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From “A farewell to landfill” to “A farewell to wastefulness” – Societal narratives, socio-materiality and organizations

Hervé Corvellec & Johan Hultman

The Department of Service Management
LUND UNIVERSITY, Campus Helsingborg
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Hervé Corvellec & Johan Hultman
* Department for Service Management
Campus Helsingborg, Lund University, Sweden
Author for correspondence: Herve.Corvellec@ism.lu.se

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Abstract
Organisational change depends on societal narratives, which are narratives about the character, history, or envisioned future of societies. Swedish waste governance is a case in point. Swedish waste governance is powered by two main narratives A farewell to landfill and A farewell to wastefulness. A farewell to landfill has been the dominant narrative for several decades, but A farewell to wastefulness gains momentum and a new narrative order is establishing itself. This new narrative order significantly redefines the socio-material status of waste and imposes major changes on waste management organisations. On the basis of the case of waste governance in Sweden, it is concluded that organisations should be aware that societal narrative affects the legitimacy and nature of their operations and therefore integrate a narrative watch in their strategic reflections.

Keywords
Narrative, Social change, Institutionalism, Waste management, Sweden
1. Introduction

The fact that organizing involves a considerable amount of storytelling has been widely acknowledged (Boje, 2008; Czarniawska, 1998; Gabriel, 2000). Less attention has been paid to the fact that societal stories condition organizing and organizational change. Societal stories tell about the character, history, or envisioned future of societies. They can be about national pride, a common ideal, or practical projects that a given society sets for itself. Societal stories are meso narratives in-between local narratives produced by individuals or organisations, and the global metanarratives of modernity (Lyotard, 1979) or post modernity (Bauman, 2000). Societal narratives emerge from the time and place of societies that they reflect and affect. How a society relates to its waste is an illustrative example of societal narrative.

The leading narrative of Swedish waste management has for several decades been *A farewell to landfill*. After the Second World War, the rise in consumption of paper, plastic and other disposables entailed a steady rise in volumes of waste sent to landfill. In the late nineteen sixties, this growth raised concerns related to environmental, health-related, social and aesthetical issues. Decision makers started to doubt that traditional landfills, basically holes in the ground, could accommodate a long term growth in waste volumes. Landfill of waste had become a problem and a vast program of incineration and recycling was put into operation to reduce the volume of waste sent to landfill. From nearly 100% in 1970, this volume has gone done to only 3%. “Sweden is today recycling 97% of its household waste” Swedish Waste management (Avfall Sverige, 2010) proudly claims. *A farewell to landfill* is paramount in a happy-end tale of sustainable material development. But the story does not stop there.

The socio-material status of waste – that is the way organisations and individuals engage with the materiality of waste in the course of daily operations and everyday life – has changed since the 1970’s when the volume of waste sent to landfill served to define the tenets of Sweden’s waste policy. A key reason of this socio-material change is that *A farewell to landfill* has been increasingly challenged by a new narrative, *A farewell to wastefulness*, to define Sweden’s waste policy. Whereas the plot of *A farewell to landfill* is to consider the disposal of waste as the problem to be solved, the plot of *A farewell to wastefulness* is to consider the generation of waste itself as the problem to be addressed. And this changes the situation considerably.
Lean production (Dahlgaard & Park-Dahlgaard, 2006), cradle-to-cradle economics (McDonough, 2009) or ecological modernisation (Fisher & Freudenburg, 2001; Warner, 2010) are examples of contemporary critiques of wasteful approaches towards production and consumption. This kind of critique is particularly vivid in the waste management community. Activists (Leonard, 2010), journalists (Rogers, 2005), social scientists (Hawkins, 2006), waste professionals (International Solid Waste Association (ISWA), 2009) and policy makers (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2005) concur that we need to reduce not only the volume of waste sent to landfill but, more fundamentally, the volume of waste that we produce.

A farewell to wastefulness is the upcoming narrative on waste. It shares A farewell to landfill’s critique of landfills as places of environmental hazards (e.g., leachlate or passive methane emissions) and, more generally, as spectacles of our irresponsible mode of living. But A farewell to wastefulness frames waste in terms that are broader than a mere end-of-pipe problem. For A farewell to wastefulness, one should either not use resources to produce such material in the first place, or recover all possible value from it by (1) redefining of the meaning of waste and (2) changing the trajectories of material flows through society. A farewell to wastefulness is a multi-entry narrative that connects to the social critique of overflow society, the economic project of using resources diligently, the technological promise of bringing solutions to problems, and ecological concerns about climate change and peak metals. By so doing, it emphasises the multidimensionality of our relationships to waste.

A societal story is challenging and replacing another societal story, and organisations concerned by these stories are faced with significant demands for change. New societal narratives challenge these organisations with new social demands, legal constraints, technological challenges and business opportunities. Our claim is that changes in societal narratives bring along demands for organizational change, and that scholars and practitioners need to understand the relationships between narrative and organisational change.

The article argues this claim by addressing how changes in the Swedish societal narratives on waste affect one of the leading Swedish municipal waste management companies. Section 2 recounts the tenets of Sweden’s Farewell to landfill. Section 3 explains why A farewell to wastefulness stands for a change in socio-materiality of waste. Section 4 describes how this change in societal narrative affects a specific Swedish municipal waste management company. Section 5 explains why societal
narratives impact on organisations and induce change, and the concluding remarks suggest that organisations would be well advised to organize societal narrative watches.

2. Reducing landfill

A recurrent concern in Sweden’s waste policy since the early 1970s has been to reduce the volume of waste going to landfills (Finnveden, Björklund, Carlsson Reich, Eriksson, & Sörbom, 2007; Hartlen, 1996; Rylander, 1985). Municipalities are the cornerstones of this policy. They have been given a statutory responsibility for the collection and transportation of household solid waste since 1972, and for the treatment of household solid waste and “household-like” solid waste – for example organic material from the public sector – since 1979.

Most municipalities decided to rely on incineration as their primary treatment method. Incineration is a controversial but efficient way to reduce the volume of waste to landfills. In Sweden, incineration became a way to recover energy from waste early on, as incineration plants were connected to extended municipal district heating systems for households, public offices and industries. Today, nearly half of the total amount of household waste is treated through incineration with energy recovery (Avfall Sverige, 2010).

In parallel with the development of incineration facilities, considerable effort has been made for the last twenty years to promote and develop recycling practices. In 1994, the Parliament introduced a scheme that imposed quantified targets of collection and disposal on producers and importers of consumer goods packages, vehicles, newsprint, rubber tires and electrical and electronic equipment. The European directive on landfill (European Council, 1999/31/EC) was incorporated in Swedish legislation in 2001. The Swedish Parliament introduced a tax on waste taken to landfill in 2000, banned the landfill of combustible material in 2002, and banned the landfill of organic waste in 2005.

Since 1994, the number of active landfills has diminished from 300 to 80; the environmental objective set that same year to halve the metric amount of waste going to landfill was achieved in 2003; from 2004 and 2008 the volume of household waste sent to landfill was cut by half yet again, from 380 000 tons to 140 000 tons; and no more than 3% of household solid waste goes to landfill today (Avfall Sverige, 2010). For the last forty years, Swedish waste management has embodied the successful societal narrative of *A farewell to landfill.*
3. Reducing wastefulness

A farewell to landfill is not the only active societal narrative on waste, though. With roots in early environmentalist critique of chemicals (Carson, 2002 [1962]) or growth (Meadows, 1972), but also in ecosophy (Næss, 1989) and ecological economics (Daly & Farley, 2004) – and reflecting lean production (Dahlgaard & Park-Dahlgaard, 2006), cradle-to-cradle economics (McDonough, 2009) and the theory of ecological modernisation (Fisher & Freudenburg, 2001; Warner, 2010) – another societal narrative of waste is re-appearing: the narrative of A farewell to wastefulness. According to this narrative, the problem with waste is not technologies of disposal but waste itself and practices of producing waste. The plot of this narrative is that modern societies should take farewell of wastefulness; waste governance should either prevent the production of waste or, when prevention is not possible, transform waste into something that can be re-injected in the economy.

This second governance alternative, considering waste a resource, is no new principle. Historical records show that there has always been people able to organise material transformations and circulations in order to retrieve value from what other people discard as worthless (O’Brien, 2008; Strasser, 1999). The economic model of contemporary waste management companies is the same as the economic model of old times’ rag pickers, third world scavengers or dumpster divers. It consists in taking in as much waste as possible, transform this waste into something valuable – in the etymological sense of something to which one can give value – and re-inject as much value as possible into the market economy (Corvellec, Bramryd, & Hultman). Exploiting the value in waste is also a way to minimise landfill that Swedish municipal waste management companies have a long experience of.

Recycling should become an alternative to the extraction of “virgin” resources (Monier, Escalon, Cassowitz, Massari, & Deprouw, 2010). Moreover, as suggested by banners on the international waste management company Remondis website such as “No Copper - No Cars” or “No Crude Oil - No Modern Conveniences” (Remondis, 2011), waste management is the mining industry of the future. If it is true that “the virgin stocks of several metals appear inadequate to sustain the modern ‘developed world’ quality of life for all Earth’s peoples under contemporary technology” (Gordon, Bertram, & Graedel, 2006, p.1214), extracting economic value from waste is likely to become critical to future wealth and welfare. The emerging industry of “urban mining” illustrates this: “You might not know it but there are veins of precious minerals that are richer than any
goldmine, running through our cities” (Urban Mining, 2011). Waste is increasingly featured as a present and future economic resource. Waste becomes the new “nature” waiting for exploitation. By starting the chain of material value creation in what has been rejected as worthless rather than in what has been highly valued as “virgin”, the traditional dichotomous and exploitive relationship between “society” and “nature” is turned inside-out (Hultman & Corvellec, In preparation).

Waste is also increasingly represented as an environmental resource. As the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency claims “The greatest benefit derived from better management of waste resources is in reducing greenhouse gas emissions”. It adds: “The greatest risk posed by waste management is the risk of dispersal of hazardous substances found in the waste or formed during its treatment” (2005, p.13). This puts the potential environmental value of waste ahead of its potential market value.

Efficient waste governance thus creates value at both ends of the extraction-production-consumption-disposal process. It means minimising the extraction of “virgin” material (including oil) while simultaneously avoiding negative environmental impacts from waste generation and management. Moreover, waste mobility is to follow the principle of proximity and “be recovered in one of the nearest appropriate installations, by means of the most appropriate methods and technologies, in order to ensure a high level of protection for the environment and public health” (European Commission, 2008/98/EC). The principle of proximity is to limit ecological footprints of waste generated by transports and minimize the value absorbed by externalities.

This brings us back to the first governance alternative of the A farewell to wastefulness narrative: waste prevention. Waste prevention rests on the idea that the best way of managing waste is to avoid producing it. Retrieving value from waste is good, but not producing waste is better. The crux of waste reduction is that “we cannot afford to be as inefficient in the future in how we use resources and create waste as we have been in the past” (Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu & World Economic Forum, 2009, p.12). The “new normal” is an economy where:

Through better design and life-cycle thinking, consumption and production ecosystems become closed loops, producing no outputs as waste through their life cycle. As such, the concept of waste disappears, as all by-products retain an intrinsic value to feed into other systems. (Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu & World Economic Forum, 2010, p.17, emphasis added).
The World Economic Forum goes as far as demanding that we should get rid of the concept of waste altogether.

In *A farewell to wastefulness* suggestions about reducing waste often come together with suggestions about considering waste as a resource to be exploited fully, albeit responsibly. For example, the Swedish Government’s interim target for waste declares that "[t]he total quantity of waste *should not increase*, and the maximum possible use should be made of the resource that waste represents, while at the same time minimising the impact on, and risk to, health and environment” (Swedish Environmental Protection Agency, 2005, p. 7, emphasis added). A double objective is set for Swedish waste governance, a sort of cap and trade system: limit the volume of waste and recover as much value as possible from the waste that is produced.

The European Union’s Waste Hierarchy Model (European Commission, 2008/98/EC) addresses this duality of waste governance policies aimed at saying farewell to wastefulness. The Waste Hierarchy Model decides waste governance in the countries of the European Union according to the so-called three-R concepts of Reduce, Reuse and Recycle. It orders waste management approaches according to a scale of preference from waste prevention (1), to product reuse (2), material recycling (3) and energy recovery (4) before the least preferred option of landfill (5) is even considered. The Waste Hierarchy Model positions waste prevention as the most preferred option, but it also ranks various ways of retrieving value form waste. The model unites the two governance alternatives of reducing waste and extracting value from it into a single progression and annihilates the fundamental divide between the two.

Reducing waste and extracting value from it represent different views of waste, in some ways in opposition to each other. Reduction implies that waste is a problem whereas value extraction regards it as a resource. Being a problem as well as a resource is contradictory. One could therefore ask: a problem for whom?; and a resource to whom? The answers might be: a problem for all, and a resource for those who solve the waste problem. Waste management companies underscore, however, that waste is a problem and a resource for all, including the environment, as illustrated by Remondis. The European Waste Hierarchy Model integrates in the most ecumenical way the *A farewell to landfill* narrative as it ranks landfills as the least preferable waste policy alternative, and the two governance alternatives of the *A farewell to wastefulness* narrative, waste reduction and waste as value.
The plot of *A farewell to wastefulness* integrates the plot of *A farewell to landfill*. But it also displaces the focus from disposal to waste and wasting. Combining a view of waste as a multidimensional resource that should be exploited with efficiency with a view of waste as a problem to be avoided, *A farewell to wastefulness* coalesces the contradictory views that waste is something that should not be and something that is welcome as a being. Logicians might react to such a contradiction; narratologists are familiar with inconsequence and know that it is an integrate part of many effective narratives. From having been something to get rid of and made to cognitively and geographically disappear, waste is increasingly framed as both a value reservoir that is worth competing for and something unwanted to be minimised. For waste management organisations, this involves major changes.

4. An illustration

SYSAV (*Sydskånes avfallsaktiebolag*, in translation: South Scania Waste Company, Ltd) is a case in point of how a company can be affected by changes in societal narratives. SYSAV is a municipal waste management company owned by a consortium of municipalities in Scania, the southernmost part of Sweden. The company has worked for decades according to the motto “[w]aste management that is sustainable in the long term, with the most extensive recovery of materials and energy possible and the least possible landfill” (SYSAV, n.d.). Through “a combination of methods” (a favourite expression of SYSAV’s managers) and a development rationale that has been “economic” rather than “ideological” (to quote one of the architects of this development), SYSAV has managed to bring landfill down to 4% of the waste that it processes. Incineration is the most important means in the mix of methods, and it represents 69% of the amount of processed waste. This allows SYSAV to produce 1,4 TWh district heating and 254 GWh of electricity in 2009. But SYSAV has also developed sophisticated managerial techniques to bring onto markets the 27% of material that it recovers from waste, for example strategic alliances, contracting and the creation of dedicated subsidiaries. Some of this material comes from the bottom ashes of

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1. The fieldwork for this case study has followed a classic design of qualitative studies. Data collection has started in 2009. It has consisted in meetings (ca 4), semi-structured interviews (ca 8), informal discussions, on-site observations, and document analyses. Interviews have been transcribed and processed together with other texts in a conventional manual manner.

the incineration process, and consists of metal scraps as small as 4 millimetres. Also to be noted is that SYSAV has managed to ensure full political acceptance for incineration among its local communities and their elected representatives.

SYSAV can pride itself of being one of the most effective waste-to-energy companies in the world. But it is a success within the narrative order of *A farewell to landfill*. As the *A farewell to wastefulness* narrative gains momentum, a new societal narrative order emerges that redefines what constitute stories of achievements (Corvellec, 1997). The narrative ground for SYSAV’s success is corroding.

Symptomatic of this corrosion are the growing difficulties that SYSAV experience to get hold of waste and the resulting risk that the company ends up underutilising its processing capacity. Historically, the company has not experienced supply problems. Its monopoly on household waste within the jurisdiction if its municipal owners and its strong market position on the industrial waste market, combined with a steady growth of waste in Sweden, have provided SYSAV with a safe and increasing supply of good quality waste. But the company is currently experiencing increasing problems to acquire enough waste. In 2008 SYSAV opened a new incineration plant with a capacity significantly above the amounts of waste processed at the time. The rationale for developing an overcapacity was an extrapolation 25 years ahead according to the historical correlation between growth in GNP and in waste volume. This investment decision also assumed that SYSAV would retain its monopolistic right to collect and process household waste within the jurisdiction of its owners in the future (SYSAV Styrelsen, 2010). These assumptions have proven to be uncertain.

Lately, SYSAV managers have observed that economic growth and the growth in volume of waste might have been decoupled on their usual markets. The reasons given for this decoupling are overall societal reductions in material use, and an increase in the scope and scale of recycling practices. To compensate for the reduction of available volumes of waste to feed its incineration plants, SYSAV now imports between 5% and 10% of its waste supply, for example from Norway. In addition to this, SYSAV managers have noted that the energy content of waste tends to decrease. They see this as an effect of the increased
care taken by their waste suppliers to redirect waste with high energy content toward waste management options other than incineration. To compensate, SYSAV needs to incinerate more tons of waste to deliver the same amount of energy to its customers.

This means that upward progressions in the waste hierarchy, either by producing less waste or by finding more valuable uses for their waste, have negative consequences for SYSAV. Instead, the organisation needs to increase its import of waste and volume of processed waste to meet its energy delivery commitments. As waste becomes scarcer and more valuable, SYSAV is faced with an increasing competition from other actors on the market and alternatives to waste treatment through incineration. As a case in point, organic waste can be incinerated but it can also be used to produce biofuels. However, from a discursive point of view organic treatment has the upper hand. Biofuel production from waste does not have the same environmentally problematic history as incineration does, and biofuel production comes with a message of retained individual mobility combined with freedom from fossil fuel dependence and a solution to the climate change problematic. As result, SYSAV’s commitment to incineration is no longer the clear competitive advantage that it has been.

Moreover, a current legal controversy threatens SYSAV’s business model (Corvellec et al., Submitted). Following a complaint from private waste management companies, the European Commission (Europeiska kommissionen, 2010) has criticised SYSAV for not respecting the European legislation on public tendering. The Commission requires that SYSAV should derive no more than a marginal share of its income from customers other than their municipal owners if it is to keep its monopolistic right to manage household solid waste within the geographical jurisdiction of its owners. This is a direct threat to the dynamic that SYSAV has developed across its public service mission, its processing activities and its marketing activities (Corvellec et al., Submitted). SYSAV has answered through the Swedish Government (Regeringskansliet - Utrikesdepartementet, 2010) that it plans to drastically decrease the proportion of its income generated by commercial activities. This is done by changing its accounting principles, by taking over the planning and billing of waste services towards households from their owning municipalities, and by preparing to take over the physical collection of waste from its owner municipalities that have so far managed
this activity themselves and not contracted it out.

It is unclear whether these measures are going to be enough to meet the Commission’s critique. Clear is that SYSAV is increasingly active on what should be called a waste market (Skottheim & Paz, 2004). In recent years, the Swedish Parliament has partly reversed its original position of relying on the administrative authority of municipalities and promoted several market-based versions of waste management. The municipal monopoly on the treatment of industrial waste was terminated in 2000 and the treatment of hazardous waste was deregulated and opened to private actors in 2007. A new legislative order of waste management has been established which redefines the conditions for municipal waste management company operations. The legal objections currently raised by the European Commission take this marketisation of waste management a step further as they curtail the possibilities for municipal waste management company to behave pro-actively on the waste market. The current legal attacks on municipally owned companies are indicative of when waste gains in value, private companies become more eager to trade in waste and limit the possibilities of others to do so. The marketisation of waste management is another consequence of the progressive replacement of *A farewell to landfill* with *A farewell to wastefulness* at the societal narrative of waste in Sweden.

The point is that current changes in household and corporate behaviour, processing techniques, legislation, and the global environmental discourse coincide in creating the risk for SYSAV to get stuck at the second least preferred step of the European Union’s Waste Hierarchy Model (European Commission, 2008/98/EC). Heavily committed to energy recovery by incineration, SYSAV is now making efforts to develop recycling, material recovery, composting and the pre-production of biofuels. But the company nevertheless remains a far cry from product reuse and waste prevention and its managers seem to have only vague ideas about SYSAV’s possibilities, as a waste management company, to adapt to the higher steps of the waste hierarchy. Major technological and cultural changes are needed for SYSAV to break its path dependence (Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010) on incineration.

The Waste Hierarchy Model is not yet legally binding. However, the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (*Naturvårdsverket*) has clearly stated that the hierarchy governs the articulation of a national waste strategy to be completed in 2013 (*Naturvårdsverket*, 2010). Unless SYSAV develops methods to drastically increase the share of waste that is reused, recovered (bottom ashes
not included), recycled and composted, the company runs the risk to be world champion in the second worst class of the waste hierarchy.

This analysis is not to be read as a critique of SYSAV’s waste management. It is an illustration of the claim that when societal narratives change, companies also have to change. The reason for this claim is developed in the next section.

5. Societal narrative and organisational change

A change in societal narrative involves a change in the institutional context of organisations (Czarniawska, 2008; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991) and thus a change in the conditions of organising, management and entrepreneurship. But the association between narrative and organisational change can also be understood through the concept of socio-materiality. Socio-materiality refers to the fact that it is for all intents and purposes impossible to accomplish anything without stuff. Everyday life as well as the operations of organisations all rely on how the material aspects of life are arranged (Hägerstrand, 1989). From this perspective, social relations and materiality are not possible to meaningfully separate. Symbolic economies such as fashion are no less material than mining, forestry or agriculture. Production, consumption and waste generation are only different phases in the same process. Principles of material circulation decide how cities are built, the existence of markets, the environmental implications of production and consumption, the design of kitchens, the logistics of everyday life, and so on. The social and the material are inseparable. In theoretical terms, this can be expressed as how human and material agencies are reciprocally and temporally constituted. Narratives are fundamental for exactly how such constitutions are shaped. Stories of appropriate ways to consume and throw things away instruct households and organisations in how to engage with material objects. So in order to develop our argument further, we conclude that social narratives of waste management power the socio-materiality of waste.

The A farewell to wastefulness narrative demands an increased intensity in the social engagement with materials. Not only households must engage with the transformation and circulation of waste through changed behaviour, multi-compartment bins and the logistics of recycling centres. The narrative forces all organizations involved in waste governance to reflect over the contradictory dynamics of waste. Waste organisations need to develop new technical and social competencies, invent new business models and offer waste management services that correspond to the
narrative that waste is no longer a problem but a resource. The *A farewell to wastefulness* narrative will act very differently upon waste management stakeholders depending on their historical, ideological, institutional and geographical contexts.

If *A farewell to wastefulness* transforms the business conditions of waste management companies, it is because the narrative introduces a new socio-materiality of waste. There is no material ontology of waste. As Kennedy (2007) underscores: no object is in essence waste. There is no waste per se. Waste is the result of social processes of de-valuation and corresponding organisations of material circulation. It is a contextualised social construction when someone considers something as having negative or no value. Waste is as relative an analytical category as positive and negative are relative qualifiers. The materiality of waste is social in the sense that it is on the basis of a socially situated judgement that the label “waste” is attributed to a material or an assemblage of materials. The history of shit (Laporte, 2000) or today’s global trade of waste (Lepawsky & McNabb, 2010) illustrate that the waste of some is the plenty of others, even if it is a stinky and dangerous plenty. Likewise, landfill mining (van der Zee, Achterkamp, & de Visser, 2004) illustrates that yesterday’s waste may become tomorrow’s resource.

Waste is a material whose definition is not physical but cultural. Waste is a failure to preserve value (Kennedy, 2007). It is a kind of individual and collective misachievement, which is why it is a powerful symbolic resource open for political use. The ability to separate people and the environment from waste is a source of political prestige illustrated by the competition between Spanish politicians and American charity associations over who can best rescue the children scavengers at the ominous open-sky landfill of La Chureca in Managua, Nicaragua (Zapata, 2010), the opprobrium brought on the region of Naples for its inability to manage waste (Nicola, 2009), or policies aimed at keeping illegal immigrants – discursively defined as human waste – at bay (Bauman, 2006). The recycling of rare minerals can even be framed as a part of national security interests (Kooroshy, Korteweg, & de Ridder, 2010). Governing waste is traditionally a public responsibility (Laporte, 2000). For a public authority, failing to shoulder this responsibility entails a loss in political legitimacy. As an accursed share (Bataille, 1980 [1949]), waste is also a sign that one can afford, and thus an aspect of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 2005 [1899]). Waste keeps circulating back and forth between the physical and the social, dissolving boundaries and discouraging any possibility to separate the two (Hultman & Corvellec, In preparation).
More generally, societal narratives shape the socio-materiality of products and services that define organisational activities. To name but a few examples: slavery – this shameful blind spot of management studies (Cooke, 2003) – has been made and un-made by societal stories of race, economy and religion; the diffusion of electric appliances and the corresponding industrializations of housework (Cowan, 1983) have been made possible by converging societal narratives on women, homeness, and industrial efficiency; the exploitation of natural resources has been made possible by narratives of nature as static and separated from society (Braun, 2002); or the success of Facebook (www.facebook.com) has been prepared by the societal praise of connectivity in late modern capitalism (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999). This list could be made longer. There is no difference between products and services on this account. As one of us shows elsewhere (Hultman & Ek, In press), service economies are just as material as industrial economies in the sense that they rest and depend upon material inputs, artefacts, environmental impact and not the least the materiality of bodies.

Narratives come with a moral. It is even one of their constitutive features (Czarniawska, 2004). This moral points to what is right and what is wrong. Correspondingly, societal narratives communicate which socio-materiality is legitimate and desirable and which is illegitimate and undesirable – to some extent. As the case of Swedish waste governance illustrate (or as the American Civil War illustrates in the case of slavery), there are more than one societal narrative at the time, even in the most controlled Brave New World (Huxley, 1984 [1932]). Societal narratives come with a plural “s”, and struggles for dominance. Moreover, societal narratives are always incomplete. When A farewell to wastefulness claims that both the environment and the economy should shape the governance of waste, it does not provide guidelines about how to solve possible conflicts between the two. Finally, societal narratives are not necessarily coherent. A farewell to wastefulness is contradictory when it understands waste both as something to be minimized and something whose use should be maximized.

Societal narratives impact on social life. People, in private or organisational contexts, need to learn how to navigate the multiplicity, incompleteness and contradictions of societal narratives. They also need to learn how to handle the different morals that these narrative deliver. SYSAV has learned how to turn waste into energy and knows how to recycle material from waste; but how much shall it be involved in waste reduction ten years from now if the Fukushima catastrophe puts a stop on the revival of nuclear energy? How are airlines to relate both to the narratives of
the desirability of mobility for economic, social and cultural development and to the narrative of	heir significant responsibility for global warming? It is not simply a matter of weeding the right
from the wrong so as to pick up the good narrative. It is a matter of understanding tomorrow’s
societal narrative order. We provide an answer about how this can be done in our concluding
remarks.

6. Concluding remarks: Developing a narrative watch

Waste narratives illustrate that new societal narratives order new activities, or new ways to or-
ganise old activities. The reason for this is that societal narratives define the socio-materialities
upon which public service, commercial and non-profit organisations articulate their activities.
Organisations produce and distribute stuff (Leonard, 2010). The stories that decide the status of
this stuff define the conditions for organisations to exist.
The range of possible organisational actions depends on societal narratives because societal nar-
ratives decide the rationale of justification (Boltanski & Thévenot, 1991) for these actions. So-
cietal narratives frame what people in a society understand as acceptable, valuable and desirable.
Keeping track of changes in societal narratives is therefore as important for understanding social
change as keeping track of legal, scientific and technological changes.

It is for good reasons that companies fear counter-narratives questioning their activities. McDon-
alds’ s fight against Super Size Me (Morgan, 2004) or the malicious use of procedural means by
the fruit giant Dole to stop the distribution of the reportage Bananas (Gertten, 2009) that docu-
mented the appalling working condition in Central-American fruit plantations illustrate this. No
company wants to see the emergence of societal narratives that run against its business model.
Companies (but for that matter even states, unions, or charities) know that some narratives sup-
port and others threaten their licence to operate (Corvellec, 2007; Crowson, 2009; Dean, 2001;
Elkington, 1998).

Societal narratives exist on a narrative market (Corvellec, 2001). Most societal narratives generate
counter-narratives for political, economic, aesthetic or other reasons. And narratives are dynamic,
adapt to situations and evolve over space and time. Private, public and non-profit organisations
might therefore be well advised to put up a narrative watch to see where the societal narrative
order is heading and make this watch a part of their strategy formulation – even if knowing what
determines the success of a societal narrative is another story.

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