The Excess of Modernity: Garbage Politics in Oaxaca, Mexico

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In the last several decades, garbage strikes have taken place around the world. In this article, I examine the case of garbage strikes in Oaxaca, Mexico, a rapidly growing city. Here, garbage, which is normally considered a hazard, is revealed also to be an effective political tool for people demanding “rights to the city.” Processes of modernization that have produced an expectation of cleanliness in modern cities have, at the same time, relied on production and consumption patterns that create more and more garbage. It is this inherent contradiction that provides a space for marginalized people to use garbage as a political tool.

Key Words: abjection, environmental justice, modernization, urban geography, waste.

In January 2001, activists from the neighborhood of Guillermo González Guardado blocked off Oaxaca City’s municipal dump. This act of protest was the culmination of years of tension between the colonia (neighborhood) and city officials. On the one hand, the colonia was angry about how the dump had been managed and the city’s inability to mitigate public health and environmental risks posed by the site. On the other hand, the protestors used garbage as a tool to demand the extension of municipal services to their community, thereby asserting their right to the city more broadly. As more than 2,500 tons of waste piled up on the streets of central Oaxaca (Figure 1), municipal authorities were pressured to negotiate with the leadership of Guillermo González Guardado and eventually conceded to some of their demands. In this article, I examine how garbage has become an important part of this colonia’s struggle to have municipal services extended to its location in Oaxaca, Mexico.

Although the case of Oaxaca occurs in its own historical and geographical context, garbage strikes have taken place in cities around the world (Philadelphia, 1986; New York City, 1990; Toronto, Ontario, 2002; Chicago, 2003; Vancouver, British Columbia, 2007; Athens,
Greece, 2006; Alumñecar, Spain, 2007; Naples, Italy, 2008). The impetus behind these events varied, along with the managerial context from city to city, but they all have one thing in common—the use of garbage as a political tool in a struggle over the right to the city. The central questions of this article are, therefore, as follows: Why is garbage such a powerful political tool in modern cities? How has garbage, traditionally thought of as either useless or hazardous, become leverage for the most marginalized in modern cities?

I argue that garbage becomes an effective political tool because it exploits the fraught relationship between city managers and urban waste. Modern citizens have come to expect the places they live, work, play, and go to school to be free of garbage—to be ordered and clean. These expectations can never be fully met, however, precisely because the same processes of modernization that have produced them have also produced a situation in which garbage proliferates. In other words, garbage as a political tool works by exploiting some of the many contradictions of modernity. Specifically, I am referring to the dual processes through which modernity produces an imaginary environment of order, cleanliness, and rational space, at the same time relying on a production system (capitalism) based on planned obsolescence and ever-expanding consumerism. Thus, the excess material of modernity exceeds the capacity of waste managers to expel it and purify the space of the city. Marginalized populations are able to leverage this difference between our expectations of cleanliness and urban order and actually existing material conditions in cities to demand their rights to the city. In examining these issues, this article contributes to our understanding of both a contemporary urban political practice being used around the world (garbage strikes) and the larger question of the nature of modern urban spaces.

This article is divided into the following sections. First, drawing on the work of James Ferguson, Mary Douglas, Ulrich Beck, and
Julia Kristeva, I discuss the contradictory relationships among modernity, risk, and cleanliness and the ways that garbage, as the abject product of modernist development, becomes an emblem of the difference between our expectations of modernity and modernity as lived experience. Second, I describe how the Latin American city developed as a practice in ordering, producing an urban modernity wherein a new politics of garbage can emerge. Next, I relate the empirical findings of the case study of Oaxaca, where I used archival and interview data to trace the recent history of city–garbage relationships and the activism that exploits them. Finally, I argue that a politics of manifestation, or making garbage visible, is effective because it exploits the contradictions between expectations of modernity and the actual material form of modern cities.

Modernity, Risk, and Garbage as the Abject, the Material Excess

Ferguson argues that modernization is a myth in both senses of the word. First, in the common usage (myth as a widely believed, yet erroneous assumption), modernization, as such, does not really happen as we suppose. Rather than being a precise trajectory of societal evolution, modernization is a story that Western social scientists have used to make other cultures intelligible, specifically as representatives of stages of progress through which the West has already passed. This leads to the second way in which modernization is a myth. In the anthropological sense of the term (myth as cosmological blueprint), modernization has become the goal of many societies whose members come to understand their lives through its terms, measuring their own successes and failures against a set of images, practices, technologies, and states of being derived largely from colonial experience (Ferguson 1999, 13–14). The daily lives of people often come into conflict with this imagined state of modernity (see also Bonfil Batalla 1996), causing turmoil. For Ferguson, expectations of modernity, when confronted with the material conditions of urban life, produce a set of contradictions that set the stage for social, cultural, and political conflict. It is here, in the productive tension between expectations of modernity, realized as clean and ordered urban spaces, and the material consequences of increasingly disposable societies, that garbage emerges as an effective political tool.

As Douglas (1966) argues, the removal of dirt and other polluting substances from the space of a society is indeed a productive act that reorders society to conform to a normative idea. Here, the removal of garbage is imperative to the normative vision of a modern city—clean, rationally ordered, and armed with modern technology. Garbage, as matter out of place (Douglas 1966), is the uncontrollable and uncontrollable threat to the integrity of the modern city, as well as its citizens. Because garbage is inherently misplaced, waste represents a risk to the modern urban societies we are trying to produce.

Despite the universalism implicit in the notion that garbage is always and everywhere disruptive, it is still possible to construe risk (and therefore waste as risk) as historically and spatially contingent (Beck 1999). As Beck argues, many of the risks faced by the world today are the products of certain processes of modern production that have led to effects beyond what could have been imagined. Risks are also the consequence of the technologies of order employed by nation-states. That is to say that the more effort we put into controlling the environmental problems that we have created, the more visible we make them. In this way, proliferating risks challenge the legitimacy of state institutions designed to contain them and lead to a new type of politics based on struggles over the distribution of environmental troubles (negative externalities; Beck 1999). In a similar analysis, Hajer (1995) asserts that environmental politics should thus be seen as “a site where the established institutions of industrial society are put to the test” (39). The notions of risk and environmental politics in Beck’s formulation are helpful in analyzing the politics of garbage. Here garbage, as a product of a certain type of development, has overflowed our abilities to dispose of it, endangering environmental and public health. At the same time, the inability of modern state institutions to deal adequately with waste is undermining their authority.

Given the potential of polluting forces to destabilize social systems and undermine modern institutions, we can argue that, as the
irreducible excess of modernist development, garbage, like other abject objects or subjects “threatens one’s own and clean self, which is the underpinning of any organization constituted by exclusions and hierarchies” (Kristeva 1982, 65). In other words:

The danger of filth represents for the subject the risk to which the very symbolic order is permanently exposed to the extent that it is a device of discriminations, of differences. A threat issued from the prohibitions that found the inner and outer borders in which and through which the speaking subject is constituted. (Kristeva 1982, 68–69)

As Kristeva makes clear, our desire to imagine ourselves as integrated whole persons decidedly separate from the outside world is constantly threatened by our experience with filth and other substances that, in one way or another, transgress the boundary between us and the outside world (see also Kingsbury 2007, on extimacy). Rather than accepting these boundaries as porous, we continually (and futilely) struggle to reinscribe and reinforce them. This provokes more anxiety and more mistrust of the abject. It is then “the urge to make separations, between clean and dirty, ordered and disordered, ‘us’ and ‘them,’ that is, to expel the abject . . . encouraged by western cultures [that creates] feelings of anxiety because such separations can never be fully achieved” (Sibley 1995, 8). Sibley (1995) offers T. S. Eliot’s Wasteland as an example of the metaphorical mapping of sociospatial relationships through notions of defilement. Here, “defilement occurs in the form of litter, corpses, fog—the residues which invade the social world of the bourgeoisie and disintegrate class boundaries” (60). He argues that this is a fundamental attribute of consumer culture and an important criterion for the success of capitalism. It is the reinscription of such borders that is made impossible by the presence of garbage. This is also where the political potential of the abject comes into play. The more we try to draw borders between clean and dirty, order and chaos, the more opportunities are created for political acts that expose the unstable and fragile nature of the imposed categories of modernity and the institutions responsible for upholding them.

Because of this potential to destabilize “established institutions” of modernity, the new politics of garbage are a site where the “modernization myth” reaches its own endpoint (Ferguson 1999). In the case of garbage, the image of modern urban order is continually displaced by the presence of waste. In the following section, I briefly describe the colonial history of the relationship among modernity, urban order, and cleanliness in Latin American cities.

**Urban Modernity and Cleanliness**

Since colonial times, the center of the disciplining of modern Latin American subjects has been the city. Indeed, as Rama (1996) explains, the Latin American city itself was an exercise in ordering. Rama argues that the process of colonization that took place mostly through these highly ordered cities “triumphantly imposed its cities on a vast and unknown hinterland, certifying and reiterating the Greek conception that contrasted the civilized inhabitants of the polis to the barbarous denizens of the countryside” (Rama 1996, 6). During the nineteenth century, Latin American elites, fully immersed in enlightenment notions of progress “adapted themselves to a frankly rationalizing vision of an urban future, one that ordained a planned and repetitive urban landscape and also required its inhabitants to be organized to meet increasingly stringent requirements of colonization, administration, commerce, defense and religion” (Rama 1996, 4). This image of modern urban space persists in Latin America, reflecting what Castro-Gómez (2001) calls an “ideal of synthesis” between science, economic growth, and aesthetic development, based on the idea that there is a “rational order” able to “guarantee the indissoluble unity between the true, the good and the beautiful” (139). Although the appearance of this order on the ground is questionable, it is the striving for this order and the inevitable inability to acquire it that drives modernist development projects.

A key constituent in modern urban orders is waste, or rather the lack of it. As has been argued by scholars of urban development and history, the need to expel waste has been an important force in the construction of cities, particularly in the late nineteenth and twentieth
centuries (Laporte 2000; Melosi 2000). Scanlan (2005) goes farther in arguing that society “developed...as a response to this alienated waste—to garbage” (124). He describes in detail the process through which this occurred:

[Progress had the necessary effect of depersonalizing the waste process, meaning that apparently separate developmental processes within modern society were entirely complementary. The end result of this supposedly virtuous cycle is that without the organization of garbage disposal, specific kinds of industrial production become impossible and vice versa. The most overlooked, or avoided, consequence of the development of modern society as a system of social rationalization cannot be disentangled from the fact that specialist production and public bureaucracy ensures that we are already one step removed from the consequences of our own waste. (154)

Here, processes of modernization mean that waste and production are intimately linked. At the same time, the system can only be preserved if rational order is maintained. This requires the distancing of garbage from urban spaces but also from citizens. The creation and participation of new urban subjects was an important part of this process. Modernization in Latin America, therefore, “assumed a new relationship between power and a body founded on discipline, productivity and hygiene” (González Stephan 2003, 189). Although constitutions delimited the public sphere and who could inhabit it, manuals were the chief indication of how the physical body of the individual should be controlled, even in private spaces. Numerous behavioral and hygienic rules followed the individual into and out of the home through pedagogical institutions and the press: “Filth...represented one of the metaphors that complemented the great axiom of ‘barbarism.’ The asepsis and cleanliness of streets, language, body and habits appeared as the panaceas of progress and materialization in a modern nature” (González Stephan 2003, 196).

Because they were so essential to obtaining or maintaining the purity of cities and their citizens, hygienization policies were pursued with “irrational zeal” (González Stephan 2003, 201). González Stephan’s work shows how what Rodriguez (2001) calls “acts of cleansing” were historically important in disciplining the modern Latin American citizen, such that, “the desired model of civilization demanded by the new urban space...predicated on compliance with behavioral rules...manifests phobias against dirt, disease, and bodily contact” (Rodriguez 2001, 28). In this way, garbage threatens not only the order of modern cities but also the status of citizens. In the following case study, I describe how attempts to eliminate garbage from the city of Oaxaca have produced opportunities for demands for rights to the city through a new politics of garbage. Before I turn to this case study, I briefly describe the data on which it is based.

Case Study

My research in Oaxaca included archival investigation, interviews, and surveys. Most of the archival materials were collected at the Hemeroteca Pública Néstor Sánchez (Néstor Sánchez Public Archives) in Oaxaca. I reviewed newspaper articles dealing with garbage and garbage management from 1950 to 2005. I also collected legal documents and state and municipal planning documents from the public archives, the public library, and government officials. These documents helped me to identify historical and contemporary waste management practices, issues, and politics in the city of Oaxaca. They also provided the basis for analyzing representations of garbage, urban citizens, and outsiders.

I interviewed twenty people including federal, state, and municipal officials involved in waste management, the members of Guillermo González Guardado’s neighborhood committee, and the leaders of three environmental organizations active in waste management issues. These semistructured interviews took place in the interviewees’ places of employment or their homes and lasted an average of one hour each. The only government entity directly involved in waste management who refused to talk to me was the head of the State Institute of Ecology. I had multiple interviews with the president, secretary, treasurer, and other members of the neighborhood committee in Guillermo González Guardado. Some of these interviews were conducted individually, and others took place in larger groups. They also included tours of the colonia and the municipal dump.
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The Case of Oaxaca

Oaxaca is, in many key respects, an exemplar for studying the politics of municipal solid waste (MSW). The rapidly growing urban area, and capital of the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, is home to 472,000 people. The pace and haphazard nature of its growth has meant that municipal services are not well planned or distributed, and land and housing are scarce commodities (Murphy and Stepick 1991). This section briefly describes the processes of urbanization that set the conditions for contemporary garbage management and politics in Oaxaca, Mexico.

In Oaxaca, as well as other parts of Mexico, urbanization was an important process shaping the state from the 1940s on. The city has grown in two main ways: government-planned growth and, more commonly, the settlement of unplanned squatter neighborhoods (**colonias populares**). The informal settlements lack basic services, which cannot be legally demanded from the city because of the absence of legal security in land ownership (Ramírez 1990a, 1990b).

Oaxaca's pattern of growth has produced a relatively affluent central city surrounded by a poorer and more isolated urban fringe. It has also produced a large metropolitan area of twenty-two **municipios conurbados** (contiguous urban counties) that extends through much of the valley. These counties are unevenly urbanized and there are still large expanses of less densely populated agricultural land within them, although this is changing rapidly in particular growth corridors.

The population of Oaxaca increased 263 percent between 1970 and 1995. At the same time, the amount of garbage produced in the city increased more than 400 percent (Ortega Castro 2001). Between 1995 and 2004, Oaxaca’s population increased by 12 percent and the amount of garbage increased by 72 percent (Mendoza 2004). This means that the amount of garbage produced per capita is increasing. The most obvious explanation for this is an increase in consumption, particularly of packaged goods. More Oaxacans are choosing packaged food and soft drinks instead of having subsistence plots or purchasing locally grown and manufactured food (Figure 2). Today, the central city of Oaxaca produces 350 tons of MSW daily, and the surrounding areas produce another 300 (Sánchez García 2001). This 1.3 million pounds produced daily by 472,000 people means that the average per capita production of garbage each day is 2.75 pounds or about 1.25 kg, near the average in Latin America (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2002).

Modernization of Waste Management

Oaxaca city officials have been concerned with garbage management since the 1940s, but it was in the mid-1980s that the city took a number of steps to “modernize” (‘**Mejorará el servicio de limpieza**’ 1985; Torres 1986; Cruz García 1987). The city initiated three major steps that decided the path of MSW management through the 1990s: It installed dumpsters and transfer stations for garbage, designated a new open-air dump in the **municipio** of Zaachila, and constructed a **procesadora** (an automated garbage-sorting plant; “**Mejorará el servicio de limpieza**” 1985; “**Primer procesadora de basura en el sureste, para Oaxaca**” 1985). These three practices of garbage management produced unexpected and contradictory results, as is true of many modernization projects (Beck 2000). After briefly describing the city’s attitude toward the modernization of...
sanitation, I discuss two of these projects—the use of dumpsters and the management of the dump site—in more detail.

The city administration argued that better garbage management would be a crucial step in the modernization of the urban area. The persistent assertion spilled over to a new cleanliness campaign with the theme, “A clean city is a beautiful city” (“En una ciudad limpia se vive mejor” 1985; “Mañana se inicia la campaña de limpieza” 1985; “Una ciudad limpia es una ciudad bonita” 1985), developed to raise consciousness among the residents. The mayor, Jorge Fernando Iturribarria Bolaños, explained the objective of the campaign thus: “To make the capital of our state one of the cleanest cities of the republic” (“PVC inició la campaña de limpieza en la ciudad” 1985, 11A). He went on to describe the rationale behind the campaign:

We produce one kilo of garbage per person and it costs the administration one peso and 70 centavos to sweep, collect and dispose of this garbage, which is the most difficult process and which has obliged the city to take measures for the modernization of the city. … One lives better in a clean city (“PVC inició la campaña de limpieza en la ciudad” 1985, 11A).

In this respect, the modernization of the city is explicitly linked to the practices of MSW management. However, despite the city’s efforts to “industrialize” garbage management and to enlist the aid of citizens, city residents were still concerned over the quality of the urban environment. Much of this concern was the result of the programs themselves.

One example of how a proposed solution actually compounded the problem of garbage in the city is the dumpster program. In 1987 the city initiated the “cleaning service through dumpsters for garbage” (“Basura en la ciudad: más de 300 toneladas recogen” 1987, 3A). During this period, the city installed dumpsters in several locations in an effort to consolidate collection. The dumpsters were used by some, but others complained that the dumpsters were more of a problem than a solution. Instead of removing waste from the communities in which they were located, the dumpsters made trash more visible. Complaints focused on the fact that, rather than improving the cleanliness of the city, the dumpsters were having the opposite effect by operating as foci of waste (“Unidades de tracción animal se destinarán a recolectar basura: Los servicios se llevarán a partes altas de la ciudad” 1987, 2A; Torres 1988, 1A).

Given the unpopularity of the dumpsters, one might imagine that the city would have abandoned this technology. The city, however, continued to install dumpsters in other areas with unwavering faith in the technology on the part of the municipality. One official remarked that the “dumpsters [were] the most viable solution to the problem of garbage in the city” and went on to explain that they would be located in all parts of the city, particularly in outer areas where garbage trucks were unable to pass (Torres 1988, 1A). Rather than trying to find a more “traditional” and, perhaps, more feasible way of solving the garbage problem (such as the addition of more street sweepers), then, the administration insisted that it was the responsibility of the citizenry to adapt to the technology:

It is up to the citizens themselves to cooperate and to bring the garbage and to dispose of the garbage in the dumpsters, for which reason the education and orientation of civil society is imperative, as it is fundamental in these cases that it be the citizens themselves who cooperate in keeping the city clean. (“Agua y basura problemas municipales” 1987, 3A).

The other major project undertaken by the city in the 1980s was the establishment of a municipal dump, “which was well located, such that it does not affect the citizens as a center of infection” (“Mejoran el servicio de limpieza” 1988, 2A). The dump was located thirteen miles south of the city on the interstate that connects the city with the southern coast, on the outskirts of the municipio of Zaachila (see Figure 3). Although the city and its associated municipios had been dumping waste at the site in Zaachila for more than ten years, the land was ejidal (community-held) property and, as such, was not officially owned by Oaxaca City. The eventual ownership of the dump by the city was facilitated in 1992 by changes to Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution of 1917. These changes allowed for the private ownership of such lands. The ejidal committee of Zaachila was paid 180,895,975 pesos for indemnification of the land.

The area around the dump has experienced significant population influx and the establishment of many colonias populares. Many of the
first to move to these areas in the early 1990s were city residents who could no longer afford to rent in the city or to buy property there. The low prices also attracted a number of rural to urban migrants whose ejido or communal land was also being privatized. By the time the dump was legalized, there had already been a number of complaints from the neighborhoods of Vicente Guerrero and Emiliano Zapata, near the site, that the environment and their health had been threatened by the dump (Bracamontes Ruiz 1991). In spite of such concerns, the municipal dump is still on the same site and has grown in size and area of contamination. Now the entire urban area, which includes the city of Oaxaca and twenty-one contingent municipios, disposes of their waste there. There is still no processing and only minimal attempts have been made at mitigating the contamination it causes.

Although city and state governments still have not adequately addressed the issue of disposal, they continue to expand collection service (both in area and frequency) and look for better ways to “modernize” MSW management and make the system more efficient. The development and implementation of the Integrated System of the Management and Use of Solid Wastes (SIMARS), which came into effect in January 2004, is the best example of this. SIMARS is a program proposed for the municipio of Oaxaca by a consulting firm based in the state of Puebla. Noting that MSW management has led to high levels of dissatisfaction among the public, the firm suggested the reorganization of routes, an increase in the frequency of collection, the use of dumpsters (again) and other transfer units, an increase in the number of mechanical sweepers, and the implementation of recycling and composting programs at the community level. All in all, such recommendations departed very little from the initiatives undertaken by previous city administrations. The administration also declared that the “project of the systematic closure of the municipal dump is a real alternative with the acceptance of the people of Guillermo González Guardado and the other surrounding neighborhoods, which has gained the approval of many institutions” (City of Oaxaca 2002, 20). Despite this rather optimistic outlook, the dump is still
in the same place and its location and management have been the source of many conflicts between the surrounding colonias and the city.

In its efforts to modernize, the city has focused on cleanliness and sanitation as signs of progress. At the same time, economic development and increasing consumerism encouraged by this modernization effort changed the nature and quantity of garbage in the city, as well as its meaning for urban development. While city officials engaged in the production of an “imaginary” Mexican city (Bonfil Batalla 1996), waste management practices were increasingly inadequate to produce this clean and modern city on the ground. This was partly the result of contradictory processes and logics of modernization, as the imperative to cleanliness and order competes with a certain type of development dependent on the production of waste. Also, the contradiction inherent in the city’s constructed imaginary and other practices and representations of waste management laid the foundation for the new politics of garbage.

Garbage, as matter out of place (Douglas 1966), is the uncontainable and uncontrollable threat to the integrity of the modern city, as well as its citizens. The more city managers attempted to guard the “public secret” (Hawkins 2003) of the existence of waste, the more obvious its existence became. When the city’s sanitation department installed the dumpsters, for example, they expected that these would provide a more efficient way of eliminating waste from the city. Instead, these contenedores became public nuisances and were viewed as foci of disease. Rather than make waste invisible to residents and tourists, this technology made it more visible as it piled up in certain locations. Thus, it was the very modern technologies that were intended to ameliorate problems with garbage that continued to bring it to the fore. In addition to the dumpsters already discussed, the installation of a mechanized garbage sorter was also a failed attempt at “modern” waste management. It turned quickly from an example of Oaxaca’s progress and status as a clean city into a useless, abandoned building, contributing only to the “chaos” of the dump. A similar case can be made about the municipal dumping point on the outskirts of the municipal area, it is now a large and central place in the midst of the urban area. It was supposed to be sufficient for several decades, but it has already almost exhausted its potential and contaminated its surroundings. As the Counselor of Ecology of Oaxaca told me, it was simply insufficient to the “unimaginable” growth of the metropolitan area and the changing quantities and qualities of MSW (interview with Jacqueline Mariana Escamilla Villanueva, 29 September 2004).

**Garbage as a Political Tool**

It is in this context that garbage emerged as an effective political tool in the case of Oaxaca. In 2000, residents of one colonia near the dump, Guillermo González Guardado, developed a tactic of blocking the city of Oaxaca’s access to the site. A number of community members, fed up with the city’s refusal to clean up or remove the dump, barricaded the access road to the site and prevented garbage trucks from unloading. This, in turn, stalled collection throughout the entire metro area. Since 2000, there have been a series of such blockades where the city suspends collection and usually asks residents to keep the trash in their houses, although this request often goes unheeded by the public, who feel that garbage is the city’s responsibility.

As the garbage that piles up in the city center begins to smell and get in the way, people who work or live in the central city express outrage at the filthiness of the area. Thus, municipal authorities are forced into negotiating with the colonias to end the blockade. Whereas protests are common in Oaxaca and generally are paid little mind by residents of the city, the presence of garbage in the streets is considered a crisis that demands immediate attention. Through these politics of manifestation (making waste visible), the people of these colonias are asserting their “rights to the city” by demanding official recognition, services, and municipal responsibility for the health of their residents. Through these efforts, the community has secured a meeting center (2001), a medical center (2003), and electricity in part of the colonia (2003).

By using this tactic of blocking the flow of trash, the people of the colonia are able to make the abject product of development, garbage, visible, revealing the “public secret” of waste. By forcing the citizens of the center to live with
their own waste, they reverse their relationship to the abject and also, to some degree, challenge their own abject status. They are claiming their rights to the city by demanding official recognition, services, and municipal responsibility for the health of their colonia’s residents. These politics of manifestation are effective in achieving some of the area’s most pressing development goals. To some extent, the effectiveness of this tactic is based on the meanings of garbage.

Conclusion

As Douglas’s definition of waste as “matter out of place” implies, the identification of an object as garbage is largely dependent on the spatial and historical context in which it is found (Douglas 1966). This is especially true in the context of Mexico, where most of the 30 percent of wastes that are recycled (Secretaría de Desarrollo Urbano y Ecología 2003) are divested by scavengers who make their living selling materials they find in trash cans, dumpsters, or on the dump itself. Despite its potential as a resource, however, in the context of modernizing cities, garbage is most often perceived and represented as a threat to urban order and public and environmental health (cf. Field 1998; Novotny 1998; Westra and Lawson 2001; Adamson, Evans, and Stein 2002; Lee 2002). This is evident in the way that colonia residents and city officials use the same language to describe the problem with garbage. For example, Magdalena Loaeza Cruz, neighborhood president of the Guillermo González Guardado colonia, framed the issue of the dump’s location in these terms: “We do not want the dump anymore, every day our children and older people are sick because of the wastes that are in the ground” (Sánchez García 2004, 1A). This argument resonated with the General Coordinator of Urban Administration and Municipal Services, who said that “[t]he problem of garbage” is very serious, that perhaps the majority of citizens do not perceive the magnitude, because the overflow of wastes kept in this site harms not only the environment, but also the people that for necessity live on the outskirts of this dump” (Sánchez García 2004, 1A).

Waste as risk, however, should be considered a dynamic and historically contingent category. As Beck (1999) argues, contemporary risks are the result of the logics of a particular type of modernity/modernization: “In their (difficult to localize) early stages, risks and risk perception are unintended consequences of the logic of control which dominates modernity” (150).

Here garbage, as a product of a certain type of development, has overflowed our abilities to dispose of it, endangering environmental and public health. Concurrently, the inability of modern state institutions to deal adequately with waste is undermining their authority. Garbage as the abject, irreducible excess of modernity produces serious social, economic, environmental, and political effects. At the same time that the expulsion of waste becomes imperative, more waste is being produced, leading to a constant threat to modern order. As I have argued here, garbage is an abject product of modernity that exposes the contradictions between our expectations of urban order and existing material conditions in cities. When waste becomes visible, it exposes the inherent instability and fragility of modern divisions between clean and dirty and the weaknesses of institutions created to police those divisions. It is in this context that garbage has become an effective political tool through which marginalized groups, like the community of Guillermo González Guardado can demand their rights to the city.

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