


[Swayamprakash on Liboiron and Lepawsky, 'Discard Studies: Wasting, Systems, and Power'](#)

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Max Liboiron, Josh Lepawsky. *Discard Studies: Wasting, Systems, and Power.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2022. 224 pp. \$30.00 (paper), [ISBN 978-0-262-54365-1](https://www.amazon.com/dp/9780262543651). 

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In *Discard Studies*, Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky claim that “the core commitment of this book is to show the role of waste and wasting as a technique of *power*” (p. 7). Over five chapters that build on each other, they posit a multilayered refined argument that begins with defamiliarizing the norm and culminates in reflections on how to discard well, that is, “where institutions and groups make changes *through*, rather than *despite*, wasting and discarding” (p. 8). Through four chapters, the authors show that to exist, subsist, and persist, systems must discard.

In the first chapter, Liboiron and Lepawsky start by covering the basic techniques of discard studies, interrogating the “common sense and everydayness as products of power” (p. 120). Breaking down myths about solid waste systems, they defamiliarize what we know about these systems. Specifically, they show that recycling infrastructure “creates a framework where disposables become naturalized commodities instead of foregrounding waste redesign, reduction, or most importantly, elimination” (p. 12). Much of this mythologizing about the desirability and normative imprint of recycling comes from its mythological place in advanced capitalism. In defamiliarizing ourselves, we question what we know (or not) about waste and waste systems—where waste comes from, where it goes, and why—that is, defamiliarization as a method. The pursuit is not the answer to the question as much as the centering of the idea that we do not know everything we need to know. The second technique—denaturalization—involves questioning what we assume to be natural about extant waste practices. Since waste practices are rooted in specific times, places, cultures, and systems, their inherent naturalness is subjective, historically specific, and not universal. The third technique is decentering. Because waste systems and wasting rely on dominant centers and externalized peripheries, discard studies rely on decentering these systems, asking instead how these came to be in the first place. The fourth technique, depurifying, introduces the concept of difference. Much of wasting and waste systems rely on maintaining purity in congruence with purity. By sully that version of purity, discard studies questions how and why power is maintained and mythologized. In essence, in the first chapter Liboiron and Lepawsky show that waste and wasting are infrastructures instead of behaviors. If, how, and why one might recycle in one’s dwelling is one miniscule part of a massive system of recycling that includes laws, policies, markets, lobbies, etc., things that are known and unknown.

In the second chapter, Liboiron and Lepawsky “use the concept of *scale* to understand the situated

nature of knowledge about waste.” Using scale as a way to understand the relationships that “*matter* to defining an issue, and thus of locating where and how interventions might best take place,” their goal is to “demonstrate not only why scale is a necessary and even characteristic concept for discard studies but also how scale and relationality takes on ethical and normative dimensions “ (p. 39). Indeed, the authors argue that understanding “scale as *relationships that matter* within a situated context has ramifications for action, from policy to management to citizen activism” (p. 45). Ultimately, Liboiron and Lepawsky posit that defining waste as a universal category can deny how situated and contextual waste is.

In the third chapter, the authors show how power “can be thought of as the integrity of systems, particularly in terms of maintaining boundaries and flows, the insides and outsides of dominant systems” (p. 63). Curbside recycling and waste pickup is an embodiment of disposability, because out of sight can often mean out of mind. This is not a value judgment as much as a reflection on the power of waste systems. Following waste, then, peels off layers of what we assume as the familiar, the truth, and the periphery.

In the fourth chapter, *Discard Studies* argues that “without paying attention to differences (as in, specificity), identifying waste and discard problems properly and aligning solutions for them won’t succeed” (p. 99). Difference is the main tool of power because it maintains insides and outsides, deciding what is in and out and therefore make it seem “as if the properties of the entity being evaluated originate from that entity, rather than the system doing the evaluation” (p. 100). The authors examine power through two techniques of differentiation—stereotypes and universalism—both of which eliminate and control important aspects of difference and uphold dominant/extant power dynamics. Difference is central to both discarding and challenging power structures.

In the last chapter, *Discard Studies* outlines how to discard since we cannot get away from discarding. To organize discarding differently, the authors argue that systems need to be organized differently by fundamentally changing the organizing relationships, moving beyond critique or tweak. Finally, in discarding well, the authors point out that there is no single good or universal ethic. Instead, the emphasis needs to be accountability and change.

Discard Studies is a valuable pedagogical tool. It flows like poetry, painting a vivid and insightful perspective without being overtly dense. Apart from accessibility, this book posits a new methodological imperative that is doable. As we recover from the pandemic unevenly, in the classroom *Discard Studies* offers new possibilities to read, learn, and engage. In all the best and charming ways, this book pops in and out, reminding the reader that ambitious words written with care and respect can be catalysts for change, one small step at a time. Dismantling power structures is not a one-way process; *Discard Studies* shows that we can rebuild only by constantly challenging the power structures we have inherited. *Discard Studies* is one of those books that you will want to sit with and let occupy your being for a while, if not forever.

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