



**WYDZIAŁ
EKONOMICZNO-
-SOCJOLOGICZNY**

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**The Review of the Dissertation of Mgr. Pavel Mašek,
*Rusting Away: an Ethnography of Totaled Cars, Informality, Capitalism, Waste, and
Sustainability at a Bohemian Auto Salvage Yard*
written under supervision of Mgr. Daniel Sosna, Ph.D.**

Mgr. Pavel Mašek in his dissertation, presents ethnography of auto salvage yard completed during long term participant observation. Since car scrapyards used to be marginalized in public perception and by the scientific community, this dissertation fills a gap in social awareness and anthropological research. The author portrays auto salvage yards as places that could repair the damage caused by neoliberal capitalism, paradoxically based on the capitalist logic of profit. Exploring these hidden corners, Mašek demonstrates that sustainability can be obtained even in the grey zones by people who do not contribute to environmental discourse, do not shout “green” slogans, or even do not identify themselves as eco-friendly.

The work is accomplished in sophisticated way and with anthropological sensitivity. The dissertation is very interesting, well and clearly written, providing excellent considerations on waste and disposal of (wrecked/ salvaged) cars in our culture.

The structure of the work

The 148-page dissertation consists of three sections: *I. Introduction*, *II. The Yard*, and *III. Conclusion*. In the first section, the author outlines the macro and micro gaze on the problem at hand. First, he offers the conceptual background of the studied problem of totaled cars, situating it by gazes through macro lenses of the automotive industry and Western car culture. Then, he introduces micro-level experiences of car users and a researcher who enters the world of auto salvage yards.

The author chose to present his findings chronologically as they were gained during the fieldwork. Explaining his research decisions and changes of initial ideas, he presents his work as a form of “wisdom quest.” That way, he helps the reader to navigate in the broad and dense conceptual framework applied to understand the salvage yard’s unwritten rules and the practices of its workers. The side effect of this decision is that only when 39 pages the structure of the dissertation is outlined, which creates some repetitions of the content in further parts of the work.

In this part, the author describes the salvage yard’s setting with its “informally formal” practices that are never monitored or officially reported and, at the same time, being used in the official statistics of the activities of the other legal scrapyards (p. 20).

The next chapter delineates the spatial arrangement of the studied place – the “yard island,” as the author names it – and the participants of this micro-world: the researcher’s co-workers, the owner, and the manager of the yard. The author considers the “undemocratic setting” of the yard’s social structure, where “the lowest-ranking always did the dirtiest and most physically demanding work” (p. 32) referring to Dant’s and Bowles’s (2003) concept of the “moral order of dirt” and the “moral division of labor” (Hughes, 1958). The author evokes here the concept of heterotopia and places a studied junkyard within its conceptual framework. The introductory part is closed with a description of the methodology applied.

The second section of the dissertation provides the reader with three chapters that sophisticatedly elaborate the findings from the yard, the author’s reflections, and discussions with the literature. In the first chapter, called *The Dark Side of the Container*, the author offers interesting conceptualization of the sanitation truck that can work as “magician black box” helping to disconnect waste from its previous owner and prevent officials to trace the activities performed at the salvage yard. Workers in the observed yard treated garbage trucks “as a way to dispose of traces of their informal practices” (p. 48). The author discusses here the very concept of the container in regard to discarding as a moral project. He also considers the semiotic and symbolic role of the messages placed on the garbage trucks in the form of short text slogans or pictures that assures the audience about pro-ecological motives of the waste management companies. He argues that the literal message in fact creates some new value, transforming the container and the content alike. Trying to encode meanings of the slogans like “purely ecological” the author explains greenwashing strategies as a discrepancy between eco-slogans and real practices. He treats slogans as images that aims in assuring people that they proceed properly, “doing the right thing” (p. 52). However these visual representations at least are “meant to produce a positive message—nothing more” (p. 54). The author

elaborates here the concept of “recycling” – showing the shift of its meaning – from technical term to “a broader ecological awakening” and “moral imperative” (p. 56).

At the end of this subsection, he discusses the meaning of “waste” and “commodity” categories, showing that waste transportation services present themselves as doing “dirty work” for social good in the way to redirect public attention to the moral obligation of individual users to segregate. This way, waste management companies obscure interpretations of their profitable enterprise. At least, garbage trucks’ contents are valuable resources with an accurate market value that will be monetized.

The following subsection, named *Autarkia*, comes up with the ancient idea of *oikonomia* as a concept relevant in our times. The author addresses the problem of requirements placed on individual consumers to participate in the recycling process actively (by sorting recyclables into different fractions or transporting waste to communal sites intended for their disposal). According to him, governments and public services nowadays deny their responsibility and overthrow the obligations for waste sorting and disposal to households. At the same time, emotional pressure is exerted upon individuals regarding their responsibility and sense of moral obligation. “Humans then tend to think that their responsible approach to waste and recycling helps solve environmental issues. Nevertheless, these issues have only been moved elsewhere but not solved” (p. 64).

In the next chapter, *Wrecked Cars, Leaked Humans, and the Death of the Person-car*, the author looks for analogies between car and human bodies, discussing many aspects of the “driving body” and “humanized/ personalized vehicle,” their materiality and agency. Continuing these analogies, he describes “the operating theater” of hospitals and salvage yards – as “places of second chances” aimed at rescuing people or salvaging cars (p. 80). The very interesting part of the chapter presents linguistic similarities between terms applied to the human body and the car body (p. 83). In the following subsection, the author addresses the problem of dirt. Since the work at the salvage yard assumes continual physical contact with it, workers must wear protective clothing, clean and remove dirt, and protect themselves from contamination (p. 84). In the hierarchical types of dirt in the salvage yard, the most disgusted and afraid of is the “leaked human” – meaning bloodstains and body liquids caused by car accidents.

The third chapter in this section, *Grey Greening: Quiet Sustainability at Auto Salvage Yards*, discusses the paradoxes of “green” ideology. Expressing environmental awareness turns out to be “a strategy of adaptation” (p. 94) of entities just yearning for profit. The author borrowed the concept of “quiet sustainability” from Smith and Jehlička (2013) to explain the

environmentally responsive behaviors of auto salvage yard workers. Their informal everyday practices contribute to the circular economy, even if their incentives do not arise from being “environmentally responsive.” They are embedded in the value of things and the exchangeable value of money so the workers can perform sustainable practices, bypassing the very idea of sustainability. The salvage yard workers “play with classification and import a significant number of wrecked cars that never appear in the statistics” (p. 101). Thus, the author concludes that economically profitable acts might also benefit the environment. The question is, for which part of the environment will it be beneficial: for the environment of the country of origin or the environment of the country where the wrecked cars finally landed? When we frame the problem like this, we can see the problematic nature of waste disposal.

In the following chapter the author raises a problem of informality and “shadow economy” as related to dismantling wrecked cars and repairing others with parts from broken ones. The author emphasizes again that informal yearning for profit results in environmentally responsive behavior (p. 105), but indicates also emotional aspects of the work in salvage yard – “the deep satisfaction and pure joy stemming from seeing a repaired vehicle that was previously labelled a total loss” (p. 107). The “culture of repair” gives them access to the transformative energy of creative process, and their own agency.

Mistrust – the last chapter of this section is dedicated to the issue of negotiating processes that base on professional knowledge, access to relevant information and conversational skills. The signs of mis/trust hamper or enable meaningful exchanges. According to the author, people’s involvement in such places does not result from their coping strategies but rather from their resourcefulness and agency (p. 113).

There are a few editorial mistakes in the work – for example, Guatri (p. 69) instead of Guattari – but generally the dissertation is carefully and properly edited.

The text is enriched with photos picturing mainly the salvage yard reality. The dissertation contains appropriate references and is closed with two summaries in German and in Czech language. The structure of the work is correct.

Research method

The method applied in the study was appropriate and effective. In the years 2019-2021 the author spent 22 months in the field, conducting long-term ethnographic research in one randomly chosen auto salvage yard in Central Bohemia, where he performed active and complete participation in the field working as a regular salvage yard worker. As he admitted, during the field study he dismantled 64 cars.

The researcher openly presented his scholar identity and explained his intentions to the all co-workers. The key research method was participant observation, supported with informal interviews, field jottings and fieldnotes. Additional data was provided from visiting several other auto salvage yards at the beginning of the study (p. 35).

Focusing “on everyday life at an auto salvage yard” the author tried to situate his findings “in the broader context of waste management” (p. 37) and gradually discovered themes and research problems to follow.

Discussion and questions

The four main empirical chapters constitute slightly related, rather autonomous stories (previously presented in the form of articles). Taken together, they create almost chronological narration presenting long term ethnographical work in the auto salvage yard. Nevertheless, even in the best work, some exclusions and omissions must exist. What I miss in this work?

1. (Not) using dramaturgical frame of Erving Goffman

Describing the spatial arrangement of the yard, the author refers to its parts being open to customers and people from outside and the other parts being hidden from the view of visitors, where “chaos rules” (p. 27). I think, the Goffmanian category of space could be of great benefit here – allowing the author to show how the dividing lines between what is formal and what is informal are shaped, as well as indicate what specific behaviors and practices help to maintain the spatial division of the stage and backstage.

2. Rituals concerning dirt

The author mentioned the rituals in connection with dirt (p. 89), but did not develop any deeper description of them. It would be interesting to know how the yard’s workers proceeded with dirt, and what kind of rituals were employed on the salvage yard?

3. More examples

The author writes about yard workers’ creativity and skills (p. 125) – for sure having in mind many real situations, when they expressed them. I missed examples of these and would like to read more about it.

4. The title of dissertation

The title of the dissertation would suggest more focus on rusting process, that is basically related with materiality and conditions of stored parts of cars in the auto salvage yards. However a reader will not find any mention of rusting process in the whole work with exception of the title. Author do not explain the reason of using this articulation in the heading.

I think, rusting process remains relevant condition of deposited metal parts of cars and should be elaborated or at least mentioned in the ethnography of totaled cars (see: *Rust: The Longest War* by Jonathan Waldman, 2016). Do salvage yard workers fight with rust?

5. Materiality in the study of wrecked cars

As “the world of auto salvage yards is about a strong interconnection between humans and things” (p. 39), I wonder how important the agency of non-human objects is in the work at salvage yards. What is the potential of material aspects of the research? Were material aspects of the daily routines highly relevant to the fieldwork? Were non-human material objects potentially fruitful sources of data in this particular research?

6. The masculine environment

The hidden world of auto salvage yard remains an entirely “masculine environment” – the researcher did not meet any females during the research (p. 102). While reading the work, I wondered whether a woman researcher undertaking a similar task would achieve similar results. Hence, my question about the researcher’s gender problem. Knowing the researched area, do you think a woman researcher would have any chance to conduct such a study? How did the researcher’s gender “work” in this particular setting of the “unapproachable male world” (p. 38)? What are the researcher’s thoughts on this issue?

Final evaluation

The dissertation of Pavel Mašek surely fills a gap in contemporary anthropological knowledge on the subject of auto salvage yards (not only in rural Bohemian settings or in Czech context). It is especially important, when official statistics and “numbers [...] say nothing about the real auto salvage yards’ entrepreneurial practices” (p. 21). The author successfully provided interesting conceptualizations of his findings, using the containers’ theory, conceptual frames of “quiet sustainability” or the idea of environmental responsiveness.

The researcher’s methodological self-awareness is noteworthy, as well as his proficiency in anthropological literature, which allowed him to interpret data, events, and facts encountered during fieldwork. Pavel Mašek also presents excellent knowledge of literature concerning garbology, waste management, scrap industry, totaled cars, and environmental studies. The author moves freely between theories, and draws inspiration from them. The field observations and analyses let him discuss with current ideas and works of other authors.

I very much appreciate the attitude presented by the author – being open to undertake “dirty work” (Hughes 1958) and situating himself in the lowest position in the hierarchy of work in

the yard – not only to achieve a better vantage point but also to better understand the world he had been studied.

The work submitted for evaluation is a valuable analysis that allows one to become aware of the material and discursive processes in the world of auto salvage yards in a specific political and cultural context of late capitalism.

The improving or supplementing suggestions of the reviewer do not diminish the value of the presented work but rather show its analytical potential. The author has provided an original work that meets all the criteria assumed in the proceedings for the doctoral degree and specified in the relevant documents. Pavel Mašek's dissertation is an original solution to a scientific problem. The doctoral student has extensive theoretical knowledge in the discipline of anthropology and has mastered the ability to conduct scientific work independently to a high degree. I am requesting that Pavel Mašek, M.A., be admitted to further stages of the doctoral proceedings.

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