



## DEFILING IMMUNDITY: ON BEING PROPERLY IMPROPER

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In September of 2014, after the People's Climate March in New York City, where an estimated 300,000 people gathered to raise awareness about the issue of climate change, images circulated online depicting litter left behind by the protesters. Among the objects left behind were discarded signs and paper cups bearing the Greenpeace logo. Empty soda cans and filthy food containers can be seen, piled on trash bins, on public benches, and on sidewalks. For a short time, these images fueled a debate about the authenticity of the protesters' intentions and about the general efficiency of such initiatives.

Almost a decade earlier, Josephine Meckseper, a German artist based in New York, produced a series of photographs documenting the massive anti-war protest that took place in Washington, D.C. Back then the crowd marched against the 2003 invasion of Iraq. And yet, one of these images is strikingly reminiscent of the litter issue raised during the People's Climate March. (See Fig. 1) The untitled photograph frames a trash bin overflowing with waste and banners left behind by the protesters. In the background, behind the pile of detritus, concerned citizens are seen walking passed a government building, holding more signs, and demanding that the war be stopped.

Jacques Rancière saw Meckseper's photograph at the 2006 Seville Biennial and commented on it in a series of lectures given in the United States the following year.<sup>1</sup> He noted how the photograph seems to bring together two contradictory elements. On one hand, there is a condemnation of "the empire of consumption" waging a war that is considered unjustified. On the other, there is the very manifestation of that excessive consumption (ES 28-29). Meckseper's photo shows how these two apparently contradictory elements participate in the same reality. Or as Rancière puts it, protest and consumption "are reduced to one and the same process governed by

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1. Jacques Rancière, "The Misadventures of Critical Thinking," *Aporia* 24.2 (2007): 22-32; reprinted in Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 2009), 25-49. Hereafter cited as ES. Although Meckseper's photograph is not reproduced in either English edition, it is reproduced in the French. See Jacques Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La fabrique, 2008), 32.



Fig. 1: *Untitled* (Josephine Meckseper, 2003).

the commodity law of equivalence” (ES 29). It is as if the trash left behind by the protesters voids the efficiency of the critique raised against the ecological conditions of our times. Moreover, the protesters’ own activism appears to be complicit with the very problem they are protesting. This “fable of the demonstrators and the dustbin,” as Rancière calls it, highlights the difficulties we face when the “law of domination” seems to seize “on anything that claims to challenge it” (ES 32-33):

It shows us absorbed into the belly of the beast, where even our capacities for autonomous, subversive practices, and the networks of interaction that we might utilize against it, serve the new power of the beast. (Rancière ES, 33)

And yet, for Rancière, the mere exposition of this contradiction—this fable—is both insufficient and unsatisfying. Simply bemoaning the way critique becomes co-opted by its object does not solve the problem, nor move the situation forward. The gesture of all those commentators, pointing fingers at the litter left behind by the citizens who marched to raise awareness of climate



change, merely expresses a form of cynical melancholy. It remains grounded in the idea that an efficient critique could and should be formulated from outside “the belly of the beast,” i.e., from a place where no waste is produced. In the meantime, this cynical melancholy merely casts its “disenchanted eye over a world in which critical interpretation of the system has become an element of the system itself” (Rancière ES, 37). Such are the “misadventures of critical thought,” the title of Rancière’s lecture, in which all critique remains stranded in a circular deadlock, going back and forth from the denunciation of a system to the exposition of its endless capacity to recycle this denunciation for its own purpose.

What is left to do? According to Rancière, we need to think societal problems from the standpoint of a different logic: we need to “start from different presuppositions” (ES 48). One such presupposition—which may very well seem “unreasonable” from the perspective of usual critique and its disapproving twin (cynical melancholy)—involves thinking the following: “that there is no fatal mechanism transforming reality into image; no monstrous beast absorbing all desires and energies into its belly; no lost community to be restored” (Rancière ES, 48).

Following Rancière, I propose to explore a similar set of “unreasonable” hypotheses; namely, I propose to put aside the idea—or fable—that there is a system out there that produces trash and that therefore must be stopped (the “beast,” in Rancière’s lecture). If granted this, then the notion that a critique of such a system could and should be formulated from an immaculately clean space (i.e., outside the “belly of the beast”) must also be put aside. Indeed, I propose that in order to thoroughly take responsibility for trash, we ought to stop thinking as if “it” could be cleanly separated from “us,” set apart and/or discarded. There is no Edenic world to restore or clean, nor is there a proper space where we could adequately dispose of our filthy trash. We do not inhabit the world as if it were a container that gives form to our existence. Instead, as I will argue here, we *are* this very milieu. This milieu is exposed—and given to experience—by the co-existence of all beings, including the existence of trash, which we share.

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In 2000, at the inaugural convention of the Media Ecology Association, Neil Postman delivered a keynote address titled, “The Humanism of Media Ecology.”<sup>2</sup> He opened his keynote by explaining how the idea of “media ecology” has inherited the “biological metaphor” of the petri dish, in which a medium is defined as “a substance within which a culture grows” (HME 10). “If you replace the word ‘substance’ with the word ‘technology,’” Postman continues, “the definition would stand as a

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2. Neil Postman, “The Humanism of Media Ecology,” *Proceedings of the Media Ecology Association* 1 (2000): 10-16. Hereafter cited in the text as HME.



fundamental principle of media ecology: A medium is a technology within which a culture grows” (HME 10). The value of this metaphor lies in the way it allows us to think of media not as mere things—a radio, a telephone—but as the *milieu*, or *environment*, in which we live. Thus, for Postman:

Human beings live in two different kinds of environments. One is the natural environment and consists of things like air, trees, rivers, and caterpillars. The other is the media environment, which consists of language, numbers, images, holograms, and all of the other symbols, techniques, and machinery that make us what we are. (HME 11)

For all its heuristic usefulness—of which the rich discussions of various “media ecologies” are living testimony—, the petri dish metaphor, nevertheless, has a limiting fallback. It still operates according to an enduring tradition that opposes form and matter, figure and ground, or, more specifically in the context of this discussion, container and content. Such a view presumes an ontological separation between “media” and “us.”<sup>3</sup> This separation is precisely what allows Postman to distinguish between two “kinds of environment” as two different kinds of containers: one natural, the other technological. Among other things, this viewpoint suggests that there could be an environment without technology—and thus without the waste associated with it. Such a view is *melancholic*, to use Rancière’s vocabulary, in the sense that it longs for a space that does not exist, never has. To think beyond this spatial metaphor, we need to think of trash and ecology in a different way. Instead of being “in” an environment, where trash is produced, perhaps it is possible to think that we “are”—together—this environment. But before moving this hypothesis forward, we need to revisit a tradition that has a long history.

In his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, an important text for Renaissance humanism, Pico della Mirandola had already promoted the idea that human beings have been set “in the middle of the world” [*in mundi positum meditullo*].<sup>4</sup> When the “Master Creator” addresses Adam, this privileged position is reiterated: “We have set you at the center of the world [*Medium te mundi posui*] so that from there you may more easily gaze at whatever it contains” (ODM 117). Centuries later, humanism’s themes have been significantly shaken by the advent of modernity. Starting with the Copernican Revolution, humans have experienced a series of “decentering” processes that have

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3. This ontological separation is also at work in Marshall McLuhan’s use of the fish-in-water metaphor. Although he didn’t coin the metaphor (nor pretended to), McLuhan used it on numerous occasions to describe our relationship with media. For an exhaustive examination of the metaphor’s uses, see Garson O’Toole “We Don’t Know Who Discovered Water, But We Know It Wasn’t a Fish,” *The Quote Investigator*, December 13, 2013. <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/12/23/water-fish/>

4. Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, trans. Francesco Borghesi, Michael Papio and Massimo Riva (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 117. Hereafter cited in the text as ODM.



thrown them “out” of the center of the world, among or alongside every other being.<sup>5</sup> In the wake of these events, the inadequacy of humanism’s anthropocentric worldview has come under increased scrutiny. The revision of human exceptionalism has become necessary with the realization that our existence takes place *with* other entities in a mutual movement of exposition. The very possibility of saying “we” implies that “our” co-existence involves animals and plants, oceans and forests, even, and especially, in the distance that keeps “us” apart. “We would not be ‘humans,’” Jean-Luc Nancy writes, “if there were not ‘dogs’ and ‘stones.’”<sup>6</sup> Hence the various “turns” of the so-called social sciences towards ecosystems, microbiomes, animals, trees, rocks, mushrooms, etc. This mutual exposition, Nancy continues, marks a clear departure from Heidegger’s privileged understanding of *Dasein*. It implies that “we” can no longer claim a natural or proper identity, not to mention a natural or proper world. *O mundus immundus*:<sup>7</sup> our world reveals itself to be properly improper.

The French adjective “*Immonde*” translates as “unclean,” “smeared,” “betrayed,” “polluted,” “foul,” “filthy,” or “nasty.”<sup>8</sup> Other translations are more literal: i.e., “immunity” or “unworldly.” The word “filth” is often used to translate the substantive “*immondice*,” which traditionally names the disorderly realm looming as the very horizon of the ordered world; it is the formless [*informe*] that resists any attempt at precise definition while threatening all existing ones.<sup>9</sup> Hence the conjuration of the Roman Ritual: “*Exorcizamus te, omnis immundus spiritus.*”<sup>10</sup> This intimate relation between notions of “world” and “(im)purity” is recorded in the French language: “*monde*” used to be an adjective meaning “uncontaminated,” “unstained,” “clean,” and “adequate.” Herein, perhaps, lies the meaning of the proverb quoted in the Cotgrave *Dictionary* (1673): “*Qui veut la conscience monde, il doit fuir le monde immonde*” (FED, unpaginated).

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5. See Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles. Spheres, Volume I: Microspherology*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2011), 20.

6. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 18. Hereafter cited in the text as BSP.

7. “*Mundus immundus*” was a popular Medieval Latin pun, often used by Saint Augustine, and may have originated from him. See Michael Riffaterre, “Sémiotique intertextuelle; l’interprétant,” *Revue d’esthétique* 5.1 (1979): 142; and Claude Buridant, “Les paramètres de l’étymologie médiévale,” *Lexique* 14 (1998): 31.

8. See Randle Cotgrave, *A French and English Dictionary* (London: Golden Ball, 1673). Hereafter cited in the text as FED.

9. Georges Bataille: “A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus *formless* is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit.” See Georges Bataille, “Formless,” trans. Iain White, in *Encyclopedia Acephalica: Critical Dictionary and Related Texts*, ed. Robert Lebel and Isabelle Waldberg (London: Atlas Press, 1995), 51-52.

10. See Francis Young, *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity* (London: Palgrave, 2016), 189.



*Mundus immundus*, however, blurs this prophylactic distinction. It suggests that “un-world,” or “non-world,” is not the mere negation of the world, as if *mundus* and *immundus* could be dialectically opposed to one another, awaiting some sort of redemptive Hegelian sublation. The world as properly improper means, as Nancy explains in a section of *Corpus*, entitled “Immondice,” that “as soon as the world is world it also produces (expels) itself as *im-munditia*.”<sup>11</sup> “*Im-mundus*”—he adds a few lines later—“that’s how this world take place” (C 107).

Indeed, it is insufficient to merely recognize that human beings are not in the world as water is in the glass, as Heidegger famously suggested.<sup>12</sup> An additional step must be taken to acknowledge that “world” is but a name for this movement of *co-exposition* and *contamination* that is not limited to—or cleanly delimited by—the co-exposition of human beings:

It is not so much the world of humanity as it is the world of the nonhuman to which humanity is exposed and which humanity, in turn, exposes. One could try to formulate it in the following way: *humanity is the exposing of the world; it is neither the end nor the ground of the world; the world is the exposure of humanity; it is neither the environment nor the representation of humanity.* (Nancy BSP, 18; emphasis in original).

Following Nancy, it is perhaps now possible to return to our “unreasonable” hypotheses on filth and trash. Although known by other names—rubbish, waste, garbage, junk, litter, debris, detritus—and although such names often point to different realities,<sup>13</sup> I would like to propose a specific mode of existence at the intersection of filth and trash. For the present argument, “filthy trash” is what we dispose of when what was neither filthy nor trash becomes untouchable and unusable. Since “filthy trash” does not work, it is regarded as being unproductive. As such, it is what becomes improper for consumption, that which we abandon or get rid of when we do not wish to claim property over it anymore. It is the leftover part(s) of what was once presumed to be a functioning whole. Nevertheless, “it” remains. Maybe not as the thing supposedly complete, but as the no-thing that persists and exposes the world as well. Crucially, and contrary to mere trash, “filthy trash” cannot be properly recycled.<sup>14</sup> *Immundus*, as Nancy has pointed out, “isn’t a simple

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11. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 107. Hereafter cited in the text as C.

12. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie, et al (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 79-80.

13. Germán Sierra, for example, proposes a clear distinction between “filth” and “dirt,” while Thierry Bardini distinguishes between “trash,” “waste,” and “junk.” See Germán Sierra, “Filth as Non-Technology,” *Keep It Dirty*, vol. a., “Filth” (2016): 2. (<http://keepitdirty.org/a/filth-as-non-technology/>); and Thierry Bardini, *Junkware* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

14. Yve-Alain Bois, for example, has analyzed the re-commodification of “trash,” or rehabilitation of “dirt,” in the context of artistic practice. See Yve-Alain Bois, “Ray Guns,” in *Formless: A User’s Guide*, ed. Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 172-179.



dialectical respiration from the ‘same’ to the ‘other,’ finally gathering up the trash and sublimating or recycling it” (C 103).

Thus, as such, this unusable “filthy trash” is a shared issue: common and co-existential. It is not an issue that comes after the fact of co-existence, but rather is constitutive of it. Far from being limited to overflowing trash bins, orbital debris, radioactive waste, or electronic scrap, “filthy trash” is the name we give to everything that is “improper” when we fall for the problematic idea that there *is* a “proper” “us.” To forget that what we call “existence” is first and foremost the shared exposition of all entities has led, and indeed can still lead, to tragic consequences. Blinded by this forgetfulness we may err and imagine that it is suitable to speak of entire populations as “human trash.” We may comfort ourselves in thinking that we are not directly implicated by a given environmental catastrophe, be it an oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico or a nuclear accident across the sea. When “filthy trash” is considered an issue separated from the general process of co-existence, it may be tempting to live among it while dreaming of a cleaner, proper world. Thus, protesters may march to raise attention about climate change while at the same time overflowing trash bins with garbage. Likewise, critics may point their fingers at them and imply that an efficient critique of climate change should only be expressed through a mode of existence that does not contribute to it. However, what is needed, to recall Rancière’s words, is a “new topography of the possible” (ES 49).<sup>15</sup>

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What would it mean to recognize that what we have in common is not a unique property—a property that would make human beings exceptional: be it technology, language, morals, or dignity—but rather a fundamental impropriety, as some have argued:<sup>16</sup> It could entail, among other things, recognizing that “filthy trash” is also what allows our co-existence to be exposed as such: not as a proper essence, but as a movement that exposes “us” to other entities. This reversal of perspective implies that “filthy trash” does not merely circulate around us, as if in the margin of our existence, but rather that “we” circulate with it, and other entities, in the mutual exposition through which the world can be experienced:

This circulation goes in all directions at once, in all the directions of all the space-times [*les espace-temps*] opened by presence to presence: all things, all beings, all entities, everything past and future, alive, dead, inanimate, stones, plants, nails,

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15. Regarding filth and junk, “a new topography of the possible” is precisely what both Germán Sierra and Thierry Bardin offer in their respective work (see note #13 above).

16. See, for example, Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).



gods—and “humans,” that is, those who expose sharing and circulation as such by saying “we,” by *saying we to themselves* in all possible senses of that expression, and by saying we for the totality of all being. (Nancy BSP, 3; emphasis in original)

The impropriety of “filthy trash” is “our own” as well. It is the impropriety that we properly own together. The ancients were already aware of this, they who recognized the ambiguity of what is “κοινός,” that is, “common”: at once shared and improper (vulgar). For example, although the Pythagoreans highly valued the community (hence the proverbial “κοινά τα φίλων”: “the possessions of friends are common”),<sup>17</sup> they were also aware of its other meaning: “That it is not proper to walk in the public ways, nor to dip in a sprinkling vessel, nor to be washed in a bath. For in all these it is immanifest whether those who use them [κοινονοῦντες, literally, “who make them common”] are pure.” (Iamblichus PWL, 44). In the Bible, this ambiguity is also present. In Mark 7:2, the Pharisees gathered around Jesus “and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled [κοιναῖς χερσίν], that is, unwashed.” In this excerpt, the hands are “common” in the specific sense that they are not pure: they have shared and thus been contaminated. Later, in Mark 7:18, “κοινῶσαι” is used to signify this process of “making common” again with the meaning of “defiling.”

Being together, then, is the sharing of this defilement. *Mundus immundus* is “the world of a common, spongelike exposition, where all contacts are contagious” (Nancy C, 105). There is no place where “we” could claim to be authentically ourselves—properly proper—, as if cleansed of all “filthy trash.” There is no other world where “we” could pretend to co-exist—to say “we”—without exposing this shared impropriety. From this perspective, one wonders if there can be any such thing as “carbon neutral,” “zero emission,” or “zero-waste grocery stores.” We may very well attempt to modify our so-called “footprint,” but we can’t pretend to be circulating anywhere else. The movement of mutual exposition that brings all existence together is what we call “world.” The impropriety of this togetherness stresses the fact that it is not given as a harmonious unity or composition. Indeed, our co-exposition is just as well our dis-position: “we” are brought together by the distance that separates us. When refugees are said to be “human trash,” what is painfully being brought to attention is our failure to recognize this shared condition.

Nancy once argued: “existing is technological through and through.”<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere, he reiterated the idea, stating: “our ecosystem (that is to say, our ecology, our economy in every sense of the term) is technical through and through.”<sup>19</sup> What is often referred to (not without nostalgia for some kind of original purity) as the “natural environment” is inseparable from the conditions of this technological co-existence. The dream of another world without “filthy trash” takes place right at the

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17. Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean Way of Life (De vita pythagorica)*, ed. August Nauck (St. Petersburg, 1884), 69. Hereafter cited in the text as PWL.

18. Jean-Luc Nancy, *A Finite Thinking*, ed. Simon Sparks (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), 24.

19. See B. C. Hutchens, *Jean-Luc Nancy and the Future of Philosophy* (Montreal: McGill UP, 2005), 165.



one, so to speak, where “we”—improperly and technically—“are.” Nancy proposed to name this condition an “eco-technological totality in motion.”<sup>20</sup> In *Corpus*, he further explains: “The figure of the eco-technical, propagating in every sense a world-wide proliferation and filthy contagion [*contagion immonde*], is indeed the figure of this identity—and no doubt ends up, finally, as this identity itself” (C 107).

In this sense, “filthy trash” could be said to name the problem we must face if we are to find a way to co-exist without discarding ourselves in the process. I suggested earlier that we dispose of “filthy trash” when it exhibits *decomposition*, rather than composition. It seems possible now to suggest a slight variation on this interpretation. “Filthy trash” makes manifest our political condition by exposing the gap where parts co-exist without forming a proper whole. Each time we discard “filthy trash” as the propriety we do not wish to own, we somehow underline the fact that we share this impropriety together. Decomposition, in other words, may be an opening on our common disposition.

For all that, to acknowledge the dangers associated with an ideology of cleanliness does not mean that “filthy trash” should be romantically celebrated. Nancy is very clear about this: “In more than one respect, the world of sense is culminating today in the unclean [*l'immonde*] and in nonsense. It is heavy with suffering, disarray, and revolt.”<sup>21</sup> “One must not,” he explains elsewhere, “oppose the world and the unworld,” even though:

the unworld (*immonde*) can also be the worst (I play on the two possible resources of “*im-monde*”: as non-world and as repugnant), the destruction of the world or worse, its sick decomposition, which is disgusting and revolting. It’s possible that today we are before a very concrete, very close possibility (even if this means a century or more) of the destruction, the devastation of the world, and the passing to an uninhabitable, unlivable world, as much ethically as physically. Humanity, too, is driven by a death drive.<sup>22</sup>

Being responsible for “filthy trash” means being responsible for the impropriety of co-existence. It is something we need to care for in common: a banal point maybe, but one that needs to be thought over and over again.

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20. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 94.

21. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 9.

22. See Peter Gratton and Marie-Eve Morin, *Jean-Luc Nancy and Plural Thinking: Expositions of World, Ontology, Politics, and Sense* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 235.

