

# "...my illness...and necessity drove me to come here..." Don Tomás, a garbage worker

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### Abstract:

According to Marx, labor power, like all commodities, must be exercised through work. The consumption of the labor power that happens in the immediate production process carries with it diverse consequences in detriment of workers' health. Workers, in general, do not have the possibility to feel and take care of these consequences. In this essay we recover some of the experiences of Don Tomás, a garbage worker who, despite attempts to prevent the diseases he suffers from "sticking" to him, finds it impossible to do the kind of work he wants to do. **Key words:** Work, garbage, illness, destiny, character, experience, vivencia, oral history.

### Introduction

It is midday and another day is starting for Don Tomás. When he arrives at the station, he gets changed for work: he puts on overalls, a mask, a pair of white gloves and a cap as his only protective gear. These serve to withstand the dust, the incessant noise and, above all, the carbon monoxide emitted by the garbage collection vehicles and the large trailers that arrive at the Tlalpan garbage transfer station.

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Don Tomás makes a living shoveling garbage. He picks up dead animals, debris, cemetery waste (coffins, candelabras), hospital waste and animal feces from veterinarians. He also has to keep a close eye on the license plates, vehicle numbers, and above all, the load size of the garbage collection vehicles.

The experiences we live through define our life trajectory, influencing our perceptions of reality, as well as our material and spiritual development. In this essay, we recover certain moments from the life trajectory of a garbage worker, Don Tomás, to recreate some of his experiences. We are particularly interested in the meanings that he elaborates in relation to his body, especially to his health situation. Different authors, including Bauman, argue that "the journey of life", "the path of human life" is the result of the following contradiction: destiny-character (Bauman: 2021). What we intend to highlight in this essay is that Don Tomás' health condition, which is an expression of his work trajectory, is what somehow prevents him from working in what satisfies him - that is, from doing things according to his character. In his words: "... my foot disease and the need were what drove me to come here...".

At first, a simple overview of the current situation of what we could call the garbage problem in Mexico City is presented. Next, the theoretical ideas that support this essay are briefly presented. The accounts of experiences that were obtained from Don Tomás, through oral history, appear in a third section. Finally, some final reflections and considerations are shared.

The laws of capitalist accumulation, that is, of the development of capitalism, demand the continuous growth of production and, therefore, of

consumption. This tendency of "pathological consumption" (Fromm: 1996) to reduce human beings into 'Homo consumens' is, according to several postmodern authors, one of the outstanding characteristics of contemporary capitalism. Galeano's critical stance admits that "In the soulless world that we are forced to accept as the only possible world, instead of peoples there are markets; instead of citizens, consumers; in place of nations, companies; instead of cities, agglomerations; and instead of human relations, mercantile competitions". (Galeano, 140: 1997)

For our present purposes, we need only point out a few of the available statistics. In Mexico City, garbage production has shown a sustained historical upward trend, closely related to its urbanization process. Thus, while in 2000 there were 11,850 tons per day, in 2015 a total of 12,843 tons were registered. The municipalities with the highest percentage of solid waste were: Gustavo A. Madero with 1,756; Iztapalapa 2,274; Cuauhtémoc 1,332 and Tlalpan with 879 tons per day. Those with the lowest percentages were: Milpa Alta, 122; Cuajimalpa, 189; La Magdalena Contreras, 265 and Tláhuac, 362 tons.

In 2019, around 13,149 tons of organic and inorganic waste, as well as Biohazardous Waste were generated; of which 7,990 (61%) were transferred to the sanitary landfills located in the State of Mexico and Morelos.

Today, there are three waste-sorting plants in operation: Santa Catarina, San Juan de Aragón, which is divided into two sections, and Azcapotzalco. Here, the pepenadores and/or sorters do their work.

It should come as no surprise that 40 years ago, garbage was deposited in the ten open dumps that existed in the then Federal District: Santa Catarina, San Lorenzo Tezonco, Tlalpan, Cuauhtépec, Milpa Alta, Santa Fe, Tláhuac, Venustiano Carranza, Gustavo A. Madero and Santa Cruz Meyehualco. Part of the waste collected in the conurban municipalities was also concentrated there (Castillo, 2005: 4).

The workday at the Tlalpan transfer station begins at six in the morning. At approximately eleven o'clock, the workload intensifies: the garbage collection trucks, which

have just begun to arrive, start unloading. The noise becomes deafening. You must raise your voice - almost shout - so that the person next to you can hear you. The dust permeates, penetrates through the nose and throat, causing various discomforts.

## **II. "... the more attention you give to the disease, the more it sticks to you..."**

Luc Boltanski, in his suggestive book *The Social Uses of the Body*, has emphasized the impact of class on what he calls medical capacity. This means that the aptitude to understand, identify and express bodily messages varies according to the ability to verbalize them and increases as we move from the popular classes to the upper classes. This occurs because morbid sensations do not have the extraordinary privilege, often attributed to them by common sense, of expressing themselves without language. The perception and identification of morbid sensations, "an act of deciphering which is ignored as such," therefore requires specific or general, implicit or conscious learning. R. Melzack showed that pain does not constitute an automatic response to morbid stimuli, but that its perception is determined by the subject's expectations, by his past experiences and, more deeply, by all his cultural learning. (Boltanski, 1975: 37).

The worker's relationship to their body is instrumental. For, as Boltanski says, the valuation of physical activity and physical strength, correlated with an instrumental bodily relationship, makes the disease feel at first like a hindrance to physical activity, which causes a feeling of "weakness".

Continuing along this line of reflection, the worker, who becomes ill because of the concrete modalities of the various work processes through which their working life passes, experiences illness as a normal circumstance of his class situation, internalizing it as a just and non-modifiable state. He lives it, he narrates it, he integrates it into his life, he sees it as an obstacle, a serious impediment to his realization as a labor force commodity. To that extent, in his struggle to

try to modify his destiny - his class -, or if one prefers, to choose among the few alternatives it offers him.

Illness, which historically has been the subject of very diverse interpretations and meanings, is, in the case of workers, an experience that "... the more attention you give to the disease... the more it sticks to you..."

### III. Don Tomás' experiences<sup>1</sup>

Don Tomás was born 69 years ago, on March 7th, 1953. He is a native of Santa Ursula Xitla, Mexico City, a neighborhood better known as "Los hornos", for its manufacture of partition walls. Coincidentally, this was an activity Tomás carried out since he was a child: at the age of six he began to climb three to four partition walls to get to the oven. Don Tomás had five children with his wife, one girl and four boys; the youngest, named Uriel, is his pride, since he is studying Pedagogy, and is about to finish his degree.

In 2018, Don Tomás suffered a stroke that kept him in a very delicate health situation. He survived with the help of his family and returned to work at the Tlalpan transfer station. However, in September of last year, he presented fever and convulsions; he was admitted to a hospital due to complications from the diabetes he has been suffering from for some time.

#### Initial experiences, first jobs...

When my boss took us to work to make partition walls, he would arrive early to beat the mud and put straw on it. There is a pine tree that has sticks, like little popovers, that was added or cow manure to tie the partition wall and prevent it from cracking. The partitions were made of mud, it was prepared with the cow's dung, it was soaked and we began to crumble the lumps with a hoe, we would load the mud and fill the gaveras, we would finish and we would have lunch, I was about nine or ten years old at that time.

When I was thirteen or fourteen years old I started working in a factory where they made

rebar in Mexico City. The company, I remember it was called Los Palacios and it was located in Santa Ursula Xitla, it no longer exists, now they made condominiums. I worked there for about six months, I worked seasonally, from one moment to the next they would call us to straighten the rods that came out of the oven.

Then I entered the department, I was about sixteen years old, but since my boss was a drunk, I had to get up at five or five-thirty in the morning because I worked near the Toreo. Then my boss would arrive drunk and instead of letting me sleep, he would start talking. I lasted six months and then they switched me to potholing and paving streets, I got drunk in that job, well, at lunchtime we would go to the pulquería and ask for a liter, but not to be left behind and with or without disgust, you go inside. Working in the government I lasted three years.

When I was about 35 years old I started working as a bricklayer, because previously I worked in the government of Nezahualcóyotl. That job was with a decentralized company called CEAS. I was dedicated to unclogging drains and unblocking the sewers and pipes by hand, because later they put us on a drainage truck and it was quieter.

**"... masonry is what I like most..."**

For about two years I worked as an assistant while I was learning the trade, and as I said, I got the jobs on my own, but what hurt me was that I didn't like to carry helpers. As I have a rather difficult character I preferred to work alone. Maybe because of the excess of work I hurt my feet and that's when I found this job later and I preferred to get in here, just like in the government.

Masonry is what I like the most, because there you can get more money, but then the work fails and if you don't know how to save, you go around borrowing money to support the house and that's the job I liked the most, but it's a pity I couldn't continue working, otherwise I would be a bricklayer right now.<sup>2</sup>

**"... the more attention you give to the disease, the more it sticks to you..."**

The doctor who treats me at the clinic was the one who diagnosed me and I took it as a normal dizziness, because I think that if you pay more attention to the disease, the more it sticks to you and my blood sugar has gone up for a long time, my blood pressure is about a month and a

<sup>1</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction, the testimonies have been obtained using oral history. Some outstanding authors in this field are: De Garay (1997), Camarena (2007) and Aceves (1993).

<sup>2</sup> Interview "Masonry is the job I've liked the most", Cortés, 2009.

half old, and my blood sugar is checked every time I go to the clinic, sometimes it is high and sometimes it is low, but it is a.... I feel it is suggestiveness, you go to the clinic and if you don't go there sick, you leave sick, that's why I feel it is suggestiveness.

I did not feel upset because I know that I am not diabetic, although the doctors tell me that I am diabetic, I know that I am not, I feel good, once the doctor was going to give me medicine to control my diabetes and she asked me if I wanted medicine and I told her that I did not want medicine to control it and until now thank God I have not taken any pills for my diabetes.

I had a pain, it started in my forehead and went down to my eye, up to half of my face and that made me desperate to the point that I wanted to get under a car, that pain made me cry. They never knew how to tell me what it was, I don't know how many people I went around seeing, I even went around seeing yerberas, yerberos, those who do "limpias" and they never took that away from me.

[When I worked at CEAS] I used to grab all the rotten mud and filth, then I started to get pimples on my hands and on my body, I got welts, I blamed it on the fact that we grabbed all the filth there. And they gave us equipment, didn't they? But the gloves got wet, but instead of doing us any good they bothered us, and that was when we were unclogging the pipes by hand, because later they put us on a drainage truck, and it was calmer. But I tell you, they gave us gloves, but the gloves ran out, and then they gave us gloves again, but the gloves ran out and [with] our hands we had to maneuver a one-inch hose [that] would wear out and the strands of wire would come out, so that hurt our hands, but what you learn is to get used to it too, the skin becomes tough and everything, and to know the tricks of the trade too, right?, so as not to hurt yourself.

The studies I have had done at the clinic, what they have told me is that it is uric acid, that nothing can be done, that it is just a painkiller. The diseases, now of the throat, probably because of the dust here, but I use mouth covers and I have been using them for about a month and fifteen days, but it goes away and then it comes back, I get hoarse again, let's say it goes away for about three or four days and then I get hoarse again, that is what happens with hoarseness.

The dust, even if you use a dust mask, finds a way to get into your mouth as well as your nose and that's why it hurts me, it closes my throat and my nose gets clogged too, right? When you blow your nose, the dirt comes out mixed with the mucus and the smells. When they throw solvents or thinner, it hurts us too. Well, men are more resistant than women and we endure more, some of us, because some of us are delicate, right? And in

fact I feel that the smell of solvents does not harm me, let's say it, smelling it, not on purpose, right?<sup>3</sup>

## Conclusion

What we have presented so far can be summarized as follows. To have the capacity to become aware of his suffering<sup>4</sup>; even more, to go in search of its causes and, of course, to try to overcome them, is for the human being, collectively and individually, something unique.

Don Tomás feels, he is able to listen to his body and to his morbid sensations, but he does not want to "pay attention" to them... let them "stick" to him. He is right. His sufferings are what prevent him from taking advantage of the little that destiny offers him, working in construction, which is the activity that satisfies him: "... it is a job that I like very much and if I could, I would be there... masonry is the job that I have liked the most...". In these circumstances, we should not try to avoid suffering, provided we can recognize its causes, and, above all, modify the historical circumstances that originate it... destiny.

A few more words. In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx warns that: "... labor power is only realized by exercising itself and is only exercised by working." (Marx, 124: 2006) We know that, by exercising, by working, the worker compromises his health. The instrumental attitude that he establishes with his body, forces him to not listen to himself, to not be fully attentive to the morbid expressions of his being. The experience of Don Tomás undoubtedly illustrates such a situation. But there is something else. It turns out that, as Canguilhem states when reflecting on Leriche's conceptions of health and disease, we individuals experience with delay the feeling of our internal disorders: we are people who may not feel sick, although we are sick: "... we are paying for the prodigality with which our organism was built, since it has too much of all its tissues..." (Canguilhem, 64: 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Interview "My feet are the ones that hurt me the most", Cortés, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> On the subject of the experience of suffering, in addition to the works already cited by Fromm and Canguilhem, we recommend the book by Bourdieu and collaborators *The Misery of the World* (1999).

Perhaps, this last consideration helps to explain why amongst workers, illnesses seem to present themselves unexpectedly and severely. Both their historically-determined material life situation and their physiology and biology contribute to a certain unconsciousness of the subject with respect to their body.

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