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Review: Empire of Scrounge: Inside the Urban Underground of Dumpster Diving, Trash Picking, and Street Scavenging

By Jeff Ferrell

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Jeff Ferrell. *Empire of Scrounge: Inside the Urban Underground of Dumpster Diving, Trash Picking, and Street Scavenging*. New York University Press, 2006. 222 pp. ISBN 0-8147-2738-7 (pbk). US \$22.00.

Empire of Scrounge is an autobiographical narrative about urban waste, ecology and the excesses of capitalist modernity. Ferrell spends about eight months in Fort Worth, Texas, without a steady job (but his partner had one), building a home and a life through scrounging. He defines "empire of scrounge" as "a far-flung, mostly urban underground populated by ... illicit Dumpster divers, homeless trash pickers, independent scrap metal haulers, activist recyclers, alternative home builders, and outsider artists" (3). Exploring this empire Ferrell discovers and uncovers many (nasty) truths about American consumerism and urban lifestyles.

His most important discovery is that law and crime have shifted boundaries – where waste and scrounging have acquired, over the years different values as "criminal" (hence the phrase "criminal waste", though Ferrell does not mention this). Scrounging, Ferrell underscores, is located in an uncertain context, between economic necessity, cultural practice and petty criminality.

There exist various "theatres" of scrounging: the road to dumpsters, the curbside trash pile, and the dumpster. Many trash heaps, especially those at curbsides are what Ferrell terms "material postmortems", or life histories of relationships (20). This point is, in fact, the ur-narrative of the entire book: that trash is a culture's history.

Ferrell is frankly appalled at the excesses of material culture as embodied in the tons of usable items that are trashed. From kitchen "utilities" to ornamental icons, the dumpster and the curbside trashcan is, Ferrell discovers, a source of survival for his own lifestyle. Ferrell also discovers that "criminal" acts also leave behind their own detritus. Artists often find not just ideas and subjects, but also the very material resources for their art from these streets. Ferrell (who has studied urban graffiti) discovers books that document cultural history, that add to his own understandings of the country's wars, gender issues, childhood and sexuality.

Most importantly, the empire of scrounge is about change. People moving up

in life, between social levels and relationships often choose to abandon their past, which is, not infrequently, a collection of material objects. Ferrell is struck by this very concrete (or plastic, or fiber, or paper...) manifestation of social change. The objects themselves are "moments" in an ongoing process (97), where the solidity of the object is undermined or underscored by their status (their sign value). Objects acquire, lose and are modified in terms of their values. Ferrell discovers how meanings and values of objects are renegotiated. Art, homes, ornaments are often built out of scrounged objects, as Ferrell demonstrates (especially in his section titled "aesthetic salvage", 147-159).

Turning to modes of control periodically imposed on scrounging, Ferrell argues that campaigns to regulate or criminalize scrounging try to sanitize a process whose very viability resists in its ambiguity and uncertainty. Scrounging, Ferrell argues, has many open-ended possibilities (as he has demonstrated throughout the book). Scrounge culture, concludes Ferrell subverts numerous "dualistic categories": commodity versus trash, public versus private, possession versus dispossession (185). It is also a whole social dynamic that links homeless scroungers, junk artists, scarp haulers in a kind of underground economy. It generates what Ferrell aptly calls the "dynamics of recuperation and conversion" (188).

Ferrell's book, a deliberate and purposeful "meandering" through an alternative economy and culture is a fascinating exploration of the dark side of consumption. The detritus he explores – from private memories to political rhetoric to upper-class quirks – demonstrates how sentiments, ideologies and beliefs are all reduced to, or at least restricted to, material culture. Waste, he demonstrates, is an epiphenomenon that is rooted in a culture of hyper consumption. The mindless acquisition and abandonment of objects reflects not only social mobility, but also social indifference to issues of consumption, wastage, and environmental pollution. Scrounge, believes Ferrell, is a modest attempt at fighting this trend. The history of urban (and even semi-urban) America, *Empire of Scrounge* demonstrates, is the history of its scrap, junkyards and curbside trash. History, one might say, is junk.

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