

Anthropology

Waste, want and other urban woes

By Susanne Wedlich



Source: Danny Lehman / Corbis

Anthropologist Eveline Dürr studies the culture of the slums, life in the shadow of waste dumps – and how terms referring to dirt take on xenophobic connotations.

A pitiful shack made of cardboard and corrugated iron – that at least was all that Eveline Dürr could see. But the young woman who lived there was proud of the home that she had built for herself. “At first I could not grasp what there was to be proud of,” says Dürr, – and the neighborhood didn’t help. The shelter was located in a slum on the outskirts of the Mexican city of Mazatlán – at the foot of a huge pile of garbage.

Dürr, an anthropology professor at LMU Munich, points out that the term ‘slum’ always refers to the outsider’s view. “The inhabitants never call their quarter of the city a slum. Indeed, they very often use euphemistic, aspirational names for their districts.” What then is a slum? Actually, there is no generally accepted scholarly definition of the expression. But every student of the phenomenon would agree that almost all slums arise in the same way.

People leave rural areas and throng to the cities in search of a better life. Once there, however, many find neither a livelihood nor a place to live. But they are reluctant to return home, since life on the land offers them no economic prospect. Instead, they settle without legal title on a patch of land on the edge of the city and, at some point there are so many squatters that eviction is no longer a practical option. They build shelters for themselves,

usually from materials discarded by richer sections of the population, as in the case of the slum in Mazatlán.

They also create their own makeshift infrastructure, often simply taking what they can get, by illegally tapping into the electricity grid or municipal water supply, for example. In fact, most slums are not characterized by especially chaotic conditions. Hierarchies emerge, and those at the top make the important decisions – for instance, who can demand rent from other slum dwellers. Membership of an influential family, good contacts with the city’s administration, access to electronic devices are all factors that confer status in the slum, and status must be defended – if necessary by violent means.

Slum tourism – a new trend in the sightseeing business

Informal norms regulate life in the congested conditions that prevail in the slums and, quite often, women are subject to especially conservative rules of behavior. “One should not think of these systems as an organized substitute for state authority,” with clearly defined structures, says Dürr, who has experienced daily life in Mazatlán in the course of her research. “And anyway, Mexico as a whole is not what we would regard as a functioning democracy.” In particular

the burgeoning cities of the Global South are often ringed by slums. But even a slum with thousands of inhabitants will seldom be marked on a street-map. These areas are mazes of officially unnamed streets. Few of the residents are officially registered, and even fewer succeed in moving on to better things.

Meanwhile, about a billion people, a significant fraction of the world’s population, live out their shadowy existences on the edges of the great conurbations. It is therefore no wonder that slums have become an important field of research, which engages the attention of several disciplines. Eveline Dürr is interested in one specific trend, which incidentally gives slum dwellers an opportunity to emerge briefly from their habitual anonymity and reveal their individual personalities – slum tourism. Increasing numbers of tourists want to visit slums, and they can book trips to Brazilian favelas, South African townships or the Dharavi district of Mumbai – reputed to be the largest slum in Asia.

The waste-pickers in Mazatlán are also on sightseers’ lists. An American church, which is involved in missionary and social activities in the city, organizes free tours of the area. Whether motivated by humanitarian concerns or by the thrill of adventure, many senior citizens, mainly from the US and Canada, who spend the

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winter in Mazatlán or have become permanent residents, take up the offer. And so tourists emerge from their luxury enclaves with country club and private beach to visit the land-fill, a habitat that is almost as self-contained as the resorts they have left behind for a few hours.

Many slum-dwellers see it as an infringement of their privacy when tour guides want to show visitors what their homes look like inside. Some residents are pleased “that people from abroad show an interest in how they live,” says Dürr. “Others are ashamed and do not wish to be visited or to accept alms.” Thus this form of tourism involves finding a balance between exploitation and informed awareness of a segment of the population that is accustomed to being ignored. “There is already a tendency for slum dwellers to put on a show of their poverty for visitors, as if they wish to appear authentic so as not to disappoint the tourists’ expectations,” Dürr remarks critically.

Different definitions of what qualifies as “urban pollution”

Indeed, the favelas of Rio de Janeiro have now attained the status of an official tourist attraction, something that not all of the city’s citizens welcome. This is hardly surprising, as the better-off locals tend to regard the slums as scandalous eyesores.

In the book “Urban Pollution”, which she edited with Rivke Jaffe of Leiden University, Eveline Dürr considers the problem of what qualifies as dirt in an urban setting, and how the definitions affect social interactions. When we think of pollution, we do so primarily in material terms, as garbage, sewage, smog or other environmental nuisances. But refuse and waste can also be perceived

as sources of impurity. In Muslim countries, for example, responsibility for the disposal of waste is often delegated to non-Muslims, and in India the job is reserved for members of the Dalit or untouchable caste, those are at the bottom of the social heap. There are settings in which poverty itself can be regarded as a stigma. In some countries, including India, homeless people may be seized and forcibly ejected from a city simply because they are seen as a blot on the landscape.

Such stigmatization can provoke communal violence. In the early 1990s in Brazil, children who lived on the streets were sometimes murdered. The perpetrators were corrupt policemen hired to rid the cities of such eyesores by rich citizens. The most extreme expression of an obsession with purity is so-called ethnic cleansing, a term that clearly originated in this context of clean/unclean. In this case, profoundly misguided notions of cultural homogeneity are used to justify the exercise of murderous means in the pursuit of power. Anyone who is ruled to be an outsider is regarded as unclean.

This is a mechanism that also comes into play in much less extreme contexts than genocide. Very often, the animosity is directed at migrants or members of a different ethnic group. “They are then regarded as a kind of cultural stain,” says Dürr. “This ideological construct originates in the idea of a natural order of things in which each individual has her predetermined place.” Mass migrations, expulsions, forced resettlements generally exacerbate feelings of resentment, and intensify fears of alien influences. Incoming settlers and their way of life tend to be perceived as a threat, and are easily associated with concepts of defilement and as a danger to public health and their new surroundings.

An influx of immigrants can lead to communal dislocation even in progressive and apparently tolerant societies. New Zealand, for example, with its relatively well integrated population of white settlers and the indigenous Maori, is now faced with the need to assimilate a wave of Asian immigrants. One of the more absurd complaints leveled at the newcomers was that they littered the streets with leftovers. A group of Asian students replied to this by taking to the streets of Auckland to clean up the city’s litter, in a demonstration of practical goodwill that perhaps did more to disarm latent xenophobia than words alone ever could.

“I do a dirty job,
but it doesn’t dirty me.”

The waste-pickers at the dump in Mazatlán have also responded positively to their situation. They don’t just live with the refuse thrown out by the affluent, they make a living from it. They have become specialists in recycling, and sell everything that is of any value. They now see themselves as performing a vital service for the city. One slum-dweller puts it this way: “I do a dirty job, but it doesn’t dirty me.” In other words, this is a cleaner way to make a living than the obvious alternatives – theft and prostitution.

This brings us back to the question of the difference between clean and unclean. No clearcut definition is possible. Dürr cites the case of atomic waste. “We in the West often speak of ‘the disposal’ of atomic waste,” she says. “That sounds like a neat solution but, we all know that it does not dispose of the problem.”

Such cultural differences come home to her every time she visits the slum in Mazatlán. Although she now knows the area well, she always needs a few days to adapt. “It takes a while for me to forget



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the feeling that everything around and about me stinks.” But then, aversion to behavior that is “out of place” is not dependent on affluence or poverty. It is quite conceivable that the slum-dwellers of Mazatlán would be disgusted by the sight of West-erners dressed in casual summer outfits. “In Mexico, to be seen shirtless in public is considered as highly improper – unless one is at the beach,” says Dürr. “But what would really shock them is that many people here go about barefoot. All Mexicans regard that as reprehensible.”



Prof. Dr. Eveline Dürr was appointed Professor of Anthropology at LMU in 2008. Born in 1962, she earned her doctorate at the Freiburg University and completed her Habilitation there in the year 2000. Over the next four years she carried out long-term studies and field research in Mexico and in Albuquerque, New Mexico. From 2005 to 2008 she held the post of an Associate Professor at the Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand.

