their price switch according to how desirable they became for potential customers looking for oddities. Consequently, the (flea) market demonstrates not only that the capacity of goods to generate desire equals their ability to create value, but also that value is a factor that changes over time. As Falkoff declares, scavenge articles at sale in flea markets are characterized by their uniqueness and their transience, which define modernity and challenge the myth of progress and the imperative of functionality which typifies it. Yet, scavengers' drive to gather trash answers to an aspiration to obtain benefit from it, as there can be no market without buyers. The difference between a street vendor and a hoarder thus depends on how well their products sell. It therefore follows that it is the act of selling which brings value to the goods being purchased. Building on Thompson's Rubbish Theory, for Falkoff the economic exchange is what provides

a path towards value, which transforms items into either junk or commodities. Taken to the extreme, one could deduce that, the same way that at the beginning of the twentieth century in the field of psychoanalysis female hysteria was accounted for by sexual repression, the characteristics of third wave capitalism may be providing the seed for hoarding, as "the reality of value is produced somewhere in between [vendor and shopper]" (Falkoff 2021, 105). The flea market is the landscape selected by Falkoff to claim that, whereas economic theories of hoarding before the twenty-first century were based on the accumulation of necessity goods, this era has witnessed the pathologizing of forms of amassment that have no direct impact on the general economy.

If the power that personal objects exercise over their owners is what helps us distinguish collectors from hoarders, in chapter three Falkoff uses the figure of the detective to discuss the functional value that can be imbued to collected objects. The investigator and the hoarder are presented as the two end poles of a continuum where the hoarder refuses to disregard any slightest aspect of an object as irrelevant, whereas the detective can find a deeper layer of meaning in an apparently useless element. Falkoff thus uses the site of the crime scene to demonstrate how both the detective and the hoarder are notable for their acute eye for detail, being the main difference between them that the former can find utility and/or purpose in such detail.

Finally, Falkoff concludes in chapter four that, though hoarding is portrayed as narratives of personal failure, it involves a rejection towards accepting the obsolescence of objects, a refusal to dump goods or, rather: make waste. Hoarders thus stand as both a result of and at the same time a reaction against capitalist economies of planned obsolescence and pollutant traits, and their activity is often sustained by personal but also imaginably environmental arguments: the refusal to dump something which might be useful for someone else. The author uses two documentaries, *Waste Not* (Song 2005) and *The Collector* (Hampton 2009), to exemplify how waste can be avoided, not by making use of things, which is not always possible, but simply



by transferring them to the limbo of potentiality. That is achieved, for instance, turning waste into the contents of artistic exhibitions, which makes rubbish 'useful' up to some extent. However, as Falkoff remarks, even if hoarders are labeled owners of a rubbish ecology, their possessions are still garbage until they can be transformed by art, occupying a capricious liminality that does not completely eradicate their transience.

The same way that value depends on temporal fluctuations dictated by the market, in the conclusion of her book, Falkoff considers the effects of digital archives on abnormalizing views on hoarding which might find an answer in the spatial sphere. The author draws attention to the irony of considering the stockpiling of newspapers a mental disorder while acknowledging the value of information stored in digital archives, a point she uses to evidence how value is also space reliant. This idea traces back to Mary Douglas's definition of 'dirt' as "matter out of place"—this author being conspicuously absent in this work—but it also implies that if something presumably valuable occupies more space than the conventionally accepted, the place immediately becomes a landfill, even if it is constricted to the privacy of the home setting.

In conclusion, drawing on the line already delineated by Bauman, Falkoff presents a valuable and thought-provoking study that opens a new line of research where mental health—embodied in the figure of the hoarder—becomes an additional category that reinforces and challenges the scope of communities of waste. The creativity permeating her approach is remarkable and the thesis is coherent and well-articulated, thanks in part to the author's capacity to link seemingly disparate ideas. Hence,

the different landscapes chosen in this work are rendered undesirably toxic for the economic and, in a lower degree, ecological epistemologies that have controlled the Eurocentric, western paradigm since modernity. These locations of surplus exemplify how product excess becomes constraining for the individual. Without romanticizing what otherwise is a disruptive and dangerously isolating condition, the act of hoarding also unveils the individuals' increasing powerlessness in a disease-mongering system where not simply object, but human value is subjective, transient, unstable and spatially confined, while epitomizing how those who deviate from the socio-economic patterns dictating compilation, exchange and function of possessions in a neoliberal society are pathologized, their agency becoming upsettingly compromised. Nonetheless, the analysis might have been further reinforced by a deeper connection to the field of dirt theory and studies on stigma. This is a promising area of inquiry which revolves predominantly on economic and psychological—and, to a lesser extent, cultural—parameters, though it could be productively driven towards anthropological aspects, too, linking hoarding and similar disorders to specific notions such as Agamben's *homo sacer* or Girard's 'scapegoat,' this being a connection which is never established, but succinctly evoked in the book.

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