

Toward a History of Trashmaking

At first the new scavenger is filled with disgust and self-loathing," writes Lars Eighner, describing "Dumpster diving" in his 1993 memoir of American homelessness: "That stage passes with experience. The scavenger finds a pair of running shoes that fit and look and smell brand-new. He finds a pocket calculator in perfect working order. He finds pristine ice cream, still frozen, more than he can eat or keep. He begins to understand: People throw away perfectly good stuff, a lot of perfectly good stuff." To the Dumpster diver—as to the scavengers who live on the Mexico City dump, the ragpickers who fascinated bohemian Paris, and the Chinese immigrants who foraged on San Francisco streets at the end of the nineteenth century—what counts as trash depends on who's counting.¹

Daily experience suggests that trash is a dynamic category. Objects move in and out of it in many ways besides Dumpster diving. The torn sweater, consigned to the giveaway pile, is restored to service by a friend who knits. The impossibly shabby cabinet, already repainted twice, ends up on the curb; a neighbor takes it to his basement, where



Italian immigrants sorting marketable materials from trash on a conveyor belt before it is loaded into the incinerator at Delancey Slip, New York City, about 1905 (courtesy of the Library of Congress)

it holds paint cans for twenty years until somebody strips the finish, rubs in some oil, and carries it up to the living room. The grotesque lamp, given away as the yard sale winds down, comes into fashion five years later; suddenly it's worth a mint.

What do we throw out? Like people in other cultures and at other times, we in contemporary developed societies rid our living spaces of corpses and bodily wastes. Like others, we consider rotting and rancid organic material impure—though the line between rancid and not, edible and spoiled, pure and impure is a matter for cultural and personal debate. So is the one between usable and worn-out, but every culture leaves some broken pottery and implements, which fill the trash dumps archaeologists study. People get rid of excess: We can eat only so many of the zucchini in the garden, we lack storage space for our grandmothers' crocheted bedspreads. Recognizing value in these things, we may give vegetables to the neighbors or hold an estate sale. Throughout the world, harvest and funerary customs include ways of dealing with excess that keeps it out of the trash.

We of the developed nations at the turn of the millennium have additional reasons for throwing things out—reasons that, while not entirely new, operate on an unprecedented scale. More often than people in less developed economies, we discard stuff simply because we do not want it. We buy things devised to be thrown out after brief use: packaging designed to move goods one way from factories to consumers, and “disposable” products, used one time to save the labor of washing or refilling. In addition, vast numbers of us declare clothes and household goods obsolete owing to changing tastes. Historians have described a consumer revolution that brought fashion to the wealthy in eighteenth-century Europe and America, but until the second half of the twentieth century, the great majority of people even in the most developed countries could not afford to discard clothes or household furnishings until they were worn out. Even then, many people made money from selling their rags and scraps. Similarly, people who could afford it have traded up for a sharper knife or a better timepiece throughout the history of technological innovation. Now watches, too,

are styled for obsolescence, and the incessant proliferation of musical-reproduction formats and personal-computer technologies sometimes makes expensive equipment obsolete before it hits the market. These habits of disposing of out-of-style clothes and outmoded equipment promote a veneration of newness not widespread before the twentieth century, filling Dumpsters with “perfectly good stuff” that is simply not new anymore, stuff the owner is tired of.

If we focus on the categorizing process that defines trash, our attention will be drawn away from the rubbish heap and concentrated on human behavior. Trash is created by sorting. Everything that comes into the end-of-the-millennium home—every toaster, pair of trousers, and ounce of soda pop, and every box and bag and bottle they arrive in—eventually requires a decision: keep it or toss it. We use it up, we save it to use 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.

Nothing is inherently trash. Anthropologist Mary Douglas resurrects and analyzes the common saying (sometimes attributed to Lord Chesterfield) that dirt is “matter out of place.” Dirt is relative, she emphasizes. “Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs; out-door things in-doors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where over-clothing should be, and so on.” Sorting the dirty from the clean—removing the shoes from the table, putting the spattered clothing in the washing machine—involves systematic ordering and classifying. Eliminating dirt is thus a positive process.²

Sorting appears everywhere in the historical evidence about trash. “Attend to the following rules,” Lydia Maria Child told readers of the

1835 edition of *The American Frugal Housewife*, explaining how to sort food waste. “Look frequently to the pails”—the slop pails, which held pig feed—“to see that nothing is thrown to the pigs which should have been in the grease-pot”—where fats were saved for cooking and soapmaking. “Look to the grease-pot, and see that nothing is there which might have served to nourish your own family, or a poorer one.” An article about street children published in the *Atlantic* in 1869 describes groups of girls, “small Cinderellas,” sifting ashes in search of unburned coal and the occasional silver spoon. An early-twentieth-century description of a factory that extracted useful products from bones declares that “the first operation is that of sorting . . . several women are constantly engaged separating the rags, iron, beefy matter, hoofs, etc. As they are sorted the bones are pushed to the mouth of the crusher.” And although he admits to occasional dysentery as a result, Lars Eighner provides instructions for sorting discarded food, useful to the aspiring Dumpster diver. “Eating safely from the Dumpsters involves three principles,” he writes: “using the senses and common sense to evaluate the condition of the found materials, knowing the Dumpsters of a given area and checking them regularly, and seeking always to answer the question ‘Why was this discarded?’”³

Sorting and classification have a spatial dimension: this goes here, that goes there. Nontrash belongs in the house; trash goes outside. Marginal categories get stored in marginal places (attics, basements, and outbuildings), eventually to be used, sold, or given away. Douglas calls special attention to boundaries and margins—especially the boundaries of the body and, by analogy, those of the household and the city—as locations for purifying activities. Indeed, disposal takes place in the intersection between the private and the public, the borderland where the household meets the city, the threshold between the male and female “spheres” of the nineteenth century. (This may explain why men have so often been delegated to take out the trash.) Reporters and fans insist that anything outside the walls of a celebrity’s house is theirs

to look at and keep, and the Supreme Court has ruled that to be so.* In public marginal spaces like the alley and the dump, household refuse becomes indisputably public matter, available for others to claim or reclaim; it also becomes a public matter, the topic of public debate, a problem to be solved by public means.⁴

Many examples demonstrate the importance of physical margins to a history of trashmaking and disposal. American cities and towns no longer operate swill yards or piggeries at the city limits, but they do maintain landfills and incinerators in places that are out of the way of all but the poorest citizens. The rural/urban cusp—the site for bales of recyclable paper awaiting a market and for abandoned cars squashed for scrap or organized in junkyards—has grown over time. Larger institutions and more complex technologies have enabled cities to move garbage and sewage farther from their points of origin, even to export toxic wastes to “underdeveloped” countries. Contemporary backyard composting and the burn pile at the corner of the rural yard echo long-standing practices of using the margins of personal property for disposal.⁵

Less familiar today are the nineteenth-century habits of using the borders of the house for disposal: throwing garbage out the door and emptying dishwater out the window, both practices frequently documented by archaeological discoveries of bones, bottle fragments, and pottery shards. The written record verifies these customs. Reformers

* This brand of enthusiasm became notorious in 1970, when the songwriter Bob Dylan physically assaulted A. J. Weberman, an obsessive scholar of Dylan’s lyrics, for going through Dylan’s Greenwich Village trash can. Nearly thirty years later, Weberman is still stalking Dylan, now in cyberspace, where he asserts that he can get into Dylan’s computer (if he has one) and read the latest form of Dylan’s trash, deleted files. In *California v. Greenwood* (1988), the Supreme Court declared that the borders of the household do not encompass the contents of trash cans, in a case that involved evidence found in a drug dealer’s rubbish. The Court maintained that citizens may not reasonably expect their trash to be private and that law enforcement officers looking for evidence do not need a warrant to search the trash. (See H. Richard Uviller, “The Fourth Amendment: Does It Protect Your Garbage?” *Nation*, Oct. 10, 1988, pp. 302–04; “Search and Seizure—Garbage Searches,” *Harvard Law Review*, 102 [Nov., 1988], pp. 191–201. Weberman may be found on the World Wide Web at weberman.com, dylanology.com, and garbology.com.)

urged the abandonment of slovenly routines. One speaker at an 1819 meeting of the Massachusetts Agricultural Society described doors “barricaded by a mingled mass of chip and dirt,” recommended receptacles “so that bones and broken utensils may occasionally be taken away and buried,” and urged his listeners not to leave “the deposit of the sink to settle and stagnate under the windows.” Many decades later, the granddaughter of a Connecticut governor described a near disaster in a letter to one of her children. Thinking she was through with her dishwashing, she wrote, she dumped her bowl “out of the north window when to my utter astonishment & chagrin I saw one of our ‘spode’ breakfast plates sailing out with the water.” (The dish did not so much as crack.) Long after even rural houses had drains that emptied far from the house or into septic fields, women continued to use their dishwater to water their plants.⁶

Discussions of marginal places and marginal behaviors often merge with discussions about marginal people, who abound in the evidence about disposal practices: Lars Eighner and his fellow Dumpster divers, the ragpickers of Paris, or the “swill children” who once went from house to house in American cities collecting kitchen refuse to sell for fertilizer or hog food. Marginal people leave few records, and scholars who study them often find that the most accessible sources—the writings and records of elites *about* marginal groups—offer more enlightenment about the writers than dependable analysis of their subjects. Thus the swill children, for example, are described in a book about the “dangerous classes” of nineteenth-century New York.⁷

The sorting process that creates trash varies from person to person, it differs from place to place, and it changes over time. The categories of objects we use and throw out are fluid and socially defined, and objects move in and out of these classifications. Some individuals save things because they are particularly sentimental or especially frugal; many people speak with disparaging amusement of deceased relatives whose estates included (or might as well have included) a box marked “string too short to save.” Some ethnic groups have probably valued saving and reusing things more than others, as the Scots have a reputation for

doing, and groups develop distinctive cultural practices for using waste materials. Nomadic people, who must travel light, save less. Age matters, too. During the twentieth century, older people have been more likely to conserve. The young, for whom the new is normal, have more readily adopted the ideals of cleanliness and convenience that underlie “disposability.”

But above all, sorting is an issue of class: trashingmaking both under-scores and creates social differences based on economic status. The poor patronize junk stores and charitable thrift stores, which depend on richer people to cast things off and even to subsidize their operations with cash or volunteer work. What is rubbish to some is useful or valuable to others, and the ones who perceive value are nearly always the ones with less money.

The wealthy can afford to be wasteful. In societies “where material shortage is the norm, discarding things is a notorious way of demonstrating power,” writes urban planner Kevin Lynch, citing Thorstein Veblen’s “conspicuous consumption,” the Kwakiutl potlatch, the palaces of kings, and the equation in many cultures of obesity with wealth. Contemporary American practices suggest that, even in a culture of material abundance, wasting serves such power functions. From the start, “disposability” was promoted for its ability to make people feel rich: with throwaway products, they could obtain levels of cleanliness and convenience once available only to people with many servants.⁸

The poor generally waste less to begin with, and they scavenge for materials to use and to sell. Anthropologist Sidney Mintz stresses the creativity, originality, and talent with which people use waste materials outside developed economies, in “capital-scarce, labor-rich contexts,” and the contribution these activities make to the effectiveness of so-called backward economies. “In the less developed world,” he writes, “I have seen automobile bearings fashioned into portable vulcanizing kits; bits of toothbrush handles used as ‘jewels’ for rings, and ordinary tin cans turned into simple kerosene lamps.”⁹

People in different social categories—rich and poor, old and young, women and men—sort trash differently in part because they have

learned different skills. Fixing and finding uses for worn and broken articles entail a consciousness about materials and objects that is key to the process of making things to begin with. Repair ideas come more easily to people who make things. If you know how to knit or do carpentry, you also understand how to mend a torn sweater or repair a broken chair. You can appraise the materials and evaluate the labor of the original maker; you understand the principles of the object's construction; you can comprehend the significance of the tear or the wobble and how it might be mended; you know how to use needles or hammers; you can incorporate leftover scraps from your own previous projects or consign objects beyond repair to your scrap collections. Even at the end of the nineteenth century, when factory production was already well established, many Americans possessed the skills and consciousness required for repairing. Women, who continued to sew and to mend clothing, preserved the skills of handwork longer than most men. Now making and repairing things have become hobbies, perhaps not yet exceptional but no longer typical.

Indeed, mending and restoring objects often require even more creativity than original production. The preindustrial blacksmith made things to order for people in his immediate community; customizing the product, modifying or transforming it according to the user, was routine. Customers would bring things back if something went wrong; repair was thus an extension of fabrication. With industrialization and eventually with mass production, making things became the province of machine tenders with limited knowledge. But repair continued to require a larger grasp of design and materials, an understanding of the whole and a comprehension of the designer's intentions. "Manufacturers all work by machinery or by vast subdivision of labour and not, so to speak, by hand," an 1896 *Manual of Mending and Repairing* explained. "But all repairing *must* be done by hand. We can make every detail of a watch or of a gun by machinery, but the machine cannot mend it when broken, much less a clock or a pistol!"¹⁰

In the handwork necessary for repair, comprehension of the object is tied to an intimate, tactile understanding of materials. George Sturt, a British schoolteacher who went to work in his grandfather's wheel-

wright shop in 1884 and wrote a book about it forty years later described skilled craftspeople's high standards for materials. Working on objects intended to last for years, unaffected by fashion or invention, they learned those standards, he asserts, from the work itself. "Under the plane (it is little used now) or under the axe (it is all but obsolete) timber disclosed qualities hardly to be found otherwise. My own eyes knew because my own hands have felt . . . the difference between ash that is 'tough as whipcord' and ash that is 'frow as a carrot,' or 'doaty,' or 'biscuity.'" This kinesthetic knowledge of materials guided handworkers—wheelwrights, seamstresses, knitters, and carpenters—when they brought tools and materials together. "A good smith knew how tight a two-and-a-half inch tyre should be made for a five-foot wheel and how tight for a four-foot, and so on," writes Sturt. "He felt it, in his bones."¹¹

The handworker's mind, too, was constantly engaged, contemplating a collection of materials that accumulated throughout a lifetime of work. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss describes the French *bricoleur*, an odd-job man who works with his hands, employing the *bricoles*, the scraps or odds and ends. Unlike the engineer, Lévi-Strauss explains, the *bricoleur* does not carry out his tasks using "raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand.'" He collects tools and materials because they might come in handy. Bricolage depends on a kind of functional arrogance, an assumption that the *bricoleur* knows what he is doing and is in the position to define his own success. His first step is always to consider new projects with respect to what he has on hand, "and finally and above all, to engage in a sort of dialogue" with the toolbox and the junk box, interrogating its heterogeneous contents to determine how he might put them to use.¹²

The dialogue with the toolbox and the junk box has had a feminine counterpart in women's relation to the sewing basket and the scrap bag. Well into the twentieth century, most American women were skilled in sewing and did a great deal of it. They continued to make clothes for themselves and their children long after men's clothing was

customarily bought ready-made, and many sewed housedresses even if they bought their coats and their Sunday best. Women who sewed for hire or for their own families knew how to mend clothing as an extension of their skills at making it. Many went well beyond mending—remaking their own clothes to suit changing fashion or refashioning the legs of their husbands' trousers into new pants for their boys. When they finally gave old clothes up, they used them as raw material for rag rugs and quilts. The habits and skills of bricolage remained part of women's work in the home long after industrial production was the rule in most trades.

In cultures based on handwork, handmade things are valuable without being sanctified as art; they embody many hours of labor. People who have not sewed, or at least watched others sewing, value that labor less than those who have, and lack the skills and the scraps that enabled so many women to see old clothing as worthy of remaking. It is easier to discard a ready-made dress, cut and stitched in an unknown sweatshop (on the Lower East Side at the beginning of the twentieth century or in the Philippines at its end), than it is to throw away something you or your mother made.

Most Americans produced little trash before the twentieth century. Packaged goods were becoming popular as the century began, but merchants continued to sell most food, hardware, and cleaning products in bulk. Their customers practiced habits of reuse that had prevailed in agricultural communities here and abroad. Women boiled food scraps into soup or fed them to domestic animals; chickens, especially, would eat almost anything and return the favor with eggs. Durable items were passed on to people of other classes or generations, or stored in attics or basements for later use. Objects of no use to adults became playthings for children. Broken or worn-out things could be brought back to their makers, fixed by somebody handy, or taken to people who specialized in repairs. And items beyond repair might be dismantled, their parts reused or sold to junk men who sold them to manufacturers. Things that could not be used in any other way were burned; especially in the homes of the poor, trash heated rooms and cooked dinners.

All over the country, even middle-class people traded rags to peddlers in exchange for tea kettles or buttons; in cities, ragmen worked the streets, usually buying bones, paper, old iron, and bottles as well as rags. These small-time entrepreneurs sold the junk to dealers who marketed it in turn to manufacturers. The regional, national, and even international trade in rags was brisk because they were in high demand for papermaking and for "shoddy," cloth made in part from recycled fibers. Grease and gelatine could be extracted from bones; otherwise bones were made into knife handles, ground for fertilizer, or burned into charcoal for use in sugar refining. Bottles were generally refilled; the market for secondhand bottles grew throughout the nineteenth century, in part because mechanization was slow in the glassmaking industry.

This trade in used goods amounted to a system for reuse and recycling that provided crucial domestic sources of raw materials for early industrialism. Scavenging was essential to that system, a chore and a common pastime for poor children, who foraged for shreds of canvas or bits of metal on the docks, for coal on the railroad tracks, and for bottles and food on the streets and in the alleys. Food and coal went home to the children's families; they sold metal, rags, bones, and bottles to junk dealers.

The old systems of recycling began to pass into history during the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. Sanitary reformers and municipal trash collection did away with the swill children. New papermaking technologies substituted wood pulp for rags. Mechanization and, later, Prohibition destroyed the used-bottle business. Swift and Armour produced and sold enough bones to put an end to collections from scavengers. The giant modern meatpackers marketed byproducts to fertilizer companies and other firms that required massive amounts of skin, hair, and bones; they also produced their own fertilizer, glue, and other products that used animal wastes.

But mass production and mass distribution literally generated more stuff, and more trash. More people had more things, and less space for storage in tenements, apartment houses, and other city dwellings. New processes for making and filling cardboard cartons and tin cans, and

new materials such as cellophane and aluminum foil, engendered a new class of household trash. Heinz, National Biscuit, Procter & Gamble, and other corporations producing household goods promoted not simply the contents of the container but a new kind of product that included the packaging, emblazoned with a brand that could be advertised. The advertising for the newly branded and packaged products in turn produced unprecedented quantities of paper trash. Magazines like the *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Country Gentleman*, and the *Saturday Evening Post* and the Hearst and Pulitzer newspapers set new standards for publications fat with advertising and circulations in the millions. Manufacturers themselves generated mountains of promotional booklets, trade cards, recipe pamphlets, coupons, and displays. Mail-order merchandisers, led by Sears and Montgomery Ward, blanketed the country with their wish books.¹³

As fewer people made their living doing handwork, their expert knowledge of materials became irrelevant; leftovers and scraps that they once might have valued became trash instead. This process of change over time was not even. Some habits and handicrafts typical in the nineteenth century were still commonplace among poor people in rural areas as late as the early 1950s. But their meanings had changed: now they were old-fashioned ways, fading as consumer culture developed.

To use an ecological analogy, households and cities have become open systems rather than closed ones over the course of the twentieth century. Just as the table scraps once fed the chickens and Dad's torn trousers provided the material for Junior's new ones, so cities, too, were once systems that incorporated ragpickers and scavengers to process the detritus of others. In this respect they resembled sustainable biological ecosystems, which are in general closed, or cyclical. Waste to one part of the system acts as resources to another; the dead body and excrement of one organism nourishes its neighbors.¹⁴

Industrialization broke the cycle. In an industrial system, the flow is one-way: materials and energy are extracted from the earth and converted by labor and capital into industrial products and byproducts, which are sold, and into waste, which is returned to the ecosystem but

does not nourish it. Thus, the late-twentieth-century household produces goods from factories, mends little, bags the detritus in plastic, and places it at the curb to be conveyed to the transfer station or the incinerator. The late-twentieth-century city takes in most of what it uses by truck and train and airplane, and flushes its waste into landfills, sewage treatment plants, and toxic dumps.¹⁵

Of course, the ecological analogy idealizes: early-nineteenth-century industrialization created notorious air and water pollution. Indeed, no human system is perfectly cyclical; throughout history, urban households have taken in material produced by people outside the system, and they have excreted waste. Visitors to Pompeii can see the stepping-stones in the pavement that kept its citizens clean as they traversed the garbage-filled streets; tourists at Knossos and many other ancient sites can observe the material remains of drains and other disposal strategies. Even otherwise self-sufficient farmers have taken in materials from outside, buying or trading for salt and the wares of craftspeople, and created dumps on their property for broken pottery, glass, and other trash that would neither decompose nor serve as animal feed.

But the ecological analogy does offer a way to think about reuse and disposal as part of a process that also encompasses both extracting raw materials and manufacturing, distributing, purchasing, and using industrial products. The process was once generally cyclical, if not perfectly so: waste products were important to economic growth because they served as raw materials for other industrial processes. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, disposal became separate from production, and Americans' relationship to waste was fundamentally transformed.¹⁶ Trash and trashmaking became integral to the economy in a wholly new way: the growth of markets for new products came to depend in part on the continuous disposal of old things.

Economic growth during the twentieth century has been fueled by waste—the trash created by packaging and disposables and the constant technological and stylistic change that has made “perfectly good” objects obsolete and created markets for replacements. On the eve of the Great Depression, Christine Frederick, a prominent domestic writer and advertising consultant, described “progressive obsolescence” as

the source of America's economic achievement. Frederick declared that modern consumers should be open to new styles and technologies, that they should be willing to scrap their old possessions in order to buy new and better ones, and that they should willingly direct their incomes toward consumption rather than savings. "Buying plenty of new goods before the old wears out," Frederick wrote, "increases the general income. . . . Mrs. Consumer has billions to spend—the greatest surplus money value ever given to woman to spend in all history." Her words acquired a certain irony as the Depression deepened during the next few years, but the accelerating processes of a consumer culture that valued fashion, convenience, and the latest technology had already taken firm hold on American daily life. Neither the shortage of purchasing power during the 1930s nor the shortage of goods to purchase during World War II halted those processes.¹⁷

At the turn of the millennium, Americans know only a well-developed consumer culture, based on a continual influx of new products. Many of these are designed to be used briefly and then discarded; many are made of plastics and other materials not easily reused, repaired, or returned to nature. Discarding things is taken to be a kind of freedom; landfills and garbage disposers make disposal an arena for technical experts. American culture offers the world's most advanced example of the "throwaway society." An emerging global culture strives to establish flows of materials and energy that will not only satisfy current consumer demand but create new desires among the many people who make the products of developed economies but do not enjoy them. Economic development has created persistent assaults on the global ecosystem from air and water pollution and global warming, as well as from solid waste. These problems are urgent, and the solution will not come from going backward in time. Only by reflecting on how we got from there to here may we come to comprehend new solutions.

Bringing to the topic of trash a stance derived from two previous books: *Never Done: A History of American Housework* and *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market*. Together, they

explore complementary aspects of everyday experience. Both books focus on the intersection of the private and the public, viewing every day events through an economic lens and asking how Americans have experienced economic and cultural change. *Never Done* juxtapose the historical details of daily life—the tools and methods of sewing, cooking, laundry, and other tasks—with ideas about women's place in the home and with the broad scope of American industrial history. It describes how the traditional work of household production was replaced by the twentieth-century task of consumption. *Satisfaction Guaranteed* examines the business history of some of the same phenomena, the creation of consumer markets for household products. It concentrates on the early history of Ivory Soap, Quaker Oats, and the many other branded, packaged products that represented new kinds of relationships among consumers, manufacturers, merchants, and wholesaling firms. The two books share a focus on the substantial transition that took place in American cultural and economic life during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first ones of the twentieth. It was then that the emblematic economic institutions of the early twentieth century—the manufacturing corporation, the department store, the urban newspaper—joined mass production and mass distribution into a national market. New products and new kinds of stores transformed the texture of daily life.

Waste and Want takes up another aspect of this transition. This time, I am inquiring about what has happened to homemade goods and industrial products at the end of their useful lives: how people have gone about reusing, recycling, and disposing of things they no longer wanted. Here, too, there is a history, a process of change over time. Here, too, the emergence of a mass consumer culture transformed the routines of private life and their meanings. Although people have always thrown things out, trash has not always been the same. During the forty or so years around the turn of the twentieth century, mass production and mass distribution created unprecedented quantities of trash that disturbed private citizens and plagued city administrations. Rubbish took on new meanings in an emerging consumer culture, as it became identified with the poor, people who stood outside that culture

The history of trash, then—like the history of housework and that of marketing—offers fundamental insights about the history of industrial society and its consumer culture.

The topic of waste is central to our lives yet generally silenced or ignored. My initial research revealed both the silence and the centrality. There is much material about municipal solid waste, the rubbish in the alley and the various systems that cities have tried for collecting and disposing of refuse. But my essential questions were less about policy issues and public garbage than about how a throwaway culture replaced one grounded in reuse. In search of answers, I had to poke about for pieces of evidence that might be found nearly anywhere—in trade journals and popular magazines, government documents and novels—but that were often little more than shreds and scraps. Nor was there much theoretical help. Because conventional economics generally treats trash and other forms of pollution as “externalities,” it ignores most of the topics for a social and cultural history of trash; ragmen, quilts, and garage sales have at best a minor place in the economics literature.¹⁸

My method was that of the ragpicker: I grazed for evidence in compiler catalogs and periodical indexes, spearing bibliographic entries to put into my pack. Others have used the metaphor. The French poet Charles Baudelaire described the ragpicker as an archivist, a cataloger who sorted through “everything that the big city has cast off, everything it lost, everything it disdained, everything it broke.” Commenting on Baudelaire, the German critic Walter Benjamin explained the ragpicker’s fascination to bohemian Paris, and he employed the analogy to describe his own methods as a cultural historian. A contemporary scholar of Paris *chiffonniers* describes the historian “wandering the archives, sifting through a detritus from the past that has been used for other purposes and recycling the figurative and literal rags he turns up to give them new meaning.”¹⁹

Like the ragpicker, I often found nothing more than scraps, even in the most promising sources. Household manuals, for example, are in general self-consciously thorough, explicitly addressed to women learning how to keep house far from the farms and villages of their

birth, or cast adrift by the times because their mothers knew less about modern appliances and methods than they did. The manuals claim to be comprehensive, asserting that they encompass every household task. But they have little to say about trash. Although readers will find mentions of such books in the pages that follow, the references were gathered in a harvest whose leanness surprised me, despite many years of research in those sources. Public discourse about household trash has until very recently stopped at the borders of the household; not until toothpaste tubes and beef rib bones became municipal solid waste did they become civic concerns, and then they entered the province of technical experts.

This taboo, like many others, has been toppled during the last thirty years. Contemporary interest in trash as part of a global environmental crisis has made household waste-disposal practices into a topic for schoolchildren’s lessons, television public service announcements, and utility bill inserts. Yet while this book addresses some of the issues of current solid-waste debates, it is not a book of contemporary data and social criticism but a history of trashmaking as a social process. An understanding of history rarely contributes in some straightforward way to the solutions to the problems of the present; indeed, the historical perspective often complicates the issues. I hope here, therefore, to suggest that important issues are always complicated and to show that matters deemed inconsequential are often significant indeed.

Notes

TOWARD A HISTORY OF TRASHMAKING

1. Lars Eighner, *Travels with Lizbeth* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993), pp. 118-19.
2. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 2, 35-36.
3. Mrs. [Lydia Maria] Child, *The American Frugal Housewife*, 16th ed., enlarged and corrected (Boston: Carter, Hendee, 1835), p. 8; Charles Dawson Shanley, "The Small Arabs of New York," *Atlantic Monthly*, Mar. 1869, p. 284; Thomas Lambert, *Bone Products and Manures: A Treatise on the Manufacture of Fat, Glue, Animal Charcoal, Size, Gelatin, and Manures* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1925), p. 3; Eighner, *Travels with Lizbeth*, pp. 112-13.
4. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, pp. 114-28; Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 92.
5. Kevin Lynch, with contributions by Michael Southworth, *Wasting Away: An Exploration of Waste—What It Is, How It Happens, Why We Fear It, How to Do It Well* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1990), pp. 25, 45; see also Park Benjamin, *Wrinkles and Recipes Compiled from the Scientific American* (New York: H. N. Munn, 1875), p. 236.
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CHAPTER ONE: THE STEWARDSHIP OF OBJECTS

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