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Book review

# Waste Siege: The Life of Infrastructure in Palestine, by Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins

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**Abstract** This review examines Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins's *Waste Siege: The Life of Infrastructure in Palestine*, an ethnography of waste and infrastructure in the occupied West Bank. The book shows that waste is not only something left over, it is a part of the infrastructure through which power, responsibility, sovereignty, and everyday life is shaped. Instead of separating military violence from environmental problems, Stamatopoulou-Robbins follows sewage, landfills, *rabish* (second-hand goods) market[1], bread, broken goods, and wastewater projects to show how Palestinians manage everyday life and infrastructure in the absence of a sovereign Palestinian state and under the hostile presence of Israeli military power. This review summarizes the book's main argument and then raises one critical question: does the focus on shared or unclear responsibility risk weakening attention to Israel's responsibility for occupation, or does it show how colonial power works through infrastructure and the environment? I argue that the book is strongest when this unclear responsibility is read as an effect of colonial rule. The review concludes by explaining why *Waste Siege* remains important today for the study of Palestine, settler colonialism, infrastructure, and environmental justice.

**Résumé** Cette recension examine « Waste Siege: The Life of Infrastructure in Palestine » de Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins, une ethnographie des déchets et des infrastructures en Cisjordanie occupée. Le livre montre que les déchets ne sont pas seulement des choses qui restent après usage. Ils font aussi partie des infrastructures par lesquelles le pouvoir, la responsabilité, la souveraineté et la vie éthique quotidienne prennent forme. Plutôt que de séparer la violence militaire des problèmes environnementaux, Stamatopoulou-Robbins suit les eaux usées, les décharges, les marchés du *rabish* (objets d'occasion), le pain, les objets cassés et les projets d'assainissement. À travers ces exemples, elle montre comment les Palestiniens vivent sans État propre et sous la présence hostile du pouvoir militaire israélien. Cette recension présente d'abord l'argument principal du livre, puis soulève une question critique : est-ce que l'accent mis sur une responsabilité partagée ou incertaine risque d'affaiblir l'attention portée à la responsabilité israélienne dans l'occupation, ou montre-t-il plutôt comment le pouvoir colonial agit à travers les infrastructures et l'environnement ? Je soutiens que le livre est plus convaincant lorsque cette responsabilité incertaine est comprise comme un effet de la domination coloniale. La recension conclut en montrant pourquoi « Waste Siege » demeure important aujourd'hui pour les études sur la Palestine, le colonialisme de peuplement, les infrastructures et la justice environnementale.

**Keywords** Waste siege; infrastructure; settler colonialism; environmental justice; sovereignty; Palestine; discard/waste studies

[1] *Rabish* is the local term used for these second-hand Israeli goods, derived from the English word "rubbish."

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Although I lived in Lebanon near the Palestinian border for decades, I had not thought about occupation through the phenomenon that Sophia Stamatopoulou-Robbins calls "waste siege". The term does not suggest that military, economic, and social forms of siege are less important; the strength of Stamatopoulou-Robbins' argument is that it makes another part of occupation visible, namely, the everyday presence of trash, sewage, broken goods, toxic smoke, damaged roads, and unreliable infrastructures in Palestine. The book asks readers to consider occupation not only through soldiers, checkpoints, and land confiscation, but also through the materials and smells that shape daily life.

Stamatopoulou-Robbins states the book's object very clearly. *Waste Siege* is about "waste and waste management in the absence of an indigenous state (Palestine) but in the hostile military presence of another state (Israel)" (Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019, 3). She guides the reader away from seeing Palestinian waste problems as merely technical problems or as failures of Palestinian behavior or governance. Waste is part of a fragmented political order. The Israeli state controls land, movement, borders, and many infrastructure projects on Palestinian territory, and at the same time, the Palestinian Authority (PA), municipalities, donors, NGOs, and residents must manage the operations of necessary infrastructure on land over which they do not have full sovereignty. The book's analysis of "waste siege" contributes to discard studies, infrastructure studies, environmental justice, and the anthropology of the state. It shows that waste is not simply what comes after politics - it is one of the ways politics is lived.

The concept of "waste siege" also reworks Mary Douglas's influential definition of dirt as "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966, 44). In the occupied West Bank, Stamatopoulou-Robbins argues, waste has become "matter with no place to go" (Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019, x). This is one of the book's main theoretical contributions: waste is not only rejected matter, but also a material environment that affects people, institutions, and ethical relations. In the author's words: "Waste acts upon the social" (Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019, xi). Siege, then, is not only military pressure from outside. It is also being surrounded from within by waste that circulates, accumulates, burns, leaks, and returns in a place where disposal is deeply restricted.

In an interview with Melanie Ford Lemus, Stamatopoulou-Robbins explains that her interest in waste grew from an earlier question about infrastructure and the 2006 Palestinian elections. Some Western commentators had argued that Palestinians supported Hamas mainly for practical reasons, such as frustration with the PA's perceived failure to provide basic services. Stamatopoulou-Robbins finds this explanation too simple, but it leads her to a larger question: what does it mean to expect waste management and other state-like services in a place where statehood itself remains suspended? (Ford Lemus and Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2022).

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The chapters of *Waste Siege* develop this argument through detailed ethnographic examples: landfills in Chapter 1 (Compression); used colonial goods and the *rabish* market in Chapter 2 (Inundated); toxic accumulation and the phantom state in Chapter 3 (Accumulation); unwanted bread in Chapter 4 (Gifted); and sewage politics in Chapter 5 (Leakage). Taken together, these chapters present an analysis of infrastructure that reveals the difficult relationship between the absence of a Palestinian state and the presence of state-like forms of governance. In the West Bank landfill projects, Palestinian waste professionals try to build institutions that look like the institutions of a future state. Their work has national aspirations, but it takes place in a political geography that prevents long-term solutions. I read this as a form of structured failure. This is not Stamatopoulou-Robbins' own term, rather it is my way of describing a pattern that her ethnography shows: temporary solutions are forced to last because the political conditions for permanent solutions are withheld.

This is especially clear in the book's discussion of landfills. Some of the Palestinian waste professionals Stamatopoulou-Robbins follows, including Hamdi, Mo'tasem, Rana, and Yaman, see landfills as nation-building projects. For them, landfills can help produce the appearance and practice of statehood. Yet landfills also turn agricultural land into underground storage for trash. They promise order, but they also create new forms of dispossession. The result is not a simple story in which the PA fails or donors succeed, it is a more complex story about Palestinian institutions trying to build state-like infrastructure while the political basis for a state remains suspended.

Chapter 3 develops this problem through the idea of the "phantom state." Stamatopoulou-Robbins uses this term for an experience in which waste siege and Palestinian Authority governance become superimposed, producing a form of governance marked by both abandonment and state-like intervention (Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019, 211). In Shuqba[2] residents experience neglect and control at the same time. They may lack reliable waste collection and protection from dumping while simultaneously living under Israeli military control. Stamatopoulou-Robbins describes this condition through the concepts of hypo- and hyper-governance: too little care alongside intense forms of control. Chapter 5 extends these questions of authority and responsibility through the politics of sewage and the idea of a "shared environment." Across these cases, governance appears as an uneven field of authority, surveillance, refusal, and abandonment, while waste becomes one of the material forms through which Palestinians encounter this unevenness most directly.

The book also pays close attention to goods, homes, and ethical life. Chapter 2 examines Jenin's *rabish* market, a second-hand market where used Israeli goods are sold and shows how Palestinian consumers deal with disappointment in cheap new goods and a desire for more durable used objects. The market is not only a place for discarded things;

[2] Shuqba is a Palestinian village northwest of Ramallah, near the Green Line, that Stamatopoulou-Robbins examines as a site where municipal and industrial waste, burned medical X-ray films, animal remains, and untreated sewage accumulate (Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019, 85–124).

it is a place where Israeli castoffs become valuable again. It also gives Palestinians partial access to durability, domestic renewal, and pleasure in a context where many new commodities break quickly.

The chapter on bread is one of the book's clearest examples of how waste becomes an ethical dilemma. Stamatopoulou-Robbins follows the practice of placing unwanted bread on fences, poles, dumpster handles, and other raised surfaces so others may take it. Bread is not thrown on the ground because it retains sacred, social, and moral value even after people no longer want to eat it. These gestures are not described as heroic resistance. They are ordinary acts of care and obligation. More broadly, Stamatopoulou-Robbins uses improvisation as an analytical term for practices that mitigate the effects of waste siege without escaping the conditions that produce it. Palestinians creatively use what is already available, even when these practices remain fragile, incomplete, or morally difficult.

Together, the chapters show that waste siege does not replace the politics of occupation. It changes how occupation can be understood. Waste is easy to sense but difficult to explain politically. Stamatopoulou-Robbins writes that waste siege is "there for all to see, smell, and feel," while its relation to ethics and politics remains "obscure and mystifying" (Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019, 9). Responsibility for it is often spread across many different actors.

To conclude her argument, Stamatopoulou-Robbins uses the shrinking Dead Sea as a powerful example of the link between waste and ecological decline in global dynamics. She notes that it receives about eight million gallons of sewage each day and that, as the sea shrinks, the concentration of waste within it increases (Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019, 212). The shrinking Dead Sea is an example not only of the encroachment of waste, but also a metaphor for a dying planet: as water disappears and waste becomes more concentrated, the Dead Sea reflects a wider global condition in which waste exceeds the infrastructures meant to contain it. This is where the book makes one of its strongest points, but it is also where it raises its most important question, that of responsibility. Does focusing on environmental and infrastructural violence risk diffusing Israel's responsibility for occupation? Or does it show the concrete ways colonial power works through infrastructure and the environment? Stamatopoulou-Robbins recognizes this tension. She argues that the relationship between waste siege and military siege ("in this case settler colonial occupation") can itself become obscured (Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019, 9) and that waste siege specifically "comes without consensus about responsibility" (Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019, 9). These passages are powerful because they show that waste creates an additional burden. Palestinians must live not only with smell, toxicity, illness, and anxiety, but also with unclear and contested chains of accountability.

At the same time, this point needs to be handled carefully. If read too quickly, it may leave the impression that environmental injustice stems from a lack of action rather than a condition produced within a deeply unequal political structure. Israel occupies a structurally different position from the PA, municipalities, donors, and residents because

it exercises military and territorial power over many of the conditions within which Palestinian infrastructure operates. The task is therefore not to place these actors on the same political level. The value of *Waste Siege* is that it shows how responsibility can appear dispersed while power remains deeply unequal. Infrastructural ambiguity should be read as an effect of colonial rule, not as evidence that political responsibility is equally distributed. Stamatopoulou-Robbins's ethnography is strongest when unclear responsibility is understood as a result of domination. The PA may build landfills, municipalities may collect garbage, donors may fund projects, consumers may discard goods, and residents may burn trash, but these actions take place within a political field shaped by Israeli control over land, movement, permits, borders, and infrastructure. I therefore read the book as an anthropology of how colonial power becomes ordinary, environmental, and infrastructural.

Having considered the question of responsibility, a further question concerns differences among Palestinians themselves. Stamatopoulou-Robbins's ethnography includes waste professionals, municipal workers, *rabish* traders—dealers in second-hand Israeli goods—consumers, village council members, and families who encounter waste siege from different social and institutional positions. These differences are particularly visible across the book's ethnographic sites. Waste professionals, for example, engage with landfills as technical and national projects, while residents of places such as Shuqba experience waste more directly through accumulation, burning, sewage, and inadequate services. In Jenin, *rabish* traders and consumers encounter waste through the circulation and reuse of discarded Israeli goods, while the discussion of unwanted bread shows how waste also enters domestic and ethical relations. These examples suggest that waste siege is not experienced uniformly. Geography, social and institutional position, and access to infrastructure shape how Palestinians encounter and respond to waste. At the same time, the book offers less sustained comparison of how class, gender, refugee status, and unequal access to resources may further differentiate these experiences. Exploring these dimensions more explicitly could extend the book's central insight that waste is not an abstract or uniform condition, but a lived relation to space, authority, morality, and inequality.

Read today, *Waste Siege* also raises a difficult question about how Palestinian suffering becomes legible to international audiences. On the one hand, information about waste, sewage, landfills, public health, and damaged infrastructure is often more accessible because it appears in reports, photographs, municipal records, environmental studies, and visible everyday practices. On the other hand, these material traces may seem easier to document and understand than the lives of the people affected by them. This reflects a broader problem in how colonial violence is perceived from a distance: when suffering is filtered through political distance, racialized assumptions, or unconscious indifference, it can seem less immediate than the material damage surrounding it. In this sense, waste can become an entry point through which some readers grasp realities they might otherwise overlook. This does not make waste separate from Palestinian life or from colonialism. Rather, Stamatopoulou-Robbins shows that waste is one of the

material forms through which colonial power enters everyday life, shaping bodies, homes, infrastructures, and ethical relations.

But what happens when Palestinians are understood by outside audiences primarily through material conditions and everyday behaviours that occupation has produced? Framed this way, the problem is not that waste distracts from Palestinian life, but that the material traces of waste may become one of the routes through which distant audiences learn to recognize the political structures shaping that life.

Recent events in Gaza have given *Waste Siege* (Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2019) new relevance. The infrastructures whose slow degradation under occupation Stamatopoulou-Robbins analyzed, including water, sewage, housing, agriculture, and waste management, have been systematically destroyed since October 2023 (Amnesty International 2024, 12, 16, 23). For Palestinians in Gaza, this has meant the loss not only of homes but of the basic systems that make daily life possible: clean drinking water, sanitation, safe disposal of waste, and the land and resources needed to grow food (Amnesty International 2024, 22–23; Albanese 2025, 18). What the book described as a condition of chronic infrastructural strain has become one of widespread infrastructural collapse. Amnesty International identifies the destruction of water, sanitation, sewage, and waste systems as part of the life-destroying conditions imposed on Palestinians and concludes that Israel has committed and is committing genocide in Gaza; a 2025 report by the UN Special Rapporteur likewise describes the genocide as ongoing (Amnesty International 2024, 35, 129; Albanese 2025, 2–3). Read in this context, Stamatopoulou-Robbins's analysis helps explain how infrastructural and environmental destruction can function not only as a consequence of military assault but also as a central means through which the genocide is organized and experienced. *Waste Siege* can therefore be read alongside scholarship on nature, infrastructure, and environmental warfare in Palestine, including Irus Braverman's *Settling Nature*, Shourideh Molavi's *Environmental Warfare in Gaza*, Omar Jabary Salamanca's work on infrastructure and settler-colonial development, and Abeer al-Butmeh, Zayneb al-Shalalfeh, Mahmoud Zwahre, and Eurig Scandrett's work on the environment as a site of struggle against settler colonialism (Braverman 2023; Molavi 2024; Salamanca 2016; Al-Butmeh et al. 2019). *Waste Siege* makes a distinctive contribution to an already established and expanding body of scholarship by showing how waste, toxicity, and infrastructure mediate colonial power and everyday life in Palestine.

Stamatopoulou-Robbins's achievement is that she turns the concept of waste into a powerful analytical lens. Through this lens, occupation appears not only as military domination, but also as an infrastructural, ecological, sensory, and ethical condition. *Waste Siege* shows that what seems ordinary or marginal may be central to understanding how power is organized and experienced. It also raises a broader question about how Palestinians are represented to non-Palestinian audiences: when waste, sewage, damaged infrastructure, and environmental degradation become the most visible signs of Palestinian life, there is a risk that Palestinians themselves are judged through conditions that colonial power has helped produce, constrain, or

intensify. The strength of the book is that it does not detach these material conditions from the political structures that shape them but instead shows how environmental and infrastructural realities are part of the lived experience of occupation. It remains essential reading for scholars of Palestine, West Asia, settler colonialism, infrastructure, discard studies, environmental justice, and everyday life under occupation.

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