



The gift of waste: The diversity of gift practices among dumpster divers

Anthropological Theory

1–23

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DOI: 10.1177/14634996221117318

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Abstract

While the circular economy invites us to realize the potential of the so-called ‘waste-based commodity frontiers’, reintegration into capitalist value chains is not the only way for discards to be resurrected. In this article, we examine the ways in which the collective of dumpster divers is organized in relation to giving, receiving and reciprocating of various waste-gifts. Our intention is not only to expand existing theorizations of the gift to new domains but also to critically interrogate them, identify their limitations and explore what dumpster diving can teach us about the gift. In particular, the analysis foregrounds the heterogeneity of gift practices. Arguing against universal notions of the gift, the article proposes that waste assumes four main forms of gifts and relations among dumpster divers: givenness (parasitic relation); solidarity-based giving (relation of reciprocity); free giving (asymmetrical relation); and non-giving, as a withdrawal from returning the discards to nature conceived as an Other (the relation of non-relation).

Keywords

Dumpster diving, free giving, gift, gift practices, givenness, non-giving, parasite, solidarity, waste

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Introduction

What happens to our stuff once it has been thrown out? One thing is certain: objects do not simply cease to exist once we have decided they are of no value to us (Thompson, 1979). No matter how hard we bin them, flush them down the drain or have them carted away, they stubbornly refuse to disappear, but persist. In this sense, all discards have an afterlife, even without humans. Sometimes, however, they may be intentionally extracted from the waste stream and used. The so-called circular economy invites us to realize the potential of ‘waste-based commodity frontiers’ (Schindler and Demaria, 2020). It challenges the prevalent economic model of take–make–use–dispose and rests on the idea of a self-enclosed circle in which all waste can be reused and revalued along the chain of production and consumption (Gregson et al., 2015; Valenzuela and Böhm, 2017; Žižek, 2010: 35). However, becoming reintegrated into capitalist value chains as goods is not the only way for discards to be resurrected. In this article, we examine voluntary dumpster diving for food, the practice of recovering discarded food items from trash bins, to offer a view of another afterlife of rubbish that is vastly different from the tidy and glossy imaginaries of the endless circularity of waste as economic value. Dumpster diving involves rummaging through items that have been categorized as waste by others. It is partly because of the suspicion that the practice raises that it usually takes place in supermarket backyards after closing time, so as not to attract unwanted attention. Dumpster divers enter the banquet when night falls, taking advantage of the darkness and making use of shadows. Few want to get caught digging through the leftovers of others. However, whereas scavenging and urban scrounging on skid row, for example, tend to be regarded as dirty and degrading, voluntary dumpster divers associate the practice with excitement and joy rather than shame. Moreover, and importantly, for the practitioners it is a way of carving out a place within capitalism while retaining a critical distance from it (Lehtonen and Pyyhtinen, 2021). People like to go diving in the company of friends and also share their finds, not least because there is much more perfectly edible food to be found in trash bins than one could possibly eat on one’s own. For the dumpster diver, the fundamental food problem is not scarcity but excess.

In this article, we place special emphasis on this collective aspect of dumpster diving. Our analysis offers a bifocal contribution, a double exposure, so to speak: on the one hand, we examine how dumpster divers as a collective are gathered around waste gifts, while on the other, we investigate what the study of dumpster diving can teach us about contemporary gift practices. We explore how and to what extent the community is organized in relation to giving, receiving and reciprocating and how the sharing that takes place among dumpster divers is about not only morality but also pleasure. By examining how waste may figure as a gift in dumpster diving, we seek to both expand existing theories of the gift into new domains and to critically interrogate them and articulate their limitations. In particular, the article challenges the somewhat reductionist notions of the gift to be found both in anthropology and philosophy. While anthropological studies have traditionally reduced gifts to exchange, philosophers have typically judged all forms of gifts by the criteria applicable specifically to free giving alone. In contrast to these two reductionist tendencies, our analysis brings to the fore the heterogeneity of gift practices.

We propose that waste assumes four main forms of gifts among dumpster divers and thus four kinds of relations: *givenness* (parasitic relation), that is, a ‘given’ that is there, without a designated giver, recipient, or gesture of giving; *solidarity-based giving* (relation of reciprocity); *free giving* (asymmetrical relation); and *non-giving*, a withdrawal from returning discards to nature conceived as an Other (the relation of non-relation).

Our argument is laid out as follows. We start by briefly discussing gift scholarship and social scientific waste studies and how we in this article aspire to link the two fields that have previously remained more or less unconnected. In so doing, we wish to contribute both to gift theory and to discard studies. We then describe the interviews with dumpster divers upon which our analyses are based. The longest part of the paper consists of examinations, in the light of both conceptual developments and our empirical materials, of the four forms of waste gift that are detectable in the practices of dumpster diving. Finally, to round out the argument, we discuss how the analytics of gift giving in our view can be enriched by the empirical prism of dumpster diving and, conversely, how the latter can be made more understandable as a social phenomenon when it is seen as a field of heterogeneous gift-giving practices.

Gift theory and waste studies

While the research tradition on the gift as a social phenomenon spans almost a century, it is somewhat curious that scholars have largely paid more attention to the role and significance of the gift in what they call ‘archaic’ societies than the contemporary ones. Classical anthropology has mostly been preoccupied with indigenous societies and their forms of gift exchange, with compulsory examples like the potlatch and the kula (e.g. Godelier, 1999; Gregory, 1982; Marshall, 1961; Mauss, [1924] 2008; Sahlins, 1974; Weiner, 1992), leaving hardly any room for the gift in contemporary Western societies, which are assumed to be driven by production, market exchange and the accumulation of wealth. Even Marcel Mauss’s classic essay *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* ([1924] 2008), without a doubt the single most influential work authored on the gift, is cautious about confirming the existence of the gift in modern society. Despite his insistence that ‘[w]e possess more than a tradesman morality’, which reduces everything to buying and selling, Mauss nevertheless pictures the practices of gift giving as somehow ‘dormant’ or repressed in the French society of his day ([1924] 2008: 83, 5).

In the 1980s, anthropologists and sociologists began to pay increasing attention to the modern gift, thus turning the analytical gaze from colonized Others to ourselves (e.g. Appadurai, 1986; Bourdieu, 1990, 1997; Caillé, 2005; Caplow, 1982a, 1982b, 1984; Carrier, 1995; Cheal, 1988; Donati, 2003; Elder-Vass, 2015; Godbout and Caillé, 1998; Gregory, 1982; Healy, 2006; Komter, 2005, 2007; Mortelmans and Sinardet, 2004; Otnes and Beltrami, 1996; Parry, 1986; Schrift, 1997; Pyyhtinen, 2014; Titmuss, 1970). Many of the questions motivating these works on the gift, however, stem from the classic studies and use their concepts. It is only more recently that scholarship has critically examined the limitations of applying insights into the archaic gift to

modern forms of the gift (e.g. Bracken, 1997; Colesworthy, 2018; Liebersohn, 2011; Wagner-Hasel, 2003).

Compared to the vast amount of existing literature on the gift, waste has been much less studied in the social science realm, notwithstanding the recent growth of interest in the topic. The pioneering works in the field were provided by Douglas (1966) and Thompson (1979), both of whom analysed waste as a product of classification: nothing is inherently waste, rather, things may move into and out of the category of waste. However, these contributions did not succeed in bringing the study of waste into the core of social scientific discussions and debates, as it has long time remained a largely neglected topic. It is only in the last couple of decades that it has finally gained significant levels of research interest. Scholars have, for example, examined disposal (Gregson, 2005; Hetherington, 2004), critically confronted the ‘throw-away society’ (Evans, 2012; Husz, 2011), explored the anti-capitalist politics of scrounging and freeganism (Barnard, 2016; Ferrell, 2006); analysed the rubbish society (O’Brien, 2011; Valkonen et al., 2019), treated the politics of value and waste (Reno, 2009), showed how harvesting wastes is a key economic activity in lower-income countries of the Global South (Carenzo, 2016; Gregson and Crang, 2015), reported on how waste may have a capacity for value (Abrahamsson, 2019; Greeson et al. 2020; Lepawsky and McNabb, 2010; Lehtonen and Pyyhtinen, 2020; Lehtokunnas and Pyyhtinen 2022), discussed waste in connection with the possibility of inhuman epistemology (Hird 2012), turned their eyes on waste management (Fagan, 2003; Gutberlet et al., 2017; Woolgar and Neyland, 2013; Zapata Campos and Zapata, 2014), examined the ethics of waste (Hawkins, 2001, 2006), studied how the notion of trash and our practices of dealing with it have changed over the years (Strasser, 1999), and connected garbage elimination with the question of order and ways of ordering (Edensor, 2005; Scanlan, 2004).

There are only few cases in which the gift and waste have been examined in association with each other. The theory of ‘general economy’ by Georges Bataille, the thinker of excess par excellence, is perhaps the most impactful example of establishing a connection between the two. Bataille was especially fascinated by the agonistic form of the gift, the potlatch of the American Northwest Potlatch based on wasteful offers and rivalries in expenditure, which at times can reach levels of utter destruction (Bataille, [1949] 1991). Nevertheless, he only examines the gift in terms of wastage and according to the logic of excess without exploring, as we intend to do here, *how waste itself may appear as a gift and give rise to gift relations*. Accordingly, our approach has much more in common with recent literature on biological exchange than with Bataille. Scholars have for example examined how the designation of bodily tissues as ‘waste’ often justifies their donation; while the epithet ‘waste’ does not exhaust all the meanings of the donated substance, it nevertheless makes the material alienable and thus donatable (e.g. Copeman and Banerjee, 2019: 136–137; Hoeyer, 2009: 244, 2013: 50, 112–113; Kent, 2008: 1751; Konrad, 2005: 198).

To go back to Bataille, like most philosophers, anthropologists and sociologists who have discussed the gift, he is guilty of assessing all types of gift practices by criteria applicable to only *one* type of gift. Hénaff (2020) convincingly shows how philosophical

theories of the gift typically take gratuitous, free giving as the standard by which they assess *all* kinds of gifts. Authors such as Derrida (1994), Marion (2002) and Levinas (1985) characteristically privilege unilateral giving and view the idea of reciprocity with suspicion. Derrida, for example, famously suggests that the gift is annulled by the reciprocity of offerings.

If philosophers tend to reduce the gift to gracious giving, anthropological (and sociological) studies have typically taken a diametrically opposed stance, viewing the notion of a ‘pure’ or ‘free’ gift with suspicion. Although recently anthropologists have also made sustained cases for the existence of a free gift (e.g. Carrier, 1990; Laidlaw, 2000; Reddy, 2007; Waldby and Mitchell, 2006), the fact remains that in anthropological scholarship the prototypical gift is one characterized by reciprocity (for classical examples, see e.g. Caplow, 1984; Gouldner, 1960; Mauss, [1924] 2008). In contrast to these two reductionisms, our interviews with dumpster divers revealed a *heterogeneity* of *gift practices*: multiple forms of giving figure in voluntary dumpster diving. This observation supports the theoretical idea that the gift is not one, but multiple (see also Pyyhtinen, 2014): ‘there is no such thing as “the gift”; there are only various gift practices’, as Hénaff (2020: 17) suggests. (For other studies distinguishing different modalities of the gift see, e.g. Caillé, 2000; Komter, 2007; Malinowski, 1922; Silber 2007 and Chaniel, 2010.) The tendency to superimpose a single frame – whether gracious giving or exchange – onto practices that differ significantly from one another leads to an erroneously uniform treatment of profoundly different modalities of gifts (Hénaff, 2020).

In this article, we examine the different modalities of gifts that may be articulated in and by waste related to the practice and community of dumpster diving. Methodologically, this means that we try to recognise dimensions of gifting in the dumpster divers’ practices instead of relying on a formal or essentialist notion of what a gift ‘really’ is. We argue that waste gifts take four forms in voluntary dumpster diving – givenness, solidarity-based gift, free giving and non-giving – and that each entails a distinctive kind of collectivity formation and gift relations.

Materials and methods

The background of this article is the authors’ long-standing research interest in waste and society. Among the projects we have pursued, the one on dumpster diving practices has been going on for several years. Our most important materials consist of interviews, the first of which were conducted in 2012, and the most recent ones in 2022. Thus far, we have discussed dumpster diving with 20 people who have actively engaged in it and whom we have met in the Finnish cities of Helsinki, Tampere and Turku. In addition, we have conducted a single interview with a shopkeeper. The informants were recruited through various channels, but mostly snowballing. Early knowledge of semi-acquaintances who dumpster dive have led to new contacts, and those already interviewed have been eager to drop hints regarding who among their friends are active in the scene. The typical interviews lasted between one and two hours. However, some of the practices and experiences recounted by the interviewees took place either in other, smaller towns in Finland or elsewhere in Europe.

Who, then, have we interviewed? Although the focus of this paper is on the practices of dumpster diving and gift giving – rather than on the identities of the practitioners – some basic characterizations of our informants are appropriate. There were thirteen women and seven men. The interviewees were between 23 and 43 years of age, but only five were older than 34.

At the core of our interest in the people we interviewed is that they practice dumpster diving *voluntarily*. This is not their last resort for getting nourishment but rather a means of living in as environmentally friendly a fashion as is possible in a modern urban setting characterized by retail capitalism. We find it interesting that these people actively want to dismantle and shake out the conventional distinctions between clean and edible food and waste, between purity and danger. One thing that distinguishes the people we have studied from the marginalized people who scrounge out of necessity is that for voluntary dumpster divers, the activity is not only about finding something to eat but also about excitement: doing something forbidden; being cunning and vigilant; and getting a rush of adrenaline when one sneaks to the supermarket backyard after dark, rummages through the stuff, and snags a good catch.

As other studies have also observed, voluntary dumpster divers are not easily distinguishable by their appearances or general lifestyle from other middle-class people (Carolsfeld and Erikson, 2013; Vinegar et al., 2016). Our interviewees are relatively highly educated, having all received some form of tertiary education. While a couple of interviewees actively espouse anarchism and try to live as far outside the money economy as possible, for the rest dumpster diving is just one practice among the many that make up the fabric of their daily lives. For them, an ethically sound life consists of doing good through the means available and of being aware of the need to make some compromises with the affordances in their surroundings (Lehtonen and Pyyhtinen 2020, 2021).

We analysed our materials by means of thematic coding, highlighting the core findings relevant to our present aims. In particular, we paid special attention to themes that deal with making discoveries at the dumpster, sharing, reciprocity between dumpster divers and ecological concerns. We present below the key forms in which the theme of the gift comes up in the conversations with our interviewees and discuss them in connection with philosophical, sociological and anthropological perspectives on the gift.

Four forms of gift relationships encountered in dumpster diving

In this section, we introduce four ways in which the themes of givenness, sharing, giving, and non-giving are encountered in the voluntary dumpster divers' accounts of their practices. The first has to do with the simple fact that there are foodstuffs to be found and appropriated for free. This is the primordial gift that establishes the possibility of the other three modalities of gifts, so we examine it in greater detail. The second form emphasizes mutuality and the idea of sharing, while the third is structured around unidirectional giving that dumpster divers may practise. Fourth, we discuss the way in which dumpster diving as an activity can be more generally about giving something to 'nature' and to the human collective, to future generations; however, the precondition for this is that nothing

is given to the shopkeeper or the overall retail infrastructure, as the foodstuff is kept in circulation among humans.

The givenness of waste: a gift from no one to no one?

For an uninitiated person, what is especially startling about voluntary dumpster divers' accounts of their activity is the image of abundance: in the backyards of supermarkets and cafés, they encounter enormous amounts of perfectly edible food. In this sense, their experiences of the piled treasures to be found in the waste containers bear fascinating analogies with the views of the South Indian gatherer-hunters called Nayaka studied by Nurit Bird-David, as the latter see 'their environment as giving' (Bird-David, 1990: 189). Our informants tell stories of hoarding in the land of plenty and how they, after their initial amazement, also have learned to practise moderation once they gradually have become accustomed to the constant availability of thrown-away food. Salla says that 'bread is something that you nearly always find, and it's good that you can freeze it and it keeps a long time'. Similarly, one can count on regularly finding bananas in excellent condition – to the extent that some of the informants complain about having to eat too many bananas and feeling remorse about having to leave behind masses of them. This is a recurring theme in the interviews: in the midst of this abundance, scarcity is not a problem, but one's willingness to be bothered is. As Taru says, 'there's no limit to the amount of food that you get by dumpster diving, so if you'd go there every day, if you felt like going, you probably would have food every day'. In addition to bread and bananas, dumpster divers' stable menus include not only all kinds of vegetables, fruits and yoghurt but also occasional finds of chocolate, vacuum-packed fish or even meat. Importantly, none of this costs our informants a thing; from their perspective, the food is simply there, given.

To us, the cast-off bounty of dumpster divers can be considered sensibly in terms of the phenomenological motif of *givenness* that we draw from Jacques Derrida. In his book *Given Time* (1994), which is probably the best-known and most influential philosophical account of the gift, Derrida refutes the presence of the gift. While gift giving does take place in an empirical sense, Derrida suggests that it never amounts to a gift in a conceptual sense, since the act of giving is not what we think it is: those who believe that they are giving are in fact engaged in exchange, and for him exchange annuls the gift. If there is a gift, he insists, the given must not return to the giver (Derrida, 1994: 7). He argues that because of the economic structure of consciousness, the gift can in fact never be present as a gift to either the giver or to the recipient. According to Derrida, the very moment the gift is perceived and received, it is annulled as a gift, because already the very identification of the gift as a gift throws it back into the economy of exchange: the recipient cannot but feel obliged to reply, and the giver makes a symbolic return payment to himself or herself. For Derrida, the gift thus gives itself to be thought only as *the impossible* (Derrida, 1994).

Derrida bases his approach to the gift on the phenomenological notion of givenness, which he receives from Heidegger. In *Being and Time* (1962), Heidegger deliberately emphasizes the idea of giving when discussing the givenness of Being and time.

According to him, Being (*Sein*) is not in beings; that is, in the things that are (*Seiendes*). Similarly, for Heidegger time (*Zeit*) is not in what appears within or through time; in themselves, Being and time are not observable in the empirical world. Nevertheless, ‘there is’ or ‘it gives’ (*es gibt*) Being, Heidegger points out, and ‘there is’ or ‘it gives’ (*es gibt*) time. Derrida’s refutation of the presence of the gift and the gesture of giving relies on this Heideggerian concept of *es gibt*. For Derrida, as it is impossible to give anything that would amount to a gift, any gift needs to be considered on the basis of the ‘it gives’ instead of a generous gesture by a subject. The gift is another name for Being in Derrida’s approach: just as Being is not in beings for Heidegger, Derrida insists that the gift is not a being or a thing that could be given by a subject. Yet ‘there is’ or ‘it gives’ the gift, just as ‘there is’ or ‘it gives’ Being.¹

For us, the existence of the discarded foodstuffs to be found inside the bin and taken home by dumpster divers resonates with this philosophical notion of givenness. If the treasures discovered by dumpster divers are a form of gift, the gift in question surely does not amount to generous giving, for the givenness or existence of food waste inherently lacks any intention or gesture of giving. The items are merely *given up*: the foodstuffs in the supermarkets’ bins have been left there by the shopkeepers after, in a sense, having been abandoned by the consumers. Even though a designated giver and recipient are both lacking, in dumpster diving the givenness of waste is nevertheless in a sense the *primordial gift*, the Ur-gift, a gift that establishes the very possibility of dumpster diving and founds or grounds all other gifts related to the practice. The givenness of waste – that *there is* or *it gives* waste to be found and translated into nourishment – is the precondition of dumpster diving.

Although there is an overall abundance of food going to waste, one cannot count on its availability at a given time or in a specific backyard. ‘It comes down to the luck of the draw what one ultimately finds there. It can be basically anything: sometimes a box of pick and mix candy, ice cream, or canned food. Crazy stuff’, one of our interviewees, Sami, says. Dumpster diving is marked with uncertainty: when going out on a dumpster diving tour, one can never know for sure whether one will actually find something to eat and, if so, precisely what it will be (Lehtonen and Pyyhtinen 2020).² One has no control over what one finds; it is – or is not – simply there.

Moreover, the givenness of the foodstuffs in the dumpster cannot be thought in an oblation sense due to the fact that it not only lacks any gesture of generous and charitable giving, but it is also quite common for shopkeepers to try to prevent anyone from reappropriating ‘their’ items. Our informants told us that, since the early 2000, supermarkets and grocery stores have increasingly started to lock up their dumpsters or house them inside closed sheds. In addition, Taru talked about how shopkeepers may even try to spoil the catch to prevent anyone from taking discarded food from the waste bin. Tommi, a 35-year-old male academic with two children, says that he has occasionally found that food items have been removed from their packaging by grocery store staff, with loaves of bread and baguettes smashed or torn into pieces or the mucus of fish spread all over other foods in the bin to spoil them.

Just as the givenness of waste that the dumpster divers encounter does not involve any generous intention, it also cannot be subsumed under exchange. When seen as a

relationship between the dumpster diver and the shopkeeper (or the retail infrastructure on the whole), the practice escapes the logic of exchange and violates the iron law of give and take. Drawing on Serres (2007), the dumpster diver can be characterized as a *parasite*, who enters the banquet without reciprocating. The parasite always takes and never gives. While regular customers pay for their food, dumpster divers hold the secret of a free lunch. They take their food without paying for it and thus, in a sense, ‘live off and in a deviation from equilibrium’ (Serres, 2008: 221). Admittedly, the characterization of dumpster divers as ‘parasites’ may suggest a negative, judgemental connotation to the practice. However, the practitioners themselves are fully aware of the parasitic dimension of dumpster diving yet refuse to feel guilty about it, as we have discussed elsewhere (Lehtonen and Pyyhtinen 2021). Dumpster divers benefit by taking the opportunity to be the tertius, or ‘third’, between others, whether that means the supermarket and waste management firms or supermarkets and most consumers. They enter the bin after the goods have been thrown away and before they have been picked up by waste collectors. Actors who are capable of placing themselves in such an in-between position have the opportunity for strategic manipulation and benefit.

As the givenness of foodstuffs in the waste container is accompanied by a parasitic relation, it depends not so much on giving as on *taking*. What is abandoned or discarded by the store needs to be perceived and appropriated by the parasitizing dumpster diver for a gift to appear. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that the actualization of the waste gift is not dependent on the dumpster diving subject alone, for surely there needs to be something inside the container to be appropriated. Otherwise, one leaves the site empty-handed. Situating all activity on the side of the subject would disregard the object, the waste matter itself. The action involved in the givenness of waste to be appropriated is thus dual: it is situated at once on the side of the object *which gives itself* (to be appropriated) and on the side of the subject who *appropriates* the object (that gives itself to the subject). There is as much appropriation as there is givenness – the ‘there is’ or ‘it gives’ (*es gibt*) of the givenness of the waste gift for the dumpster diver is contemporaneous with appropriation. So, while the waste gift shows itself by giving itself, its givenness must pass through appropriation (although the emergence of the waste gift may also involve an excess beyond appropriation).

So, while the givenness of cast-off bounty is a gift that *is* and *gives* without anyone intentionally giving anything to anyone else, it simultaneously presupposes another pole beyond that of the object that manifests itself; namely, appropriation by the dumpster diving subject. Givenness cannot therefore be considered only in terms of the object that emerges and gives itself; rather, the question of what occurs must be accompanied by the questions of to whom it occurs and who acts. The subject pole of the relationship can be conceptualized more aptly as grasping or taking than as receiving. All in all, the givenness of waste relates to the *generous aspect of things*, creating possibilities and initiating actions.

In addition to making dumpster diving possible, the givenness of cast-off bounty also makes it possible for the dumpster diver to give to others what they have appropriated; it gives a particular condition of giving waste gifts to others. It gives the gift of giving. Yet, without prior givenness and appropriation, it would not be possible to give the item as a gift to others.

Solidarity-based gifts

Whereas givenness remains without a designated giver and recipient, the second gift form that we encountered in the interviews reveals explicit generosity among humans. Jarkko told us that as there is plenty of food available for free, it makes sense to share the abundance. When he was active in the squatting movement, dumpster diving was customarily attached to that activity: 'There is always too much to dive; that's the problem, but when squatting, that's good', because the food is enjoyed in common. In Lauri's previous workplace, some of his colleagues practised dumpster diving and had the habit of bringing the food there 'to be freely shared'; according to him, the foodstuffs thus made available were eagerly enjoyed by others in the office. Milla talks about often finding so much food on her way home that she 'is hardly able to carry it', but being 'stupid enough', she cannot help but take it along anyhow. However, by the time she gets home to the commune where she lives, it gives her satisfaction to be able to share her catch with her flatmates.

The stories above well illustrate that while dumpster divers enjoy a good bounty, the practice is not simply about getting as much stuff as possible for oneself. Instead, solidarity and sharing are important, and dumpster diving can be fun, too. Tommi, for example, told us of a time when he went to a cottage for a weekend with some friends. On their way, 'we drove to the dumpster by car, and you know we just stuffed the whole trunk full of food. And whoever came to the cottage, we could provide them with this pile of food. Very nice and handy'. The kind of giving Tommi describes is associated with benevolence, solidarity and mutual aid, given for the benefit of familiars.

The context of the solidarity-based waste gift that our informants talked about may range from philanthropy – related to an emergency requiring efficient action – to a feast among friends. Alina, who is deeply committed to dumpster diving as part of her alternative lifestyle, told us that she learned to dumpster dive when she was living in Spain. Interestingly, at the dumpsters, even when there were multiple people in dire need of food, it was shared equally between everyone present:

I got to know some Slovenian and Slovak hippies and punks who taught me the practice – I had never heard the term 'dumpster diving' before, but with them it was a 'trash party everyday', as they put it. There was a supermarket in walking distance where we went. [...] A sick amount of homeless, punks and all kinds of dudes arrived at the dumpster; one guy dived inside the container and shared all that stuff equally with everyone.

Here, thus, one also gives to benefit strangers, not merely one's friends or acquaintances. Moreover, the information about a good hunting ground can be spread much wider than among one's closest circles; Seppo says that he tells everyone that he knows engage in dumpster diving about a good spot he may have found. The same attitude is attested by Alina, who in the beginning of her dumpster diver career was astounded by the way in which everyone seemed to be open about where to find good catches when she asked for hints:

Everybody was, like, 'yes of course, you can go over there, that's my favourite spot'. You wouldn't expect people to reveal such things. 'Where are the best places to pick mushrooms?' – that would be a ridiculous question. Certainly, that's not being told.

The nature of the solidarity-based waste gift changes, however, when it is part of a festive get-together among friends. Our interviewees report having the habit of every now and then sharing their catches by organizing dinners where all the food served is rescued from the dumpster. Occasionally, they call these feasts 'trash parties'. Seppo acknowledges that food has 'an important social function' in the large commune where he lives together with friends: 'We have so many guests. All of it does revolve much around food: we serve food for free, we invite people over and prepare large amounts of food, because we can. It is fun to pass it on'. When throwing a party and sharing the food found in dumpsters, the physiology of eating is connected with sociability, with the enjoyment of being together with others (Simmel, 2001).

Taru, also living in a commune at the time, once found an enormous amount of potato crisps when she was dumpster diving with a friend. 'And then we had to throw a party to get them eaten'. Sharing is thus not only about morality, a way of preventing perfectly edible food from going to waste and/or helping others in need, but also about pleasure.

The abundance involved in dumpster diving enables a heightened solidarity, and giving may incite more generosity. 'In all communes I have lived in we've had the practice that all food is shared and in common, unless it is marked as belonging to someone', Seppo says. He thinks that 'it's nice to do something for the commune' by providing one's flatmates with food. Similarly, Irmeli, who had learned to dumpster dive with student friends who lived in a commune, recounts how three or four residents dumpster dived for the rest of them. Because of this solidarity, 'it was really easy to be generous' for others as well, for example by helping out in cleaning the catch or by preparing a meal from the ingredients for the entire commune. The generous gesture is thus not primarily motivated by an expectation or profit or return on investment; rather, it amounts to a gesture of reciprocal recognition among people.

To sum up, the gifts passed on among dumpster divers do not embody pure givenness, but they establish a bond mediated by the object given. The purpose of sharing is not only to establish or nourish a bond between the giver and the recipient but also to sustain the convention of sharing that can structure the very being of a commune. In other words, while all who share recognize one another as potential contributors and recipients, sharing as a collective convention, the practice of sharing itself, transcends personal relationships. Yet, the generosity it involves contributes to a different kind of collectivity than that implicated by the gracious gift, as we examine in the next section.

Free giving

The third form of gift that we encounter among dumpster divers is giving without expectation of return. While the free gift is valorized by every Western moral and religious tradition, anthropological and sociological approaches to the gift are especially suspicious of the existence of free giving and typically consider the gift in terms of reciprocity instead

(see, e.g. Caplow, 1984; Gouldner, 1960; Mauss, [1924] 2008; however, see e.g. Carrier, 1990; Laidlaw, 2000; Reddy, 2007; Waldby and Mitchell, 2006 for recent anthropological defences of the free gift). Mauss ([1924] 2008), for example, insists that the common wisdom about gifts as gracious and disinterested is mistaken. He maintains that no gift is devoid of self-interest. From the Maussian perspective, the free gift is nothing but a paradox: for him, the gift creates a bond between giver and recipient, and a giving that refuses requital thus shoves the given 'outside any mutual ties' (Douglas, 2008: ix).

Utilitarianism and objectivist analyses of the gift go even further and claim that the denial of self-interest in the gift amounts to a masquerade (see e.g. Godbout and Caillé, 1998 for a more detailed discussion and criticism of these). If not direct profit, when giving one nevertheless wishes to gain something, be it power over others or social acceptance. Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) approach to the gift is slightly more refined, as he suggests that there are two truths to the gift, one subjective and one objective. They are 'quite opposite' to one another (107) in that according to its subjective truth, the gift amounts to disinterested, voluntary, and free giving, and yet the objective truth of the gift is reciprocity or, as Bourdieu puts it, the 'objective "mechanism" of exchange' (105). With this idea of the dual truth of the gift, Bourdieu suggests not only that even though people like to think that they are giving freely, they are nevertheless engaged in cycles of reciprocity but also that the denial of the objective reality of the gift as reciprocal is a necessary condition for gift exchange to be viable and acceptable; gift exchange necessitates a deliberate denial and misrecognition of the mechanism of exchange. In Bourdieu's (1990) own words, '[g]ift exchange is one of the social games that cannot be played unless the players refuse to acknowledge the objective truth of the game' (105).

However, while Bourdieu insists on paying attention to how people perceive gifts that they give and receive, he takes their experiences and views seriously only to the extent of denouncing them. He never considers the possibility that the actors might in fact be right about the nature of the gift (Elder-Vass, 2015). They may genuinely give out of generosity. This experience is not merely a delusion to be dispelled.

Our interviewees told us of several occasions of free gifts. For example, there is no gift exchange between the parties when the giver and the recipient remain personally unknown to each other. While the food given out of mutual solidarity expresses reciprocal social recognition of one's partners, in the gracious gift, the generosity is more discreet or even *secret* in nature, as Salla reveals:

Sometimes when you dumpster dive a lot at the café, for example, and you realize that you cannot take more for yourself, you are like, 'Hey, I'll leave these pies here so that they can be seen if anyone opened this bin'. That if someone who has never even dumpster dived might consider whether to take it. You can always leave small signs like that.

In the quoted passage, the gift evinces a self-effacement of the giver and involves no expectation of reciprocation from potential recipients, something that would make hardly any sense in gift exchange, the purpose of which is to bind the giver and the recipient to another in a relationship of alternating dissymmetry. Nevertheless, the secretive

nature of giving is possible in a case like the one described by Salla, where the *obligation* to reciprocate that characterizes gift exchange is not relevant. Whoever came to the bin after Salla would not even be able to make a corresponding gift in return even if they wanted to. Here the giving is unilateral, insofar as it concerns interpersonal relationships between self and others (while acknowledging that for example the act of self-congratulating oneself and the feeling of being satisfied with oneself for being generous can set the ‘return’ in motion within the mind of the giver, as Derrida (1994) insists). Or, if there is reciprocity involved, it remains anonymous, at most: one may see oneself as participating in a convention of giving that surpasses specific individuals, as it were. One may for example give by thinking that just as the treasures one leaves at the dumpster may please someone else and satiate their hunger, it would be preferable if others donated as well; not least so because it might just happen that some day one was in need of food oneself.

Furthermore, secretive or anonymous giving does not merely involve the self-effacement of the giver; the potential recipient may also remain unknown to the giver. In the example above, the position of the recipient remains an empty place that can be assumed by essentially anyone. Hénaff (2020) suggests that the nature of the free and gracious gift is primarily psychological and moral, aiming to generate joy in the recipient. However, when Salla left items in the bin for those who might come after her, she did not seek to control the response created and the effect her gift would potentially make. She simply left them there.

To cite another example, Taru mentions a time she came across ‘a whole grey waste bin full of Edam cheese’ and decided to ‘only take the eight kilos that I could carry and leave the rest for anyone who came after me’. Like Salla’s case, leaving the rest of the cheese in the bin is a gift Taru gives to an unknown, unspecified other, and it is likely, indeed almost certain, that her giving would remain unknown to anyone making their way to the bin in her wake. What they see is just cheese; they remain oblivious to having received a gift from her.

However, the free gift does not necessarily have to remain anonymous. Seppo told us that the commune where he lives has the custom of donating bread to their guests upon their departure:

Even people who don’t dare, don’t know how to, or do not want to go diving, they too are willing to accept bread from our commune, which we have an absurd amount of. If I ask them, ‘Do you wanna have some, here’s ten packs of bread and here’s some cheese’, then of course [they agree to take that]. When we have it in our fridge, it will be passed on even to those, too, who do not want to dumpster dive themselves.

In this case, the gesture of giving does not involve an expectation of an explicit counter-gift to balance the accounts; rather, the bread is given due to the sheer excess amounts of it on hand. Seppo and his flatmates give simply because they have so much to give. Another example reminiscent of this is the occasion when Tommi had his freezer fully packed with 73 packages of sausage he had discovered in the dumpster of a relatively small grocery store. As he did not want to eat them all by himself, he passed them on

a bit randomly. When we asked him whether he announced (semi-)publicly anywhere that he had all these sausages, he replied with chuckles that 'I think it is nicer to hand it [i.e. a package] as a surprise, as a surprise present' and imitated the move of drawing a package out of the breast pocket. Interestingly, for us, pure giving appears in these examples to be a kind of counterpart of the parasitism discussed above. Both free giving and parasitism entail a relation where there is no reversal of direction; things flow one way only. To some extent, by taking without giving, the parasite may even establish the condition for the possibility of pure and unidirectional giving, and the gesture of pure giving places the recipient in the position of the parasite, irrespective of the intentions of giver or recipient (see also Copeman, 2008: 28).

The gift of non-giving

The dumpster divers share an underlying understanding that their practice is socially and environmentally beneficial, although it is at odds with the majority's customs. To some extent, the idea of doing good to the environment may of course be an ideological armour with which the dumpster divers protect themselves against the charge of parasitism, but we would suggest that this is not only what it is. Besides, as we mentioned, the practitioners themselves fully admit their being parasites without, however, feeling bad about it. The perception of dumpster diving as an ecologically sound practice is thus more than just an instrument of denial, a manifestation of individual and collective self-deception. We think that the practitioners deserve to be given at least the benefit of doubt. To understand the practice, it is important to take seriously what the dumpster divers have to say about it. But what, more precisely, makes the activity 'good' in their eyes? Discussing this question makes it possible to comprehend the extent to which *non-giving*, the withdrawal from giving, may constitute a gift. Here, the gift does not concern the givenness of waste, solidarity, or generous giving, the three forms of gifts discussed above, but an ethical responsibility to nature regarded as the Other.

First, dumpster divers think their practice is beneficial for the environment and planetary well-being and, consequently, for their fellow humans simply because of their *withdrawal* from the productive circuit of capitalism. Tommi, for example, expresses how he wishes to disentangle himself from consumerism and from the throwaway society to which it is tied: 'The less I waste resources the happier I ultimately am when I look back on this life. Because I am still not okay with overconsuming. So, this is indeed a form of counterculture, for we are constantly urged to consume'. Dumpster divers give to the environment and other humans the gift of their own consumer passivity, the (anti)deed of *not* purchasing commodities. In other words, the *negative* gesture of not giving (money) back to the shopkeepers and producers is in itself felt by them as a form of *positive* gift to nature and the future of society at large.

Second, dumpster divers see themselves as doing good for the environment by not letting food go to waste: 'I know that the dumpster will probably be emptied out during the night, but I take foodstuffs from it just to make sure that it won't remain there even by a chance and be spoiled' (Seppo). They care about and for stuff when others have already finished with it, stuff which disgusts most people and which they therefore wish to merely expel and exterminate. Thus, in addition to giving the gift of

not contributing to the growth of the consumer society, dumpster divers do good by *reducing* the harmful effects that the retail sector and their fellow citizens' way of life more generally produce: they minimize the amount of waste by making good use of the food items available in the trash bins.

It could be claimed that what usual consumer practices give back to nature is resources in the form of waste. Seen this way, dumpster divers want to give back as little as possible not only to shopkeepers but also to nature; it is the not giving back of waste that is the gift they give; it is their way of caring for the environment. Salla, for example, laments how 'we have somehow got used to this ridiculous overabundance' and says how it is better to keep matter in circulation rather than waste it. The temporal span of a food item's 'biography' (Kopytoff, 1986) is deliberately made more complex and prolonged as part of an ecologically sound way of life that demonstrates resistance to the ethos of disposability that still largely characterizes Western consumerism.

Of course, all human activity is bound to generate excess, and the category of waste is an integral part of the human condition. Thus, not even dumpster divers are able to live without ever throwing anything away. The practice nevertheless reveals that there is nothing inevitable about the moment when an object comes to be seen as redundant. Negating the retail sector's and other citizens' practical views on what is waste, dumpster divers problematize not only overconsumption but also when and how we discard stuff and what it is that we exclude and why (Lehtonen and Pyyhtinen, 2021).

To sum up this section, it is significant that two negative yet essential aspects of dumpster diving – not purchasing consumer goods and negating others' views of what is waste – can be turned into positives. In dumpster diving, parasitizing itself becomes a 'good', a gift, something that one gives to the Other of nature and to one's fellow humans. Interestingly, this would not be the case if the relationship were *not* one-sided or indeed parasitic. In other words, dumpster divers can only give the gift of good environmental deeds (positivity) if they do not give back (negativity), that is, engage in exchange with the retail infrastructure or give waste back to nature.

Conclusion

In this article, we have tried to bring gift studies and social scientific waste studies into a dialogue with each other. The two fields have hitherto remained almost totally separate, but we think that their combination gives rise to novel insights regarding both dumpster diving and contemporary forms of gift. Instead of venturing the much more commonly asserted idea of the wastefulness of giving gifts, we have examined the ways in which waste itself may figure as a gift.

There is no denying that the waste gifts that we identified – especially the first and fourth forms: the food that is there inside the dumpster, without a designated giver, recipient, or gesture of giving, and the gift of non-giving – do not fit neatly with existing anthropological gift theories. For example, while the modern gift usually implies that you give what you own, the foodstuffs do not *belong* to the dumpster divers. The items are not theirs to appropriate and give away – or this is at least how the shops see it (and therefore try to prevent the dumpster divers from taking the trash). What is

more, the waste gifts also seem at odds with for example kula valuables, potlatch coppers, gifts to the Sangha or other manifestations of gifts traditionally studied by anthropologists. However, instead of seeing that this would disqualify their nature as gifts, we think that the four waste gifts discussed may in fact help us challenge ‘anthropological elementarism’ (Cheal, 1988) and appreciate the specificity of modern gift practices. In our view, it is questionable to what extent the indigenous gift exchanges studied by anthropologists in tribal societies can actually serve as the model to understand contemporary Western gift practices, which seem to embody a different kind of generosity and different kinds of relations (see also Hénaff, 2020).

By focusing on gift *practices* among dumpster divers we wanted to avoid essentialist notions of the gift. Instead of asking, what counts as a gift or what a gift is, in essence, we approached the gift as a *pragmatic* matter: as something that is enacted in practice rather than as something that would have an underlying reality irrespective of and detached from practices. The reductionist notions of the gift to be found in philosophy and anthropology tend to assess all types of gifts by criteria applicable to *one* form of gifts: as either free giving (philosophy) or in terms of reciprocity (anthropology). For us, this leaves the heterogeneity of gift practices and significant differences between them unacknowledged. Our analysis, by contrast, brought out the polysemy and different orders of the gift. It was guided by our theoretico-methodological starting point to preserve and embrace openness and sensibility to potentially all sorts of practices that may be understood in terms of gifting or entail dimensions of gifting. In our data, we identified patterns that for us manifested as instances of ‘gifts’, in terms of something being given or received,³ although they seemed to fall out of the categorizations of gifts provided by classical anthropology.

There were four modalities of waste gifts that we encountered in our interviews with dumpster divers, each with its own system of justification and meaning. For example, reciprocity, which is crucial in and for the trash parties embodying solidarity-based gifts, is not relevant to the parasitic relationship marked by the givenness of waste or to free giving. Similarly, the self-effacement of the giver and the concealment of the expectation of reciprocation, which are appropriate in or even necessary conditions for free, disinterested giving, would hardly make any sense in the solidarity-based gift, the purpose of which is to bind giver and recipient. Further, while the givenness of waste involves no generosity in the strict sense of the term, it is present in the other three forms of the gift. In each, however, generosity plays a different role: while in the solidarity-based gift, the generous offer tends to be reciprocal and contributes to the continuity of a relationship, in free giving it is unconditional and aimed at graciousness. Finally, in the gift of non-giving, the generous offer consists, paradoxically, in the withdrawal from giving, and the recipient – nature – knows nothing of the gesture.

When discussing the controversies and tensions in gift scholarship, John Milbank (2006: 446) suggests that one question scholars disagree on is ‘whether our approach to the gift should be primarily philosophical or else primarily ethnographical’. The theoretical and methodological point that we want to make with our analysis of waste gifts is that one does not necessarily have to choose between philosophy and anthropology;⁴ moving from one form of waste gift to another involves shifts between different semantic fields, and one should just make it explicit when a shift happens. A move

from the phenomenological analysis of givenness to a sociological and anthropological analysis of gift practices among humans implies a shift from the question of how the treasures discovered in waste containers appear and occur to the dumpster divers to how the practitioners pass their finds on to others and what kind of relations the objects mediate among them. Whereas givenness remains without an agent who intentionally gives out of generosity, each of the other three forms of waste gifts involves generous gestures by human subjects which establish, settle or maintain relationships among them. The phenomenological approach to givenness is, however, prone to all too easily disregard the various agents that are there to make (often without knowing it) givenness possible: the fact that there is good waste to be found for the dumpster divers depends existentially on the wastefulness of the retail business, other consumers, capitalism and our contemporary mode of life. The givenness of waste is thus placed somewhere in between the passive 'what occurs' (that things go to waste) and the active 'who acts' (the grocery store staff throw the stuff out, after which the dumpster divers search for it in the bin).

And how are dumpster divers as a community gathered around waste gifts? In the case of solidarity-based gifts, the relatively informal collective gathered around the waste gifts is mainly formed along the lines of reciprocity and mutual sharing. The relationships may be dual – as when one gives to the benefit of a stranger, for example – but they also can take other, more open and indeterminate forms, amounting to an association of several participants, as with trash parties. The sharing tends to nourish trust, respect and mutual recognition among the voluntary dumpster divers. It does not necessarily assume balanced or symmetrical reciprocity – where all would give according to their abilities and all would receive according to their needs (Graeber, 2012) – but the sharing nevertheless participates in building an explicit community, a specific 'us': what is shared is shared among 'us'. In that sense, while reciprocation tends to occur among the members of the community, this is not imperative. Free giving, by contrast, is characterized by a unilateral dual relationship for which the obligation to reciprocate is not relevant. In it, the generosity may even be secretive by nature and the gift may evince a self-effacement of the giver, as happens when giver and recipient remain personally unknown to each other. In such a case, the position of the recipient remains an empty place that can be assumed by essentially anyone. Finally, the gift of non-giving refutes the logic of exchange. While dumpster diving fundamentally relies on the excess of consumerism, the dumpster divers refuse to be indebted to the retail system, not to speak of giving anything in return. The positive gift to nature this designates for the dumpster divers is based on not forming a relationship with nature that would be mediated by an object, because the object has been withdrawn, thus giving rise to a kind of non-relation.

On a final note, we see that engaging with the waste gifts related to dumpster diving increases analytical sensitivity to the contingency and dynamic nature of the very category of waste: the wasteness of waste is coextensive with the practices and relations that make it waste, and it may also be transformed into something else – in this case a gift – when it becomes part of other relations and practices. In addition to the fact that both involve giving up a possession, what the gift and waste have in common in more general terms is that nothing is inherently waste/gift; things become waste/gifts depending on how they are perceived and valued in hands-on valuation practices by humans. The

waste gifts we have examined exemplify how effectively anything can be given as a gift. Interestingly, at the same time, they also accentuate the limits to *givability*; not everything is givable to anyone in all situations. Not only do objects themselves have a say in whether they are givable or not (for example when food is no longer safe to eat because it has gone bad), but the givability of an object also depends on the nature of the relationship between the giver and the recipient and on *acceptability*; that is, on the counterpart of givability on the recipient's side, which is the disposition to recognize, welcome, perceive and receive the incoming gift. Our informants told us that they do not give food they have discovered from the dumpsters to everyone they know; instead, one selects to whom one gives, and not everyone they know would even be willing to accept a gift of food that has been found in a dumpster. The dynamics of givability and acceptability merit further examination.


Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Koneen Säätiö, (grant number 202009490).

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Notes

1. Jean-Luc Marion's work might further clarify this idea. In *Being Given* (2002: 34), Marion suggests that 'Being, insofar as it differs from beings, appears immediately in terms of givenness'. Being is not, only beings are; Being is *given*. And 'Being withdraws from beings because it gives them' (36). At the heart of Marion's thinking of the gift lies the question of phenomenality. Unlike Husserl, for whom an intentional object is constituted by an intuition, Marion gives the appearing of phenomena the initiative; one must let them manifest themselves. Marion thus considers phenomenality in terms of manifestation, which he thinks on the basis of givenness. Marion's model of givenness comes from the gift; he draws the notion of givenness from Heidegger's *Es gibt*, which he translates as *cela donne*, 'it gives', rather than as *il y a*, 'there is'. So, Marion understands the gift on the basis of the phenomenological idea of givenness drawn from *Es gibt*, and considers givenness from the perspective the gift. For an informative discussion of the debate around the given and the gift, see Milbank (2006).
2. This primordial sense of uncertainty also makes evident that the analogy to gatherer-hunters only takes us so far. Whereas the Nayaka perceive the forest 'as an ever-providing parent' (Bird-David, 1990: 190), dumpster divers cannot trust that the waste containers will keep on providing. Another crucial difference lies in the fact that in dumpster diving, the given lacks a giving subject (such as the forest as parent among the Nayaka), as we have already noted.

3. These are not essentialist criteria, but rather practical notions that *sensitize* us for dynamics potentially involved in gift-relationships.
4. By this, we do not intend to make the claim that anthropology would be synonymous with ethnography (see e.g. Ingold, 2011: 229–243; 2017). We only suggest that the point of controversy mentioned by Milbank need not necessarily be taken as a given.

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