Dakar landfill and the wastepickers

*Social production of value, urban subalternity and work ethics*

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ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK:

Public service delivery (electricity, water, transportations, ...and waste management)

• Mbeubeuss dumpsite (27 km far from Dakar, in the middle of its densely populated suburbs) is the only public landfill in Senegal

• Set up since 1968

• Receives 400,000 Tons of any kind of wastes (municipal, dangerous, industrial, etc)

• The only treatment is done by the community of wastepickers which operates informally within the dump
THE WASTE ISSUE

• Empasse:
  - The state decides to displace the historical landfill
  - Local communities contest this choice (environmental risk)
  - Wastepickers requests (landfill as workplace)
  - International financial pressure (WB e APIX: toll road investment)

• WASTE MANAGEMENT:
  - EXTRAVERSION (Foreign companies unsuitable for the african context)
  - MUNICIPAL WASTE MANAGEMENT absorbed by political manipulation for the electoral consensus
The *banlieu*: rejections, *deguerpissement* and «alternative» marginalization

**URBAN POLICIES:**

- Politics of *Deguerpissemen* — ‘Eviction policies’ (50’s/60’s)
- Fight against the ‘human overload’ (‘*encombrements humaines*’) 60’s/70’s
- Repressive apparatus of the ‘Senghorian state’: modernization imperative and political need to promote tourism

**Mbeubeuss landfill:** into the heart of ‘urban issue’. Many people rejected from the downtown discover Mbeubeuss as the last chance to find job
SOCIОLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL TRAJECTORIES DETERMINING THE LANDFILL PEOPLING

• Deguerpissement Policies

• Rejection and isolation of the urban overpopulation towards the suburbs

• The rural exodus

• The “spontaneous” adaptation of the subaltern classes to the urban environment

Mbeubeus, being into the heart of the banlieue, attracted who, rejected by the downtown because unsuited to the selective urban context, had no alternative than to “make a last try”
The ethnographic work

In many of the senior wastepickers stories a common narrative fragment emerges, linked to the experience of violent evictions and deportations, and to the memory of Mbeubeuss as a “place of mads”. This can be connected to the closeness of a Psychiatric Hospital in Thiaroye (Collignon, 1975), not far from the dumpsite, where a separated pavilion used to host people, presumably normal, rejected from the evictions and from the urban cleansing policies.
The hasty rejection of these ‘undesirables’ brought to an essentializing discrimination among unproductive subjects, mental diverted and the ‘human overloads’ composing the dangerous classes.

**Quote:**

“When there were institutional meetings in Dakar, authorities used to carry out in advance some random raids against vagabonds[...] these “human wastes” (dechets humaines) were then sent to Mbeubeuss because, not being criminals, they could not be taken to jail”
Mbeubeuss as space of ‘alternative’ marginalization

• Dumpsite, outside of society, becomes a ‘dispositif’ of social control and containment. This fosters its transformation into a «space of production»

• The urban underclass, diverted into the dump, constituted itself as handwork in the waste chain
Mbeubeuss: the social distribution of space and work

• **2500** wastepickers (live and work inside the dump)

• 3 neighbourhoods:
  - **Gui Gi**: senior wastepickers (good quality wastes)
  - **Baol**: rural migrants (just municipal solid waste)
  - **Platforme**: «A battlefield»

• **PAKK**: In wolof is the production unit for the recycle economy. Wastepickers gather here all the recovered stuff (metals, plastic, glass, electronics, etc)
The *boudiouman* and the division of labour

• In the social hierarchy of labour, the simple waste pickers - those that do not have access either to the resale nor to a better quality of waste – carry out the less paid and heaviest activity, constituting an underpaid handwork, subject to the sales’ brokers.

• In such a context of subordination, the waste pickers have created their own repertoire of reference. The predatory performance over the platform is indeed powered by a high degree of competition to grab the “best waste” (in wolof ‘*mbalit tubab’*).
Everlasting wait and predatory performance

• The intensive nature of the recovering practices has made the dump as a place of "everlasting wait" in which, even at night, you expect to find 'waste of quality'. This is well represented by a very significant sentence of a young wastepicker:

"the landfill is like a pregnant woman, it could give birth at any time"
CONCLUSIONS

• In the social history of the dump concentrate the most painful experiences and most emblematic events of the African city.

• The process of political subjectivation that has seen the emergence of the wastepicker, whose morality swings between work ethics and social legitimacy, must be understood through the moral economies characterizing such contexts of extreme poverty.

• The production of value from waste must be understood as a social process in which the material conditions of existence are constantly negotiated.