

From Trash to Treasure

Valuation of Waste in Dumpster Diving

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IASR/NSR lecture
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Background

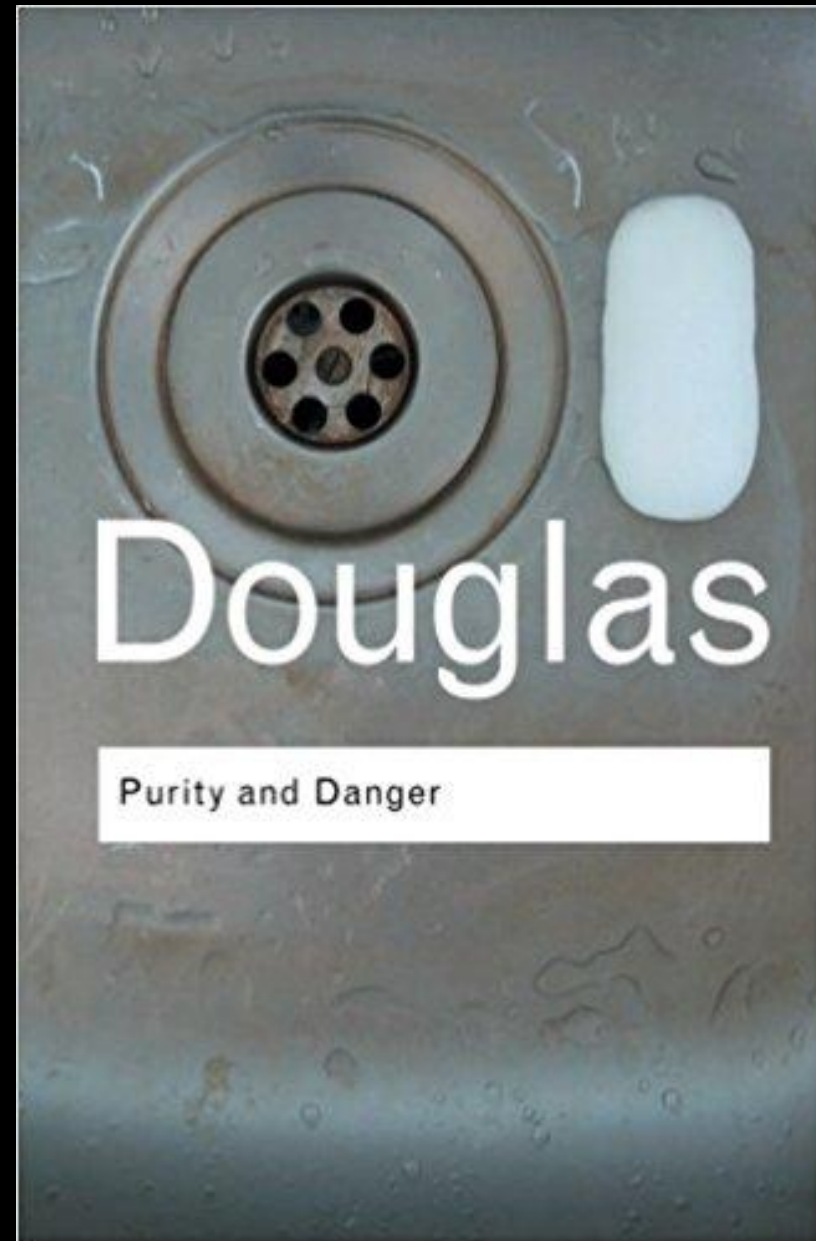
- Based on on-going fieldwork.
- Data: interviews, participant observation, media materials.

Dumpster diving

- recovering discarded items from trash bins, often placed in supermarket backyards or in the vicinity of other commercial establishments.
- unsettles the assumedly fixed status and negative value of waste.

Mary Douglas (1921–2007):

Dirt is 'matter out of place'

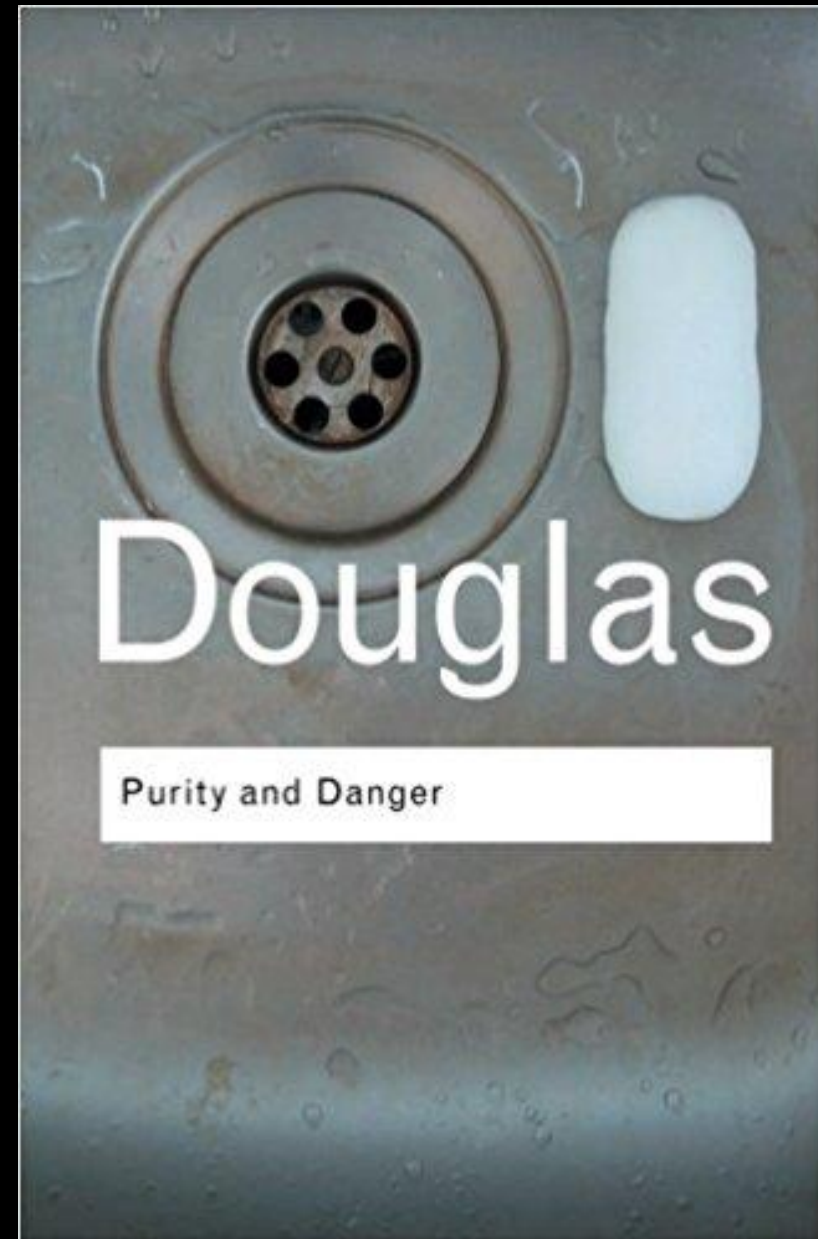


Mary Douglas (1921–2007):

The distinction between
clean and dirty is dynamic

- dependent on categorizations

Order and disorder are co-
constituted



Valuation

Studying dumpster diving a highly relevant topic for the understanding of valuation:

- 1) Waste and value are **co-emergent**.
- 2) Challenges common perceptions of the **flow of commodities and value**.
- 3) Valuation as a **hands-on practice**.
- 4) Sheds light on valuation by **other means**.

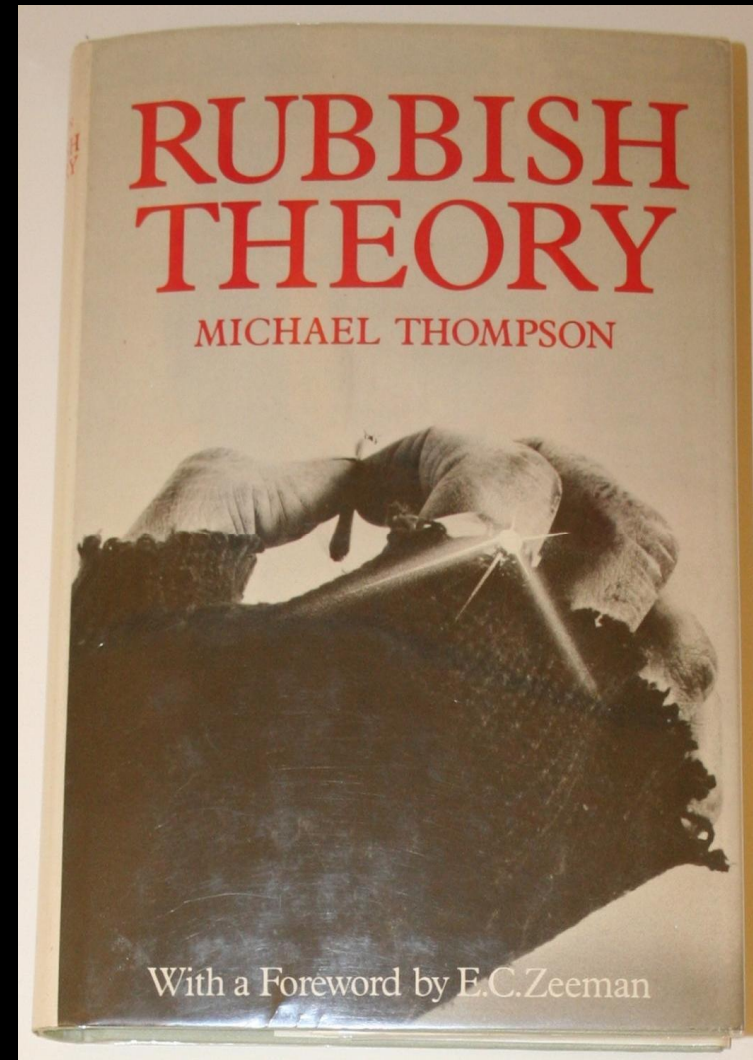
Pragmatist approach to value

- value as a practical matter, as the outcome of *practices*
- a result of **valuation**.

Michael Thompson:
Rubbish Theory (1979)

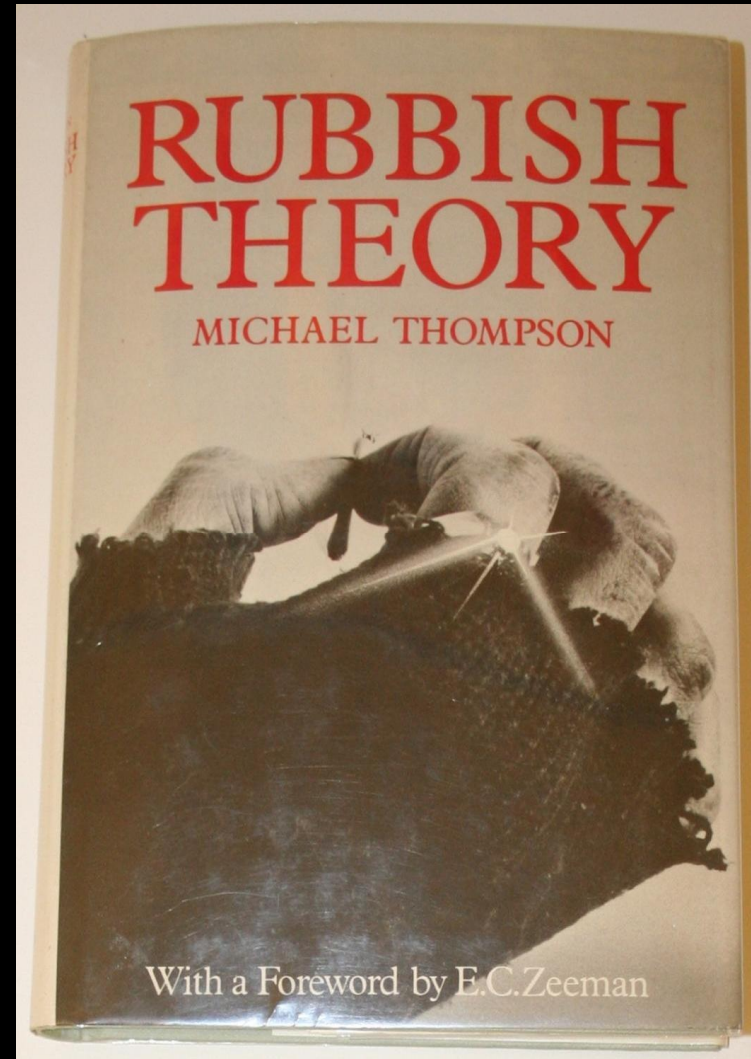
2 categories of objects:

- 1) transient objects: have a limited life-span and their value decreases over time
- 2) durable objects: more permanent and their value increases over time



Michael Thompson:
Rubbish Theory (1979)

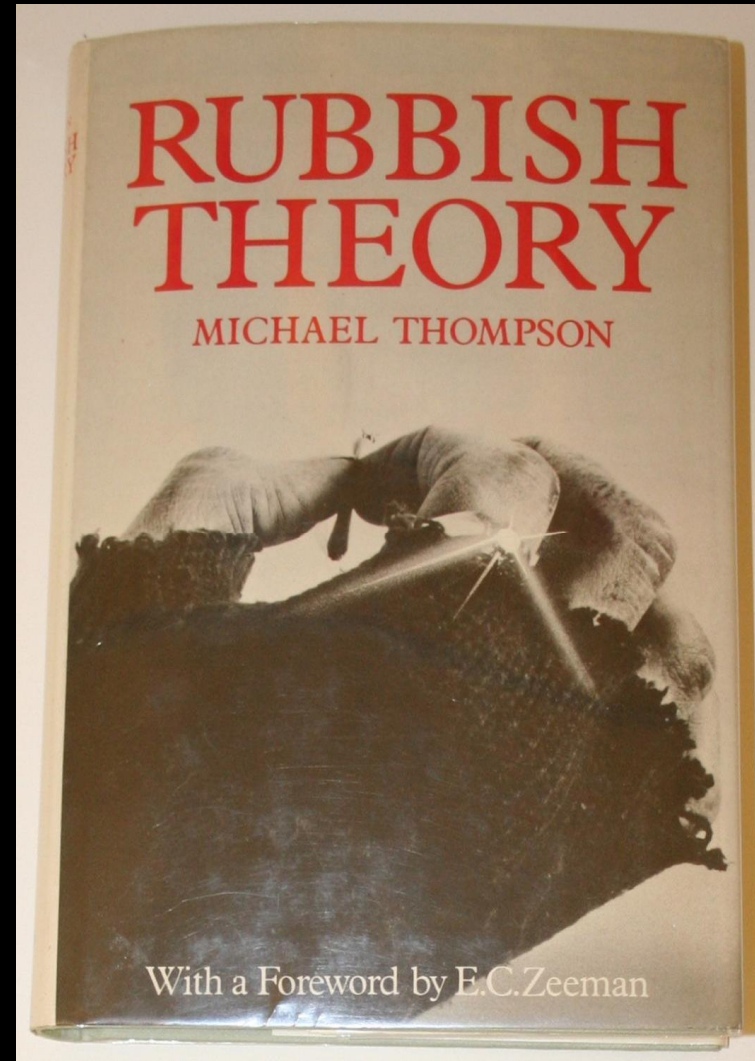
'In an ideal world, [...] an object would reach zero value and zero expected life-span at the same instant, and then [...] disappear into dust. But, in reality, it usually does not do this; it just continues to exist in a timeless and valueless limbo were at some later date (if it has not by that time turned, or been made, into dust) it has the chance of being discovered.' (pp. 9-10)



Michael Thompson:
Rubbish Theory (1979)

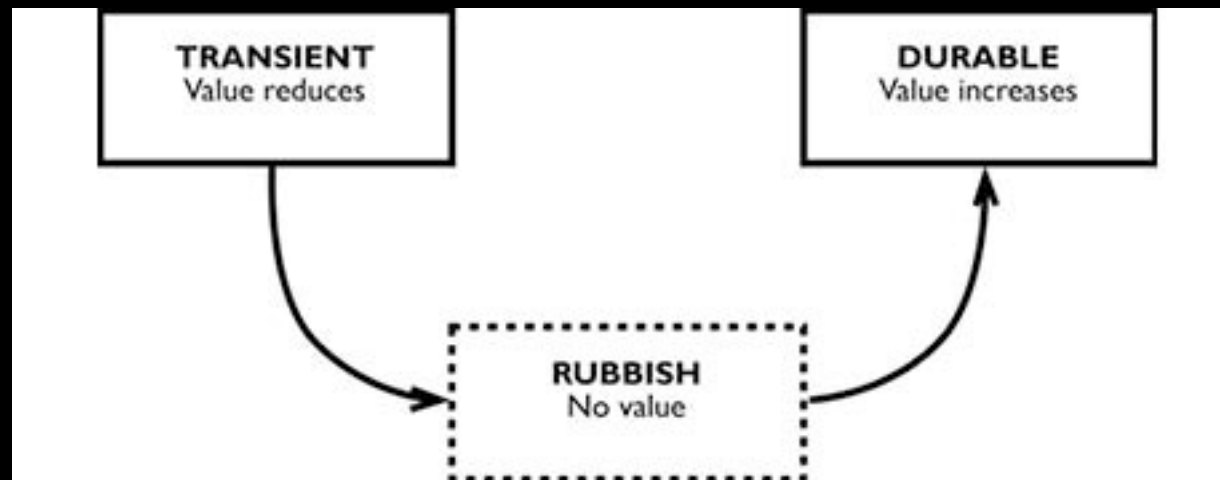
'rubbish':

- the objects that persist even though we no longer have any use for them
- zero point of value



Michael Thompson: *Rubbish Theory* (1979)

Rubbish explains how transient objects can be turned into durable objects



How my take differs from Michael Thompson's:

- 1) Valuing may also lead to **destruction**
 - dumpster divers 'consume' and finish off the discarded objects that they recover
- 2) Waste may turn out to have a **capacity for value**
 - not simply its zero point
- 3) Attending to **matter** and the **world of materials**.

Gilles Deleuze: the virtual

- helpful in underscoring the generative, creative side of valuation



Valuation in practice

Scavenger gaze (cf. Urry: tourist gaze)

- scanning the urban environment to find a good catch
- increased sensitivity and attention to certain visual elements of the townscape
- a mirror for making sense of the 'normal' ways of being in and experiencing the townscape
- a way of *valuating* the urban environment.

Mixing cognitive evaluation with bodily practices and technological prostheses

- senses as epistemic devices

Doing good and
undoing the stigma
of scrounging

The stigma of scrounging

- dirty, degrading, indignity, disgust, shame, necessity, desperation, poverty, inequality.

'There is a genuine unpleasantness to it that people have at the back of their heads [when they think of scrounging], precisely the dirtiness associated with rubbish. That it is the outcasts of society that hang around there [at the dumpsters].'

- Tommi, interview

Voluntary dumpster divers refuse this negative stigma

- along with re-valuing waste matter, they trans-value the value of the practice of scrounging.

Voluntary dumpster divers are distinguished from the marginal people, who scrounge out of necessity

- voluntary dumpster divers would also afford to buy their food, but they choose otherwise
- they hold the secret of a free lunch
- ideological reasons:
- pride in doing good (to the environment): a form of 'informal waste management'.

Technologies of the
self: valuing
oneself through
revaluing waste

Dumpster diving as a 'rather invisible' form of resistance

- rather than actively changing society, dumpster diving is a way of **living ethically**

A different ethical relation to waste

- Foucault: **ethical subjectivity**
- dumpster diving as a mundane technology of the self located within 'arts of existence'
- the self as bodily entangled with waste
- a way of co-existing with waste and making something out of it instead of just getting rid of it.

Conclusion

What is valued and how valuation takes place

- **what:** waste matter, practices, people as ethical subjects, the Western way of life
- **how:**
 - valuation is intertwined with other practices
 - a hands-on relation to the objects of valuation: not only about *knowing* what can be eaten, but also about *making* them good to eat
 - creativity of valuation!
 - valuation is bound to remain more or less **uncertain**
 - multiple **modes of valuation.**

Thank you!