

Ontology of a Dirtbag

Min Straussman

February 2022

Paris

For weeks, if not months now, I've been turning the phrase "dirtbag"—and its more recent use in the phrase "dirtbag left"—over in my mind. What does it really *mean*? Am I a dirtbag myself? How do you know if you're a dirtbag? And, if you are, what does this description imply?

To me, the word *dirtbag* first conjures up a literal sack of earth, the kind you can plunge your hand into, letting the bits of matter run through your fingers with delight. The dirt itself is messy, uneven, but rich and textured. The smell when it is wet gives me small shivers of joy. In my mind's eye, a dirtbag is a measure of burlap enveloping the fundamental material from which gardens grow. This association is no doubt a result of my love for planting things in the dirt, whether potting soil or red clay I have wrenched apart, feeling the roughness of it under my fingernails. One of my earliest memories is carefully burying an acorn in the backyard soil. I was overjoyed when it sprouted, small green shoots reaching towards the sky. I was devastated when my father carelessly crushed this fragile creature under his heel. Perhaps this was an early lesson about leftist politics, or maybe he just didn't want another oak tree taking up space.

The earliest example of the term "dirt-bag" (two words, hyphenated) I can find in print dates to June 8, 1839 in a periodical entitled *Wilson's Historical, Traditionary, and Imaginative Tales of the Borders, and of Scotland*.¹ On this day, in number 240 of this venerable journal, ran a tongue-in-cheek but nonetheless lengthy article entitled "The Natural History of Idiots." This context does seem rather plausible for understanding the origins of the dirtbag—the journal appears to be a kind of 19th-century *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*. After breaking down "The Blethering Idiot," "The Blazing Idiot," and so on, we arrive at "The Pedantic Idiot." Naturally, this starts with a commentary on the "Oxford bred—pure Oxford" example of the pedantic idiot, but then moves on to others, and here is where we find our first dirtbag, held by a chimney sweep.

There are even pedantic chimney-sweeps—men in sooty garb, who brandish the brush and display the dirt-bag with an air of importance, and whose loud and penetrating "sweep" has a peculiar force with it.

Here we have *dirt-bag* not as a sack of earth but as a sort of trash bag, for holding rubbish. But already we see the outlines of an association being formed between the bag itself and the kind of person who holds it. They are someone slightly ridiculous, but passionate, filthy and slightly naïve and misguided, but somehow endearing nonetheless. They are working-class, they do the filthy but necessary work others overlook, and they do it with a slightly ironic self-seriousness. I must say, I think I am a little bit in love with these pedantic chimney-sweeps; they sound delightful.

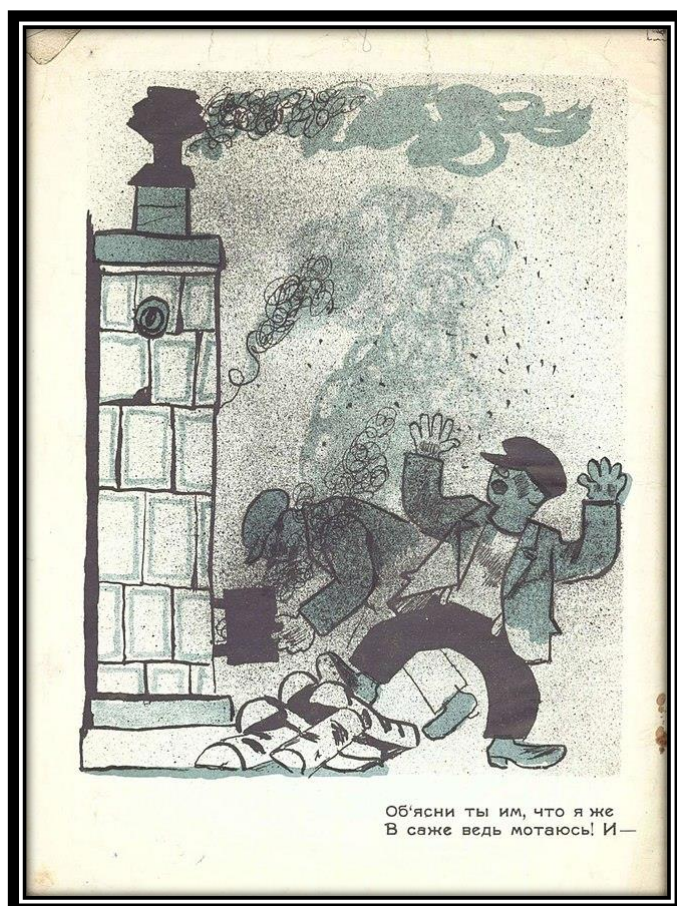


Image from *In Defense of Chimney Sweep*, 1926
Source: Wikimedia Commons

¹ As an aside, the *Oxford English Dictionary* seems intent on distancing itself from the British origins of the term *dirtbag*, as they give the earliest citation of it in 1897 and label it "American slang." Typical.

How does dirt bag get personified? In other words, how do we go from it being a word for a trash bag to a figurative description of a person who shares qualities with sack of rubbish? This transformation, as near as I can tell, begins in the American military. According to *A Dictionary of Army and Navy Slang* (1941), “dirt bag”

meant “a soldier on garbage detail.” If anything, then, my ability to take my beer cans out the recycling in a semi-timely manner rather than letting them accumulate like moss on all of the available counterspace in my apartment is a testament to my dirtbaggery.

By the late 1960s, dirt bag had become American college slang for “an obnoxious person.”² Military slang often got absorbed into campus slang in this time period, likely as a result of veterans going to college on the Vietnam Era GI Bill. Is this elision from “someone who carries trash” to “someone who is obnoxious” a mark of a pervasive anti-war sentiment at the universities? Is it a commentary on someone who carries trash being *like* the trash itself? I leave it to you to decide. One thing that is clear to me, however, is that the masculine quality of this term once ported over to a more general, non-military usage was left intact. A dirt bag is a man, and a particularly annoying kind of man, at that.

And so, over the passing of the years, the two-word stylization of *dirt bag* turns into *dirtbag* and enters into wider usage, beyond the military and the campus and into popular culture. A dirtbag is masculine, trashy, obnoxious, working-class, inherently difficult to tolerate. A dirtbag is criminal, part of the underclass, overlooked unless being put in his place.



Rob Arnold of Chimaira, Berlin, 2004
Source: Lowdown, Wikimedia Commons

This brings us to the year 2000 and the American rock band Wheatus’s hit debut album *Teenage Dirtbag*. In much the same way other derogatory terms have been reappropriated by the marginalized groups they designate (like “queer,” for example), the song “Teenage Dirtbag” ushered in a new era of the dirtbag. The song, if you somehow managed to miss out on its heyday, tells the story of a metalhead with a crush on a cute girl at school, Noelle, who he thinks is far too good for him. Vocalist and guitarist Brendan B. Brown croons nasally in the chorus: “I’m just a teenage dirtbag, baby.” The twist comes at the end when Noelle (in fact Brown singing in an impressive falsetto) says to our protagonist, “I’ve got two tickets to Iron Maiden, baby. Come with me Friday, don’t say maybe. I’m just teenage dirtbag, baby, like you.” (OOooOoo)

We have our first female dirtbag. Is this parity? Something approaching it? Either way, we now have dirtbag as a symbol of solidarity, a way of recognizing another member of whatever fragments of the counterculture there are left. It is a song explicitly designed to rehabilitate the figure of the dirtbag, to turn them into someone who is perhaps a bit uncouth, sure, but fundamentally decent. Not a murderer or a Satan worshipper, just a nerdy kid with a fondness for trashy metal music and long hair. Brown, in an interview with *Tone Deaf* in 2012, explains:

It came from the summer of 1984 on Long Island, when I was 10 years old. That summer in the woods behind my house, there was a Satanic, drug-induced ritual teen homicide that went down; and the kid who did it was called Ricky Kasso, and he was arrested wearing an AC/DC T-shirt. That made all the papers, and the television, obviously; and here I was, 10 years old, walking around with a case full of AC/DC and Iron Maiden and Metallica—and all the parents and the teachers and the cops thought I was some kind of Satan worshipper. So that’s the backdrop for that song.

² From the *College Undergraduate Slang Study, 1967-8*, cited in *Green’s Dictionary of Slang*.

We finally have the stage set for the “dirtbag left” to emerge. The dirtbag left is conceptualized as inherently countercultural, a little rough around the edges and irreverent, but fundamentally decent, with a patina of the working-class—it’s an outsider leftist politics, be it “progressive,” Communist, socialist. And we can’t talk about the dirtbag left without talking about the podcast *Chapo Trap House*.³ I’ve not listened to much of *Chapo* myself (is that a prerequisite for being a part of the dirtbag left, whatever that means?). Amber A’Lee Frost, a host of the show, is said to have coined the term in 2016.⁴ Writing against the relatively staid language employed by the leftist publication *Jacobin*, Frost argues in [the essay](#) “The Necessity of Political Vulgarity” published in *Current Affairs* that vulgarity is essential to revolution—“One lesson of the French Revolution, then, is that rudeness can be extremely politically useful.”

Why the term *dirtbag* to describe this kind of “vulgar” politics? Perhaps because it takes all of the negative traits ascribed to the dirtbag in popular culture—someone obnoxious, unkempt, marginalized—and turns them into strengths. It is a messy, populist, politics of common solidarity. (We may note here the dual use of *vulgar* to mean both “offensive” and “common.”) It is also, I reckon, not enough—but it might be fertile ground for something better, something that might resemble a more complete politics.

As I have sketched out here, the *dirtbag* is a marginal but loveable figure, sitting on the edge of the gymnasium at prom, smoking too much weed, prone to pedantic rants about the ills of capitalism and the ruling class whilst waving around soot-covered hands. To stretch all the way back to the beginning of this analysis, a *dirtbag* is also a container that holds the bits of rubbish and ground we can use to plant something that, if tended with care, might be able to grow—a politics of revolution that might firmly root out of common cause and a love for the discarded things of this world. It is materialist, scrappy, but also spiritual, imbued with a compassion for those things overlooked, charged with a hope—not a despondency—for the future.

After all, one does not plant a garden if there is not some expectation of seeing things bloom. We might even call this fertile ground a dirtbag *culture*, in both the sense of tilling the earth and a social site of change. This culture may yield only little for now, it may not yet be enough to sustain a whole community, but could, one day.

A few weeks ago, I took two springs of rosemary that were past their prime and soaked them in water. When small roots emerged, I got out my dirt bag, filled up two small pots, and planted them in the soil. This week, in the weird light of a hesitant February spring, my rosemary gave off new shoots, awkwardly reaching toward the sun. A bit unstable, sure, but growing nonetheless. A symbol of a kind of politics as sure as my dad crushing my acorn sprout so many years ago. So, in this small sense, I suppose you could say I am something of a dirtbag myself.



Photo by Author, Paris, February 2022; Needlepoint by E. Baum from detail of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Bosch (1490-1510)

³ Where is Virgil Texas?

⁴ “What Will Become of the Dirtbag Left?” by Jia Tolentino, *The New Yorker*, November 18, 2016.