



Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash

Susan Strasser , Alice Austen (Photographer) , Michelle McMillian (Designed by)

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An unprecedented look at that most commonplace act of everyday life-throwing things out-and how it has transformed American society.

Susan Strasser's pathbreaking histories of housework and the rise of the mass market have become classics in the literature of consumer culture. Here she turns to an essential but neglected part of that culture-the trash it produces-and finds in it an unexpected wealth of meaning.

Before the twentieth century, streets and bodies stank, but trash was nearly nonexistent. With goods and money scarce, almost everything was reused. Strasser paints a vivid picture of an America where scavenger pigs roamed the streets, swill children collected kitchen garbage, and itinerant peddlers traded manufactured goods for rags and bones. Over the last hundred years, however, Americans have become hooked on convenience, disposability, fashion, and constant technological change-the rise of mass consumption has led to waste on a previously unimaginable scale.

Lively and colorful, Waste and Want recaptures a hidden part of our social history, vividly illustrating that what counts as trash depends on who's counting, and that what we throw away defines us as much as what we keep.

Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash Details

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From Reader Review Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash for online ebook

Christine Kenney says

Put into perspective how relatively new consumer culture is and some of the surprising factors which drove it. Edifying read for materialists, minimalists, zero wasters, and pretty much anyone participating in a market economy.

David Bjelland says

The thing about reading books that are exhaustively researched is that they're often exhausting to read, too. Waste and Want isn't exactly the environmental polemic I was hoping for ("The Way We Live Now" takes up all of three pages), but it satisfies in a history-wonk kind of way. For example, did you know during the height of the WWII campaign to encourage grassroots citizen recycling efforts, "Detroit nightclub patrons paid one old pot each to see the famous stripper Gypsy Rose Lee clank around in (and finally out of) a bizarre costume of aluminum kitchenware"? The ~40 page chapter on door-to-door rag recyclers of the 19th century or the section on the founding and early marketing of Kotex inspire awe at the human capacity for investigation, but like the rest of the book, they lean on primary sources more than critique, which gives the whole thing the feel more of an academic text than a popular nonfiction book. Still, for anyone who wants to ground their hopes and dreams for the future of waste management in a solid knowledge of where we've been and how we got here, definitely an enlightening book.

Jodi says

It took me FOREVER to finish this book. It was soooooo dull in parts but I persevered just because there were sections I found fascinating. It was just way too long and read like someone's dissertation. The pages and pages on the collection and disposal of rags was enough to make me toss the book aside. But I did enjoy learning more about the development of things like feminine products and the consumer culture. Two and half stars.

Talia says

Terrific book, very well-written and well-researched. I loved this book's historical take on trash--focusing not on actual disposal practices (what "Gone Tomorrow" tried but failed to do), but instead on how we define trash, and how that definition is shaped by the times and the resources/technologies available to us.

From the intro chapter: "Everything that comes into the end-of-millennium home--every toaster, pair of trousers, and ounce of soda pop, and every box and bag and bottles they arrive in--eventually requires a decision: keep it or toss it. We use it up, we save it to be used later, we give it away, or at some point we define it as rubbish, to be taken back out, removed beyond the borders of the household. As everyday life

and ordinary housework have changed over time, so has this process of defining what is rubbish, as well as the rubbish itself, the contents of the trash..."

Particularly interesting to me was an early section of the book "Any Rags, Any Bones" on peddlers in the late 1800s who used to both sell goods and buy items that poor families had saved or stored at their houses--hides of dead animals, rags, bones, and later metal and rubber. Because the peddlers traveled with carts, they could haul away stuff as well as they could bring new goods to the countryside. This two-way exchange (where a family comes to assign a value to their scraps instead of just reusing all of their own materials) was an early kind of "recycling", and the exposure to new goods that these cashless transactions with peddlers created is something that Dr. Strasser sees as a critical step in a developing consumer economy.

Loved also learning more about the historical context of the birth of the Salvation Army and its thrift stores, as well as the birth of the modern sanitary napkin industry (Kotex, developed as it was, to do something with a surplus of cellucotton that had been used for bandages during World War 1). Previously women used to pin homemade pads made from cloth in their rag bags, and wash and reuse them many times.

From p. 170: "The success of the sanitary napkin is better understood, however, as a demonstration of the principle that products depend on cultural context for success, let alone triumph. The successful introduction of the most obviously desirable new product rests on groundwork laid by other products and cultural practices. New needs emerge where none existed before, and time-honored habits change. It is true that women bought sanitary napkins, not modernity. But the product exemplified, and was made possible by, modern attitudes and practices. Its success relied on a general acceptance of relatively new ideas and practices relating to cleanliness and convenience, which supported the notion that throwing things away not only was all right but could make a positive contribution to the quality of life..."

Strasser liberally quotes from advertising literature and lots of women's home manuals and guides across the ages. It's fabulous stuff...I wish I could take one of her classes at the University of Delaware (<http://www.udel.edu/History/bio/stras...>).

Kateryna Martynenko says

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Lisa says

I love this book. Thought provoking look at the anthropology of waste. My grandparents have had the same television for over 20 years; is my 4 year-old laptop really that ancient?

Rebecca Watts says

Fascinating but got a bit difficult to finish. Perhaps it was all the talk of war propaganda that gave everyone on the home front a job to do towards the war effort during WWII.

David Bates says

Waste and Want by Susan Strasser is about a nexus which unites a broader story of economic transformation - Strasser's subject is trash. Defining trash conceptually as something which is out of place and unusable to us Strasser uses it as the lynchpin of an examination of the journey of American society from largely self-sufficient colonial agriculture to modern consumer culture. The transition away from a self-sufficient attitude toward goods, in which much of the stock of the household was personally made, carefully repaired, and reused somehow if irreparable, matched the development of the economy.

Expanding wage labor opportunities meant both the loss of the skills to make and repair and the opportunity to buy. During the 19th century labor was cheap and materials expensive, so it was profitable for manufacturers to solicit households for their scrap materials. Often all these trends came together in the form of a peddler who would call on a house and trade with the wife, taking her rags and other household excess and selling goods in return, with some cash changing hands to cover any imbalance. Expanding charitable giving proved a durable way of legitimizing the waste which came from consuming. Old clothing could be given to the poor or to servants personally by the paternalistic well to do of the early Republic. Used clothes markets also helped to cope with the excess, absorbing clothing which was unwanted and selling it cheaply south to slave masters who were unwilling to divert the labor necessary for the making of clothes by hand. In the expanding cities of the late 19th century the most impoverished staffed their own reclamation efforts – junk piles filled with the rags, tin, bones and broken goods collected by hand and sold to factories.

By the early 20th century however the cost of material inputs was sinking as resources extraction became more mechanized and efficient. Manufacturing offered increasing varieties of sophisticated products to consumers and advertising began to emphasize the cheapness and convenience of disposable toiletries and other household goods. Disposable plates, napkins, cups and towels offered the kind of access to labor savings which would previously only hiring a servant could accomplish. Consumption became its own means of efficiency rather than being regarded as inherently inefficient. The vision of a domestic life divorced from some of the backbreaking chores of domestic labor connected to social aspiration – this was the kind of life which women of higher status were supposed to lead.

The recurrence toward reusing resources during the scarcity conditions that brought about the scrap drives of World War II only illustrated the diminished societal understanding of utilizing waste. Many drives foundered on the hostility of voters to junk dealers, resentful and suspicious of those who dealt in waste. The drives organized and carried out by so many grassroots organizations did not want to see their charity work turned to profit for speculators holding out materials for the highest price. Yet the volunteers themselves did not have the expertise or desire to break down the items they collected into a usable form. Baby strollers, wagons and other items were not acceptable in an assembled state as inputs for manufacturers, yet many scrap drivers resisted sending their collected materials anywhere else and their efforts became counterproductive due to their ignorance of the details of recycling and their disdain for those who did know. Recycling became more prevalent with the environmental movement of the 1960s. Indeed, the “how-to lore of the counterculture contained instructions for making things at home . . . and for rescuing industrially produced wastes: cable spools became coffee tables, and bottles could be sawed in half to make drinking glasses.” Nevertheless, as Strasser points out, future prospects for some kind of sustainable system are dim. “Powerful institutions play for high stakes in such debates. Garage sales flourish, but everybody has more stuff; bigger houses, mini-storage, and overflowing trash cans go together.”

Ariane says

professor strasser sure knows her way around original source materials. But a litany of quotes from Women's Housekeeping through the ages does not satisfying reading make.

Jeramey says

A different take on the many books about garbage I've now read. This one follows the origins of garbage and its many different uses.

Jeff says

Many useful topics, but some rehash of a few done elsewhere, and some missing.

Jen says

This book was definitely a catalyst for wanting to live a "less waste" lifestyle. I don't go to the extreme that some do, but honestly I found it fascinating. I could see it "boring" some people. I wouldn't expect any of my family members to pick it up haha, but if the subject interests you the social history of trash is so interesting to look at!!

Rena Sherwood says

This review originally appeared on Celsias.com in 2008:

"Give me your tired, your poor ...Your wretched refuse of your teeming shore..."

- From the base of the Statue of Liberty

Susan Strasser's 1999 "Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash" could have been titled America & Trash: A Love Story. The book focuses on America's relationship to trash - sometimes with love and sometimes with abuse. There are some comparisons made to Europe's relationship with rubbish, but mainly the focus is on post-Columbian America. Although once considered something to be cherished by all classes, trash eventually became equated with the poor.

The title is adapted from a 1903 Salvation Army report to rouse the troops, "We confidently believe and are seeking to demonstrate that the want of our cities can be met from its waste!" We're left wondering if the waste means the city's trash or the city's poor.

Highlights

Strasser did exhaustive research for this book, with a whopping 43 pages of endnotes from newspapers, political tracts, diaries, magazines and novels of the time. She's found some really interesting information from the dustbin of American history, including:

The word recycling originated from the oil industry in the 1920's. It referred to petroleum that needed to go through the refining process again.

Harriet Beecher Stowe of Uncle Tom's Cabin fame also co-wrote a book with her sister Catharine about "domestic science" called The American Woman's Home .

Wastepaper didn't become a problem in America until 1885. Until then, no one needed to throw it out.

Around the Civil War and well into the 1900's, giving your old clothes to the poor was frowned upon. It was a social disaster for a poor person to be seen walking around in your old clothes that your friends could recognize. You were to make new clothing specifically to give away to charity.

Lessons For Today's Environmentalists

Strasser doesn't romanticize the past. Although trash picking was a legal way for the poor to make a living (until it was outlawed, that is), the poor still had to live with the trash they picked, sorted, mended and sold. We also see that sorting trash and recycling (in the modern sense of the word) is not a new concept.

Perhaps some of the means of trash disposal and recycling could be used again in the future America as she tries to once again patch up the relationship with trash. Maybe in the future we will see:

Sacred pigs. These would be modern versions of urban swill pigs, which eat all of the food waste we toss out. The poor can hunt and eat the pigs (unless we do something about making the distribution of wealth more even, but is that really going to happen?)

To counteract the lack of space for cemeteries, bones of the dead could be ground up to use as fertilizer

Rags once again could be used for paper making and perhaps a source of income for charities, the needy and local entrepreneurs keeping up the rag peddler tradition.

Civilizations come and go. Their monuments, art and traditions disappear, but their trash lives on forever for archaeologists to find. Our trash might wind up being the eulogy of the human race. Let's make it a good one.

Alex Lee says

Strasser's modest book is an examination into the short history of trash... which is also a history of how the image of household status became, through post-industrial capitalism, attainable for the average American family... and how that image in its purity, shed its excess into garbage bins, trash cans, landfills, and the ocean.

Strasser examines how we go to where we are with our attitudes of what is disposable, what is usable, and what is wholly taken for granted, mostly examining from the mid 1800s our attitudes towards what we consider today to be trash.

What may be surprising to many, such as I was, that as of the start of the 20th century the cycle of trash was completely different (mainly there being a cycle). One richer family's disposal was in fact "up for grabs" by

an entire industry which relied on wasting as little as possible. While her detailed descriptions and references as to how people recycled, reused parts, and the importance of odds and ends (such as strings, rags, metals, and foodstuffs) is interesting I found it most compelling to see how the development of late industrial capitalism here in the United States also meant the splitting of consumer and producer ends of the cycle.

In other words, as finished material became more abundantly available, so recycling, and the industry of recycling began to disappear. This industry was previously supported by the poor and the very poor, picking through richer people's junk, selling these choice parts to junk men, who then introduced the materials back into industry by sorting and shipping back to factories. This grid of consumers feeling material back into producers did not stop even up until World War 2, as it was so prevalent.

You see the ramping up of production starting around the boom of the 1920s, when new things became more desirable as status symbols. Previously to that, things were made by engineers and mechanics, with very little attention to design and color. When the '20s hit and department stores needed to sell sell sell to survive, they pressured design into products. With this, planned obsolescence became the trend as obsolescence of style or function became inherent within the system of production. In fact, much of what was produced after the Great Depression was to replace what was already functional!

While much of whether planned obsolescence was desirable or not was debated for some time. From the side of business, waste wasn't seen as throwing away functional things... waste was seen as not buying the newest thing and allowing industry to progress!

How progress can be done through style obsolescence, isn't something that is discussed in this book, Strasser is more interested in presenting us the history, without judgement.

Today we do get a recognition that the abundance and conveyance of a throwaway society isn't necessarily a good thing. There is a funny (and sad) exchange between the mayor of New York trying to justify discarding NYC's waste in the state of Virginia and the governor of Virginia. The seeds of our recycling program come from observations of one alarmed citizen writing books in the 50s... and while recycling today is more of a moral duty than one in which we expect to get paid (as the past individuals who did recycle then), today we pay the price for our laziness and our pursuit of the image of what a perfect household should look like... the history of waste is somewhat less a history of capitalism's development as it is a history of how the image of status created the anti-septic, spotless kitchen (home) with its perfectly clean and refined interiors all made from the latest, most stylistic fashions.

I can't recommend this book as a great page turner, or a mystery novel (as we do know where we are today) but this book is definitely an interesting page turner, one which will open your eyes to seeing the very things that surround us daily -- our stuff, our junk -- and allow us a foundation to understand that life doesn't have to revolve around disposable anythings.

Stephen says

Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash
© 2000 Susan Strasser
368 pages

Consider your trash can. In all likelihood, you cannot imagine not using it. What else would you do all with

the trash generated in the course of day to day living? And yet trash cans haven't always been a fixture in our homes; until the 19th century, people invariably found uses for whatever extraneous materials they produced, so much so that waste was an anomaly. But now, disposing of it is a mammoth task, handled by the government and large corporations. In *Waste and Want* Susan Strasser reveals how waste rose to such heights, and despite its subject matter it manages to be charming rather than 'offal'.

Throughout most of human history, material goods have been too precious to waste. Every article represented hours of hard labor, where that work was invested in the sewing of clothing, the milking of cows, or the manufacture of pottery. Economy forced prudence, not to mention self-reliance: people made their own candles out of cooking fat because they needed candles, and like all skill-made objects they were not easy to come by, being either rare or expensive. If an item broke, it was repaired; if beyond repair, it was put to future use. Clothes were extensively modified to extend their lives, and passed down through the generations (as were most household items). Cloth remains too small to be used in clothing could be sewn into quilts. Food scraps were fed to animals, who converted refuse into more food -- and if nothing else, the items were burned as fuel in the family hearth. Even if a given family didn't possess all the skills and time required to recapture the value of every scrap, local economies thrived on communal recycling. But all that changed with industrialization.

Although the first factories, like paper mills, inserted themselves into the garbage cycle seamlessly -- using refuse like rags to produce paper -- soon the industrial process broke a circle of endless reuse to the one-directional "waste stream", the stream that has turned into a torrent by the 21st century and is fast filling up landfills, incinerators, and the open ocean. This disruption began as industrialization became increasingly efficient through economies of scale: large operations that relied on waste for their manufacturing (like the paper mills) demanded too much to be satisfied by communities: instead, they had to be fed by other factories, and the trash of the common people found itself without an outlet. Transformations in the home (like gas stoves) removed the use of garbage as fuel. Factories also made consumer goods cheaply: as they became abundant, they lost value. Why repair when you can replace? In the 20th century, companies seized on that idea and encouraged it, first through changes in fashion (cars replaced by new models every year, the only real distinction being aesthetics), and then through Planned Obsolescence, wherein items were manufactured with the intent of their breaking down within a relatively short time frame and requiring replacement. (They could be repaired, at first, but then someone hit on the bright idea of engineering every part in a given machine so that they would all begin breaking down at roughly the same time...)

The results? Trash -- lots of it. Dealing with the trash has required new technologies and systems of organization to cope with it. The pressing demand for waste management is mitigated (ever so much) by recycling, but our pitiful attempts at reusing resources are nothing like those our ancestors managed. Recycling is a meager flame overwhelmed by the mighty ocean of garbage that consumerism encourages and our economy relies on. The amount of waste necessitated by modern life is staggering: next time you visit a grocery store or supermarket, consider how almost every item in the store comes in a cardboard box, and inside it may be goods wrapped in plastic. We cannot possibly find uses for so many boxes, and what on earth would we do with even one ice-cream wrapper, let alone the dozens or hundreds we are liable to rip off in a year?

Waste and Want is a fantastic little bit of history and indirect social criticism. While garbage is on the cover, it's really a history of us, of how we relate to the world through our use of its material resources and how that has changed. It's a fun read, sure, but by its end one can't help but be impressed by the fact that waste is an issue we must think about. Environmentalism aside: in this era of austerity, how can we possibly justify throwing away so many resources and even consuming more resources to manage the waste? It behooves us to act more responsibly, and as the 21st century progresses I can only hope that our worsening economic condition will force a rebirth the prudence of our forebears.

