Rubbish Theory

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The Creation and Destruction of Value

NEW EDITION

Michael Thompson

Foreword by Joshua O. Reno

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Introduction to the new edition

In the summer of 2000 Britain's 'New Labour' government was thrown into a tizzy by the publication in the *Daily Mail* of excerpts from a confidential draft, by one of its senior policy advisers, of its future strategy. At first it was feared that there was a 'mole' in Number 10 Downing Street: someone on the inside must have faxed or e-mailed the secret document to the not entirely friendly newspaper. Then it was a 'hacker' in the Conservative Party's Central Office, and accusing fingers were rather publicly pointed in that direction. But, either way, the consensus was that there was some sort of damaging conspiracy with the Murdoch-owned press. Eventually, to the delight of those who had been accused, and to the somewhat malicious amusement of all those who were neither among the ranks of the accusers or the accused, it turned out to be none of these suspects. It was Benjamin Pell, now much better known as Benji the Binman.

Benjamin is a refuse collector, in so far as he wears a cloth cap and a luminous yellow anorak and goes around emptying dustbins, but, unlike most refuse collectors, he does not work for a local authority; he is self-employed. Moreover, he is very selective, removing only some of the refuse—written and typed material that he judges may be of value to him—and from outside only certain premises—City law firms, for instance, and the north London homes of celebrities and policy wonks. It was during the course of these nocturnal excursions in his white van that Benji had acquired what was, in fact, a discarded early draft of the secret strategy document. Once he had it, and had realised what it was, he knew where to take it—to the offices of News International—and the rest, as they say, is history.

Had an offence been committed? The law, unsurprisingly, is not entirely clear about whether, and up to what point in the process, people who are set on getting rid of something are entitled not to be deprived of it. It is, in other words, a 'grey area' but, because of the seriousness of the consequences of this particular piece of freelance refuse collection, the police decided to raid and search Benji's house, (or, rather, his mother's house, since Benji, who was then in his late 30s, was unmarried and still

lived at home). In a large wooden shed in the back garden they found more than 200,000 documents, all of which had come from dustbins, and all of which were meticulously organised, indexed, filed and so on.

The most remarkable thing about this awesome Pell archive is that it is composed entirely of documents that have been discarded in order to *form* archives. The hapless adviser to Number 10 could only work his way towards a satisfactory strategy document by discarding his earlier and not entirely satisfactory drafts and, in the other direction, it would be asking for trouble if the prime minister's office had on its computers not just the final version (which they would then circulate to all those who were authorised to have sight of it) but all the versions leading up to it as well. So, if you cannot create an archive without discarding, what on earth is this shed full of documents that, while having all the characteristics of an archive, is composed of nothing but discards? It is, of course, an *anti-archive*: an affront to all the archives it draws upon in this negative way, in that it clearly has both order and value, while the whole justification for the discards from which it is composed is that they are both amorphous and valueless. Indeed, it is only by discarding them that what is left is able to achieve form and value, and thereby *become* an archive!

Shredders might help, together with 'stand alone' computers with programs that routinely wipe documents that have been superseded. And a law that got rid of the 'grey area', by making it illegal to take possession of anything that has been discarded by someone else, is another possibility. But most Britons do not want to live as though they are MI5 agents, nor are property rights in rubbish much of a capitalist turn-on. And, even if we did all that, the discards would still have, within and between them, the structure and value that Benji the Binman has now revealed for us all to see; it is just that, without him and his ilk plying their strange and strangely disturbing trade, we would not know about it. Beyond that, perhaps we, and posterity, would all be the poorer. To now go and destroy Benji's anti-archive—an ordered assemblage that, unlike most archives, actually pays for itself and then goes on to show a handsome profit—would surely be a philistine and culturally erosive act; on a par, almost, with Lady Churchill burning Graham Sutherland's portrait of her illustrious husband.[1]

And so it goes! Once Benji's anti-archive is out of the bag we cannot put it back in. Indeed, less than a year later, and despite having been certified by self-appointed psychologists as suffering from an 'obsessive-compulsive disorder' (shades of the old Soviet Union), Benjamin

Pell found himself in line for the coveted 'Scoop of the Year' award in the so-called Oscars of British Journalism.[2]

* * *

Well, this story—Benji the Binman and his anti-archive—confirms just about every prediction from the rubbish theory that I first propounded in the 1960s[3] (though the book itself did not appear until 1979).

- You cannot create value without at the same time creating non-value.
- We make sense of our world by whittling it down to manageable proportions.
- This whittling-down cannot be done in an unbiased way.
- Nor can we ever reach general agreement on how this whittling-down should be done.
- Even when the whittling-down has been done, the chances are it will not stay that way.
- And so on... .

What then, *is* the theory that gives us these predictions: predictions that, though I never realised it at the time, clearly have some relevance when it comes to what are nowadays called archive processes?[4]

To answer this question, quickly and simply, I will rely on a 1979 review of *Rubbish Theory*. What I particularly like about this review (I come from an engineering family) is that it is not by a social scientist. It is by a mathematician, Ian Stewart: an up-and-coming young lad back in 1979 but now probably Britain's most distinguished mathematician. He begins with the puzzling business of antique-creation, which, he explains, is one of the key concerns in rubbish theory.

- How does something second-hand become an antique?
- How, on a rather larger and less moveable scale, does a rat-infested slum become part of Our Glorious Heritage?
- And, how, I can now add, coming to the sorts of processes Benjamin Pell has played such havoc with, does a draft memo become a crucial component within a national archive?

Those were the sorts of questions I asked when I was starting my PhD, back in the 1960s, and of course I looked at all the literature—economics especially—to find out what sorts of answers were already on offer. To my amazement, I found that *no* theories answered those questions, and, even more amazingly, according to most existing theories these sorts of dramatic value shifts were actually impossible.

So I had stumbled on a wonderful PhD topic; all I had to do was come up with a theory that (a) accounted for the existence of the two value categories, *transient* (here today, gone tomorrow) and *durable* (a joy forever), and (b) explained how transitions from the former to the latter were possible (and why the reverse transitions were not possible) (Fig. 0).
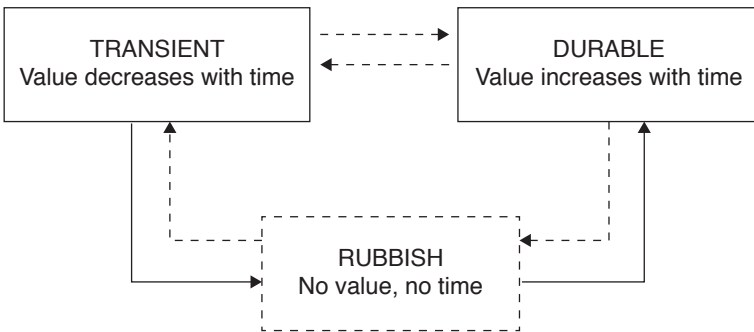
Figure 0   The Basic Rubbish Theory Hypothesis. (The solid boxes denote overt cultural categories; the broken-line box denotes a covert category, like the documents discarded in the formation of an archive. The solid arrows are the transfers that happen; the broken ones the transfers that do not happen, because they contradict the value and/or time directions that define the various categories.)

Ian Stewart, in his review, explains it like this:

Social economists have long recognised two categories of possessable objects: Transient and Durable... . The value of one decays to zero, the other increases to infinity. Michael Thompson argues that there is a third, covert category: Rubbish. Rubbish has zero value, hence is invisible to socio-economic theory. But this is blinkered self-delusion: Rubbish provides the channel between Transient and Durable.[5]

If the Rubbish category was not there—if everything in the world was of value, one way or another—no transfers would be possible (you can't go from minus to plus, or vice versa, without passing zero). And, even when it is there, there is only one smooth path: from Transient to Rubbish to Durable.

This splendidly simple hypothesis does two vital things: it answers my questions (the three 'bullet points' above) and it rescues us from the 'blinkered self-delusion' of orthodox economic reasoning. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it has had a mixed reception. In the art world (which is where it actually started off, thanks to my involvement in the Art and Language Group)[6] it has been embraced right from the start. Indeed, at the time of writing (August 2016) an early version of Fig. 0 is on display, *as an artwork* in the Tate Britain Gallery, in its exhibition 'Conceptual Art in Britain: 1964–1979'. And one museum of modern art—the Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum in Hagen, Germany, which after the Second World War had lost all its contents—was re-founded on explicit rubbish theory principles. As well as the conceptual art, I produced a host of real world examples, perhaps the nicest of which were the nineteenth-century woven silk pictures—called Stevengraphs—that were produced, on Jacquard looms, at the Coventry factory of Thomas Stevens Ltd. In 1902, a complete set of 60 Stevengraphs cost £2.55. Immediately after purchase they were worth nothing, and they stayed that way for the next 50 or so years. But by 1973, they were worth £3,000: about 200 times their original cost (allowing for inflation).

Ian Stewart, being a differential topologist (a breed of mathematician whose nose is finely attuned to qualitative differences: state changes, as when ice melts or smooth flow turns turbulent, for instance) is attracted by simple hypotheses that lead to complex and counter-intuitive behaviour. And having cut his professional teeth on catastrophe theory,[7] he is particularly attracted to simple hypotheses that result in the sort of *discontinuous* behaviour—despising one moment, cherishing the next— that underlies the value transformation of these Stevengraphs (and also of inner-London houses which provided my other main example, thanks to my earning my living so as to pay for my PhD—Britain's Social Science Research Council having refused to fund it and the head of my university department having tried to have it stopped—in the building trade). Rubbish theory, Ian Stewart goes on to explain, 'studies this mechanism and its all pervasive influence'.[8]

- What sort of people effect the transfer?
- What sort of people try to prevent it?
- What sort of people are able to profit from it?
- What sort of people lose out?

In putting his finger on this four-fold requisite variety[9]—four different kinds of 'social beings', all of whom have to be present if this mechanism, with its all pervasive influence, is to kick-in—Ian Stewart was ahead of the anthropological game, in that he was making explicit a link to the four-fold typology that Mary Douglas (who was my supervisor) set out in her paper 'Cultural Bias':[10] a link that I only really got around to making many years later.[11] And by that time Mary Douglas' original analytical scheme (she called it 'grid-group analysis') had developed into a fully-fledged and extensively applied theory (variously called cultural theory, the theory of plural rationality, neo-Durkheimian institutional theory and a few more) that, it has been claimed, now 'rivals the rational-choice, Weberian and postmodern outlooks in terms of influence across the social sciences'.[12] So, if that claim is valid (and of course I want to argue that it is), and if Ian Stewart was indeed ahead of the game, then I will have to pause in order to make this implicit link explicit. However, I will do it in a fairly light way here, keeping the heavier argument for the Afterword.

RUBBISH THEORY'S LINK TO CULTURAL THEORY

One thing is obvious enough: social status and the ownership of Durables are closely related (as, in the other direction, are marginality and Rubbish). And we all know that money, by itself, does not confer social status. If it did we would not be able to witness that socially fraught process by which those who have acquired 'new money' transform it into 'old money' by, among other things, buying, and making themselves comfortable with, objects that are Durable (so nicely captured in the Duke of Devonshire's remark, after a rather bourgeois guest had departed: 'Cheek of the man, noticing my chairs!').

But there is another route to the same destination, and creative and upwardly mobile individuals can sometimes emulate Frank Sinatra and do it their way, by convincing the 'high priests' that the rubbish items they have lovingly surrounded themselves with are mis-categorised and are actually sadly-neglected components of Our Glorious Heritage:

Durables. This, for example (and as we will see in Chapter 3), is what happened in the 1960s and '70s with inner London's terraced housing. And it is by some combination of these two routes—making your new money old and transforming your Rubbish to Durability—that two crucial adjustments can be achieved: (a) keeping the category system abreast of the whole ever-evolving technological process by which objects are produced, consumed and conserved and (b) ensuring that status (feeling at ease with Durables, for instance) and power (loads of money, for instance) are continually re-aligned.

That, at any rate, is what has to happen if we live, and are to go on living, in a class-based society. But, for that to happen, the controls on the transfers to Durability have to be 'just right': permissive enough to keep the class show on the road yet restrictive enough not to inflate the Durable category to the point where Durables are so ubiquitous as to no longer be able to denote the crucial conjunction of status and power: a 'repeater system', in other words.[13] This then raises the question that was not really addressed in the first edition of *Rubbish Theory*: how do we trace out all the other possible shifts: shifts that, in one way or another, take the totality away from the 'repeater system' state of affairs that prevails for as long as the controls are 'just right'?

This, I need hardly point out, is a big question: probably as big a question as we are likely to come across in social science. Unfortunately, to answer it fully we need to venture into cybernetics—the science of communication and control—and that is something that many social scientists may see as a step too far. Better, therefore, if I postpone that step until the Afterword, where I can then draw on the expertise of my co-author, Bruce Beck, a journeyman (as he modestly puts it) control engineer.[14] For now, I will just point out two things: first, that the overall system (three linked cisterns and two taps) has the potential to generate shifts across two dimensions—status and power—and, second, that to realise that potential there will have to be sufficient variety among the individual actors for all the different dynamic permutations (opening this tap, closing that one, etc., etc.) to be possible. An analogy would be that spooky game where people (and there have to be enough of them) sit around a table, each placing a finger on an upturned glass, and the glass then seems to take on a life of its own, sliding first one way then another across the flat surface.

Such requisite variety, though a crucial concept in cybernetics, is seriously at odds with most of social science, in that it requires that

rationality be plural (rational choice theory, for instance, insists that it is singular: we are all rational utility maximisers). But each 'social being', according to cultural theory, will be striving towards a different goal (just one of which is the utility-maximising one); turning the taps this way or that, as it were, in the expectation that, if they are successful and can overcome those who are doing all they can to turn them to different settings, they will bring the totality ever closer to that goal. This plurality, moreover, has to be sufficient; it has to be four-fold. Just two sets of hands (which is the most that social science tends to countenance—markets and hierarchies, for instance) would only generate a back-and-forth oscillation (between 'light touch' and 'heavy hand' regulation, to give a topical financial example), leaving the other dimension of variation unexploited.

For instance:

- In the 'repeater system' situation, where the controls are 'just right', there is a lot of stratification and a lot of competition, and the transfers from Transient to Rubbish and from Rubbish to Durable are such that the inevitable changes in power are quickly reflected in matching changes in status: things staying the same, class-wise, despite all the unavoidable flux: increasingly wealthy British brewers in the nineteenth century, for instance, finding themselves 'raised to the beerage'.
- If the controls become rather more restrictive then status and power will no longer be able to realign themselves and, as they diverge, we will find ourselves being transformed into a caste-based society (as in the classical Indian system, where the meat-eating Rajah sits firmly at the head of the power structure but defers to the vegetarian Brahmin within the hierarchy of caste).[15] Perhaps the current and much lamented lack of social mobility in Britain, despite all sorts of efforts to promote it, can be explained in terms of a shift—quite small and easily overlooked—away from class and towards caste.
- If things are too permissive the Durable category will eventually collapse under its own weight. The status 'currency' will be debauched, and the totality will move away at right-angles to the class-caste axis. As status differences disappear transactions become more symmetrical and we move onto the increasingly levelled 'playing-field' beloved by those who abhor 'restrictive

practices', on the one hand, and, on the other, an unwillingness by those who cannot discern any opportunities in their immediate neighbourhood to 'get on their bikes'. Margaret Thatcher's 'enterprise culture' is the goal here, and some ferociously individualistic societies—those in the New Guinea highlands, for instance, that engage in competitive pig-giving—actually get themselves to this goal (though, as we will see in Chapter 9, they are not then able to stabilise themselves in that position).

- And yet other settings of the taps will trace out the other possible shifts on this two-dimensional 'table'.[16]

This requisite variety, however, is nicely captured by the answers to those four questions that Ian Stewart has listed:

- Those who are able to 'do it their way'—we can dub them the 'crashers-through'—are the upholders of what in cultural theory is called the *individualist* solidarity. Their hands are strong enough to hold open the tap that will allow the flow of objects (theirs, of course) from Rubbish to Durable.
- Those whose aim is to over-ride the tap-turnings of the crashers-through—we can call them the 'high priests' (those literary critics, for instance, who strive to define what shall and shall not be admitted to 'the canon')—are the upholders of what is called the *hierarchical* solidarity.
- Those—we can call them the 'levellers'—who, by flooding the Durable category, are able to diminish both status and power, are the upholders of what is called the *egalitarian* solidarity.
- And those—we can call them the 'losers-out'—who, despite all their efforts, keep on finding themselves squeezed out to the margins (unable, as it were, to get their hands on any of the taps, and unsure which way to turn them even when they do) are the upholders of what is called the *fatalist* solidarity.

This plurality, being four-fold, gets us beyond the inadequate one-fold and two-fold schemes that are so prevalent in social science and thereby provides us with what we need for a decent theory: the requisite variety.[17] On top of that, it has a certain plausibility, in that we can all recognize ourselves, and others, within it.[18] Or, putting it another way (and as will become clearer, I hope, when we come to the Afterword), cultural

theory is inherent in rubbish theory; they are 'of a piece': a single, and rather all-encompassing, theory. But what, some may ask, apart from this conflation within what is often disparagingly referred to as 'grand theory',[19] is there to justify this republication of *Rubbish Theory*?

THE BOOK ITSELF AND WHY IT IS STILL VALID

The basic idea, to quickly re-iterate, is that the two cultural categories—the Transient and the Durable—are 'socially imposed' on the world of objects. If these two categories exhausted the material world then the transfer of an object from one to the other would not be possible because of the mutual contradiction of the categories' defining criteria: those in the Transient category have decreasing value and finite expected lifespans; those in the Durable category have increasing value and infinite expected lifespans. But of course they are not exhaustive; they encompass only those objects that have value, leaving a vast and disregarded realm—Rubbish—that, it turns out, provides the one-way route from Transient to Durable. A Transient object, once produced, will decline in value and in expected lifespan, eventually reaching zero on both. In an ideal world—a world uncannily like the one that is assumed in neoclassical economics—it would then, having reached the end of its usefulness, disappear in a cloud of dust. But often this does not happen; it lingers on in a valueless and timeless limbo (rubbish) until perhaps it is discovered by some creative and upwardly-mobile individual and transferred across into the Durable category.

Just who the people are who are able to effect this value-creating transfer, and what sort of people feel at home with transient objects, with durable objects and with rubbish objects, tells us a lot about our dynamic and ever-changing social system. It also makes clear that both the status ladder itself, and the subtle transitions up and down it, depend on there being things 'out there' for us to push around (and be pushed around by): *materiality*, as it is sometimes called. In other words, and this I would say is the crucial and enduring message from this book, stuff matters. We need a theory of people *and* stuff—particularly now that we are faced with seemingly intractable discard-generated problems such as climate change—and that (as Bruce Beck and I will endeavour to explain in the Afterword) is precisely what rubbish theory gives us.

The book's early chapters set out this three-components-and-two-possible-transfers framing, and then go on to explore those social