

German Historical Institute
Washington, D.C.
Annual Lecture Series
No. 5

**WASTE
AND
WANT**

The Other Side of Consumption

SUSAN STRASSER

*With comments by
Gunther Barth and Wolfgang Erz*

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Susan Strasser

**Probing Urban Waste
Comments on Susan Strasser's "Waste and Want"**

Gunther Barth

Wasteland: Wanted Land for Conservation

Wolfgang Erz

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Introduction

Over the last thirty years, many historians have used the categories of class, race, and gender as analytical tools. During this time, these scholars were engrossed in the history of social strata and social conflicts, of race relations and ethnic culture, and, most recently, in gender history. Comparatively much less research was carried out on diplomatic history, military history, or intellectual history.

Since the 1980s, what may be called a new ecological awareness has found its way into the historical profession. For historians this suggests a renewed interest in, and a new approach to, the transition from preindustrial, agrarian, traditional society to industrialized, urban, modern society. Furthermore, it implies, or should imply, the attempt to gain insight into the conditions—and limitations—of human existence on this planet. One of the demands that may and should be raised in this respect is to look not at ancient, medieval, and modern history, but at a comprehensive history of humankind. Yet at present we hardly recognize, rather only perceive, the contours of this new direction of historiography.

Professor Susan Strasser of George Washington University is one of those colleagues who has begun to pose new questions, and who piques our curiosity by analyzing new materials and formulating new answers. Professor Strasser received her B.A. in 1969 from Reed College (Portland, Oregon); she earned both her M.A. in 1971 and Ph.D. in 1977 from the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Aside from a series of articles, she has published two major works: *Never Done: A History of American Housework*, published in 1982, and *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market*, published in 1989. Both of these books have received much praise. Presently Professor Strasser is engaged in research on the history of what modern society discards as useless: *Müll*, garbage, trash, debris; those ever-growing piles of waste that modern society produces; piles of waste that have become a serious environmental problem, but that distinguish our age most clearly from previous ones. We are very grateful that Professor Strasser has accepted our invitation to present her findings and discuss some aspects of this project in our Fifth Annual Lecture. Her topic is "Waste and Want: The Other Side of Consumption."

We are equally grateful that two distinguished colleagues have agreed to provide commentaries on Susan Strasser's work. Gunther Barth, Professor of American History at the University of California at Berkeley, is the author of path-breaking studies in modern urban and cultural history. Among these are *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*, published in 1980; *Instant Cities: Urbanization and the Rise of San Francisco and Denver*, published in 1988; and *Fleeting Moments: Nature and Culture in American History*, published in 1990. Professor Barth is presently working on a history of the University of California at Berkeley. He also serves as one of the two American members of the Institute's Academic Advisory Board.

Our second commentator is Wolfgang Erz, Director of the Institute for Nature Conservation and Landscape Ecology in Bonn, and Professor of Landscape Ecology in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Wuppertal. Professor Erz holds degrees from the University of Kiel and the University College of Rhodesia in Salisbury, now Harare in Zimbabwe. He has published widely, for example, *Historical Development of Nature Conservation and Landscape Management* in 1981; *Acceptance and Barriers in Society, Politics, and Administration for Realization of Conservation Requirements* in 1985; and *Ecology or Conservation: Reflections on Terminological Divergence and Integration* in 1986.

We are very grateful that Professor Barth and Professor Erz are available on this occasion to help us better understand the historical and interdisciplinary aspects of Professor Strasser's topic.

HARTMUT LEHMANN
Washington, D. C., October 1991

Waste and Want: The Other Side of Consumption

Susan Strasser

The first half of my title derives from a familiar English proverb. Waste not, want not, we say; do not squander your resources and you will not go hungry. Although it sounds like Benjamin Franklin, this adage was not recorded in its present form before the nineteenth century.¹ An eighteenth-century variant, Wilful waste brings woeful want, may be found in dictionaries of quotations attributed to a variety of authors, all quoting it as a common maxim.

The proverb juxtaposes two words rich in meaning in both verb and noun forms. "Waste" suggests not only useless consumption—squandering, extravagance, and indulgence—but dissipation, destruction, and death; the last a verb form often associated with the American war in Vietnam, where "to waste" meant "to kill." Waste means decline, as in "wasting away." As a noun, waste is just one among many terms for the topic of my historical inquiry: garbage, debris, refuse, rubbish, trash. "Want" branches out in two directions: on the one hand, it connotes craving, desire, yearning; on the other, lack, need, poverty. Waste not, want not, then, suggests many links in addition to the one between indulgence and privation.

Above all, I intend this maxim to cast two historical constructs -garbage and consumer culture-each in the light of the other. While acknowledging the moralist perspective implied in the title and the present-day concerns implied in my choice of topic, I want to link these concepts-waste and want, garbage and consumer culture-analytically and come to understand them historically. I have written this lecture at the beginning of my inquiry, or, more precisely, at the end of its first stage, and have chosen to reveal what may be premature speculation, in part to organize my own thoughts,

¹ H. L. Mencken, *A New Dictionary of Quotations* (New York, 1952), 1274.

and in part to stimulate questions from others that may guide my future thinking.

The potential topics for a social and cultural history of household trash have received scant attention from historians of the United States. Martin Melosi's work, especially *Garbage in the Cities*, provides a notable exception and a sound basis in the institutional history of solid waste collection and disposal.² Jane Busch's unpublished dissertation, "The Throwaway Ethic in America," offers a wealth of information and sources, especially on bottles and paper products.³ And a number of recent books in fields of history that are no longer separable—urban, women's, social, labor, technological—offer potential avenues and sources for further exploration in their scattered paragraphs on thrift shops, scavengers, or the international trade in rags, which are embedded in broader discussions of the Great Depression, poor women and children, or the paper industry.⁴

Recent historiography, most of it interdisciplinary, suggests many vantage points for thinking about the issues, without necessarily touching on the specific topics. The work of influential scholars who have created the discourse of gender in many fields during the past decade suggests attention to the social and historical dimensions of a fundamental household question: Who takes out the garbage? Studies of immigration and urban poverty turn that line of questioning toward issues of race and ethnicity. Historians of material culture

² Martin Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities: Refuse, Reform, and the Environment, 1880–1980* (Chicago, 1981).

³ Jane Busch, "The Throwaway Ethic in America" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1983).

⁴ Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York 1789–1860* (Urbana, 1987), and David Nasaw, *Children of the City: At Work and At Play* (Garden City, 1985), describe scavenging among poor women and children. Judith McGaw, *Most Wonderful Machine: Mechanization and Social Change in Berkshire Paper Making, 1801–1885* (Princeton, 1987), pays attention to the international trade in rags. Lizbeth Cohen, in *Making a New Deal; Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919–1939* (Cambridge, 1990), mentions thrift shops. Roland Marchand's *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley, 1985) opens topics like product obsolescence. See also my own *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York, 1982) and *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (New York, 1989).

and technological change offer an angle on the adoption of new materials and methods that integrates the study of objects with an emphasis on economic and social development. Recent work in environmental history demands complex approaches to historical relationships between environmental issues and economic ones.

Three writers in fields outside of history offer especially compelling analytic insights. Mary Douglas, in *Purity and Danger*, describes dirt as a cultural construct and as matter out of place. Cultural rituals intended to purify—to separate filth from cleanliness—constitute "creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience," she writes.⁵ 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 this activity.⁶ Michael Thompson, in an idiosyncratic book entitled *Rubbish Theory*, demonstrates that trash is a *dynamic* social construction; objects move both into and out of the category of rubbish. Thompson is relatively unconcerned with the activities of the scrap dealer and the ragman, offering as his primary illustration the Stevengraph, a kind of picture woven in silk that sold in Britain for sixpence in the 1870s and 1880s. Useless and valueless rubbish for most of the next century, Stevengraphs were auctioned to collectors for as much as £75 in the 1970s.⁷ The third writer, Kevin Lynch, promotes yet another kind of dynamism in his posthumous and somewhat sketchy *Wasting Away*, which suggests that refuse be understood as part of a social cycle of creation and decay that is modeled in natural processes. He calls his work "a brief for waste," an assertion of the importance of trash within that cycle.⁸

Using the focus on process proposed by all of these writers, trash may be understood as an issue pertaining to the normal functioning of both the household and the economy. The economic proposition is straightforward: once large numbers of people have attained a

⁵ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1966), 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 114–128.

⁷ Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (Oxford, 1979).

⁸ Kevin Lynch, with contributions by Michael Southworth, ed., *Wasting Away* (San Francisco, 1990), 2.

certain standard of living, the growth of markets in new products depends on the continuous disposal of old things. Disposal, in other words, may be understood as part of the larger process that encompasses production, distribution, purchase, and use, and trash as a product of that process, not merely a by-product.

In addition to discarding things by putting them in the garbage or by taking them to the dump—that is, in addition to adding them to the public trash—Americans, like people elsewhere, have had other choices: reuse, recycling, remodeling, fixing, and giving things away—transactions with both economic and social dimensions.⁹ In addition to the essentially archaeological questions What is in the trash? and How has that changed over time?, we must ask what has stayed out of the trash. This involves essentially anthropological and historical questions: How has this culture operated with regard to refuse? How have groups of people interacted with respect to objects no longer desired, and to objects no longer desired by some, but desirable to others? What institutions have developed out of those interactions? How have those interactions and institutions changed?

As a normal household process, disposal may be understood to involve the literal, spacial interface between the private and the public. Some time after they are purchased and brought home, parts of food, clothing, appliances, cleaning products, and other household goods (the parts that are not literally consumed) are removed beyond the borders of the household. Nontrash belongs in the house; trash gets put outside. Marginal categories get stored in marginal places—attics, basements, and outbuildings—eventually to be used, sold, or given away. Once in the alley or in the dump, household refuse becomes both public matter, available for others to claim or reclaim, and *a* public matter, the topic of public debate, a problem to be solved by public means. (The alley and the dump, of course, are themselves marginal places, what Lynch calls "backsides,"¹⁰ or untended landscapes.)

⁹ See Michael B. Schiffer, Theodore E. Downing, and Michael McCarthy, "Waste Not, Want Not: An Ethnoarchaeological Study of Reuse in Tucson, Arizona," in Richard A. Gould and Michael B. Schiffer, *Modern Material Culture: The Archaeology of Us* (New York, 1981), 68.

¹⁰ Lynch, *Wasting Away*, 27.

The rhetoric of the debate over garbage has shifted during the twentieth century. Described as a problem of poverty at the beginning of the century, garbage is now understood as a problem of affluence. The links between trash and the relationships of caste and class necessitate careful attention. People's connections to rubbish both underscore and create social differences; class is an essential factor in the dynamic processes of reuse. What is garbage to rich people is useful to poor people. Sidney Mintz has stressed the creativity with which people use waste materials in "capital-scarce, labor-rich contexts," and the contribution these activities make to the effectiveness of so-called backward economies.¹¹ Poor people waste less than the rich. They scavenge for materials to use and to sell. They supply secondhand producers' markets. And poor people constitute secondhand consumers' markets, the institutions of which (junk stores and thrift stores) depend on richer people to cast things off and even to subsidize their operations with cash.

Before the late nineteenth century, households did not produce much trash by twentieth-century standards, though accumulations in urban public places would be noxious to modern Americans. At the turn of the century, household refuse was a smaller component of what is now called the waste stream than the ashes produced by coal and wood heat or by street sweepings primarily composed of horse manure-by-products that were later replaced by air pollution from fossil fuels. In 1906 New York City employed 750 workers to load Manhattan's residential trash onto trucks and 1,200 men to sweep its streets.¹² That year, H. de B. Parsons, an engineer retained by the commissioner of the city's Department of Street Cleaning, reported that New York collected less than half a million tons of household trash and over two million of ashes and street sweepings. He provided comparable ratios for the smaller cities of Buffalo and

¹¹ Sidney Mintz, "Poverty and Creativity in the Caribbean" in Singaravelou, ed., *Pauvreté et Développement dans les Pays Tropicaux: Hommage à Guy Lasserre* (Paris, 1989), 391–92; Sidney Mintz, "Men, Women, and Trade," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 13 (July 1971): 249–50.

¹² Daniel Eli Burnstein, "Progressivism and Urban Crisis: The New York City Garbage Workers' Strike of 1907," *Journal of Urban History* 16 (August 1990): 387.

Washington, D.C.¹³ The Public Sanitation Committee of Saint Louis' Civic Improvement League similarly reported that household trash constituted one-quarter to one-third of municipal waste in the average American city.¹⁴

These reports represented the efforts of a turn-of-the-century movement to make garbage a matter of municipal concern. But as a distinct concept, it was far from a matter of everyday concern in the household. Neither Sears nor Montgomery Ward carried any household products designed and marketed specifically for holding or disposing of garbage; no trash barrels, garbage cans, or wastepaper baskets. People used whatever barrels or boxes were on hand instead of purchasing special receptacles to meet a special need. Moreover, they threw away relatively little. In 1900 companies like Heinz and Procter & Gamble were well established, and many households bought at least some packaged products. But most food, hardware, and cleaning products were sold at the store in bulk, and most goods came into most households without modern wrappings. People practiced habits of reuse that had prevailed in agricultural communities on both sides of the ocean. Food scraps were boiled into soups or were fed to domestic animals. Chickens especially would eat almost anything and return the favor with eggs, and many people raised them in working-class cities like Homestead, Pennsylvania, and Manchester, New Hampshire.¹⁵ Items more durable than food scraps were stored in attics or basements for later use or to be passed on to people of other classes or generations. Objects of no use to adults became playthings for children. When things broke, they could often be returned to their makers, taken to a person who specialized in repairs, or fixed by somebody handy. And items beyond repair could often be recycled or their parts reused.

The point is most striking in the case of clothes. In 1900 the ready-made revolution was yet to debut in women's apparel, and nearly half the population knew how to sew. Mid-nineteenth-century housekeeping manuals had preached frugality even to women who

¹³ H. de B. Parsons, *The Disposal of Municipal Refuse* (New York, 1906), 27.

¹⁴ Civic Improvement League of Saint Louis, Public Sanitation Committee, *Disposal of Municipal Waste* (Saint Louis, 1906), 5.

¹⁵ See Strasser, *Never Done*, 28

wore silk dresses, teaching them to rip out and reverse sleeves thinning at the elbows and to lengthen the lives of old sheets by tearing them down the middle and sewing the outer edges together.¹⁶ Although many, if not most, middle-class women hired seamstresses to help with their dressmaking, few could afford to hire help for the whole task, and even fewer paid others to mend or darn.¹⁷ Well into the twentieth century, most American women were close enough to production to have both an appreciation of their clothes as the product of labor and the skills to fix them.

When they were finally given up for rags, old clothes were used for tasks later assigned to new products like paper towels and cellulose sponges. Rags could also be traded to peddlers in exchange for their wares or sold to ragmen who, like the peddlers, worked the streets. These entrepreneurs in turn sold the rags to dealers for use in papermaking or for shoddy, that is, cloth made partially from recycled fibers.¹⁸ Rags were in such high demand that the Crane paper company imported them from abroad as early as 1822. The dollar value of American rag imports increased on an average of twenty-six percent per year between 1837 and 1872.¹⁹ By 1875 the United States imported more than 123 million pounds of rags, about half of which came from the United Kingdom and British possessions.²⁰

Paper itself was valuable, as historians understand from archival documents covered with handwriting, every inch used. And it could be recycled. Paper, bones, old iron, and bottles were exchanged like

¹⁶ See, for example, Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home or, Principles of Domestic Science* (New York, 1869), 358–59, and Catharine E. Beecher, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (New York, 1841), 384.

¹⁷ See Strasser, *Never Done*, 131. On darning, see Eliza Farrar, *The Young Lady's Friend* (New York, 1838), 124–126.

¹⁸ On shoddy in the United States, see Philip Scranton, *Figured Tapestry: Production, Markets, and Power in Philadelphia Textiles, 1885–1941* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 140–41, 237–38, 308; for shoddy in England, see Samuel Jubb, *The History of the Shoddy-Trade, Its Rise, Progress, and Present Position* (London, 1860).

¹⁹ McGaw, *Most Wonderful Machine*, 67, 191–92.

²⁰ "Parliamentary Reports on the Rag Trade of Foreign Countries," *The Practical Magazine*, new ser., vol. 5, no. 6 (1875): 222.

rags: sold or traded to peddlers and dealers, who in turn sold them as producers' goods. Grease and gelatine could be extracted from the bones; otherwise they were burned into charcoal, used in sugar refinery, made into knife handles, or ground for fertilizer. In 1836 Lydia Maria Child advised readers of *The American Frugal Housewife* to sell bottles back to apothecaries and grocers for reuse.²¹ The secondhand bottle trade grew throughout the nineteenth century, in part because mechanization was slow in the industry that produced new bottles. Businesses specializing in used bottles developed during the 1880s in most cities and were thriving by the next decade.²² *Gould's Directory for Saint Louis* listed four bottle dealers in 1880 and eleven in 1891; all but one were casualties of the 1890s depression. But by 1906 the number was back up to ten.²³ These producers' markets in used goods—rags, bones, bottles, and old iron—amounted to systems for reuse and recycling.

Scavenging was an essential element in those systems. A number of recent works in urban social history have pointed to its prevalence throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. "Scavenging was the chore of those too young to earn income through wage work or street selling," Christine Stansell writes of poor New Yorkers in the 1830s, in *City of Women*.

Besides taking trash home or peddling it to neighbors, children sold it to junk dealers, who in turn vended it to manufacturers and artisans to use in industrial processes. On the waterfront, children foraged for loose cotton, which had shredded off bales on the wharves where the Southern packet ships docked, as well as for shreds of canvas and rags... Broken bits of hardware—nails, cogs, and screws—went to iron and brass foundries and coppersmiths to be melted down; bottles and bits of broken glass to glassmakers. Old rope was shredded and sold as oakum, a fiber used to caulk ships. The medium for these exchanges was a network of secondhand shops along the waterfront.²⁴

David Nasaw's *Children of the City* describes scavenging and junking as typical activities for urban working-class children seventy years

²¹ Cited in Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York, 1990), 187–88.

²² Busch, "Throwaway Ethic," 188.

²³ *Gould's Directory for St. Louis*, 1880, 1164; 1891, 1561; 1897, 1916; 1898, 1892; 1906, 1993.

²⁴ Stansell, *City of Women*, 50–51.

later, "as common a pastime as playing baseball or jumping rope."²⁵ Both writers point to the connection in the minds of policemen and some reformers between scavenging and juvenile crime; the children and the authorities might well disagree in making what Stansell calls "the distinction between things belonging to no one and things belonging to someone."²⁶

The children Nasaw writes about did their scavenging in the context of that turn-of-the-century network of reform organizations and impulses known as Progressivism. Lewis Hine photographed the scavengers combing through the dumps; residents of Hull House wrote about them; public and private organizations were formed to "protect" them; and the dumps themselves were shaped by regulations resulting from Progressive debates. The reform network encompassed many issues connected to garbage and reuse. People interested in municipal sanitation were in dose contact with those concerned with other issues of public health, personal cleanliness, and civic beauty. In 1906 the Civic Improvement League of Saint Louis, for example, had, in addition to its Public Sanitation Committee, committees concerned with playgrounds, smoke abatement, pure milk, free baths, billboards, trees and horticulture, and restoration of Forest Park, the site of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition two years before.²⁷ Municipal reformers were also connected to the mission movement (which spawned Goodwill Industries and the Salvation Army) and were influenced by the efficiency movement, which promoted consciousness of waste of all kinds.

"The refuse problem," writes Martin Melosi, "gained public recognition as an environmental issue soon after the efforts to assure dean water and adequate sewerage in the early 1880s and just before the first attempts to abate smoke and excessive noise in the mid1890s."²⁸ Piles of garbage were perceived both as menaces to public health and as public eyesores, and they were becoming larger and more prevalent as urban areas increased in population and density. The street-leaning problem alone was staggering. At the

²⁵ Nasaw, *Children of the City*, 88.

²⁶ Stansell, *City of Women*, 205.

²⁷ St. Louis, *Disposal of Municipal Waste*, 2.

²⁸ Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities*, 20.

century, American cities were home to over three million horses; those living in Milwaukee produced 133 tons of manure every day, in Brooklyn about 200. In 1912, when horses were already sharing the streets of Chicago with motor vehicles, the city removed ten thousand horse carcasses from public thoroughfares.²⁹

These kinds of refuse were mixed up with household waste, literally and rhetorically. Cities varied in their disposal methods. Some gathered it all—street sweepings, ashes, food scraps, old mattresses—and dumped it. By far, the greatest amount of American garbage was dumped. Most cities disposed of their refuse on land, but many of the largest deposited at least some of it into water: New Orleans and Saint Louis into the Mississippi River, Chicago into Lake Michigan, New York into the Atlantic Ocean. Some smaller cities made revenues by selling organic garbage for animal feed or fertilizer and ashes for soap making. These and other municipalities that disposed of different kinds of refuse in different ways required householders to separate it—a practice now called source separation. Other cities made money from contractors who hired immigrant workers to pick through the garbage and remove marketable materials. At one New York City dump, as much as forty-eight percent of the trash was picked out. In 1903 contractors paid \$71,000 for the picking privilege in Manhattan and the Bronx.³⁰ As garbage became a municipal concern and debates developed over municipal expenditures for new disposal technologies, dumping found competition not only from incineration but also from the "reduction process," which used machinery to extract by-products that could be sold commercially.

As reformers began to call for municipalities to take responsibility for refuse, the garbage of the poor received particular attention. Trash piled up in poor neighborhoods because they were densely populated, and because the poor could afford neither storage space nor the private contractors that wealthier people in many cities hired to haul away their rubbish. Some commentators recognized that people who had many things actually created more garbage than those who had little. A Chicago survey from 1912 demonstrated that "Americans" produced more garbage, ashes, and rubbish than Italian,

²⁹ Ibid., 24–25.

³⁰ Parsons, *Disposal*, 23.

Polish, Bohemian, German, and Russian immigrants. Assuming that the natives were more affluent than the immigrants, the research suggested a link between affluence and the production of refuse. "It is curious, therefore," writes Melosi reporting on this study, "that those grappling with the refuse problem tended to place excessive responsibility on the immigrant populations for generation of wastes."³¹

Contemporary rhetoric, indeed, discloses prejudice against immigrants combined with the fact that, in one historian's words, "sanitation was equated not only with the struggle against disease per se, but also with civilization, morality, and an orderly way of life."³² A passage from H. de B. Parsons' 1906 *Disposal of Municipal Refuse*, part of a larger discussion of how conditions varied from city to city depending on the character of the population, is a case in point. Parsons explicitly states that cities with a large proportion of poor people produced less market waste and less combustible refuse than other cities. (The poor, we may surmise, ate the rotting food left at the markets and burned what trash they could find for heat.) The most household refuse per capita came in areas with "large stores, private dwellings of the better class, and corresponding hotels and restaurants." The ashes originating in these districts, Parsons points out, and especially from the private houses, had especially high percentages of unburned coal.

Parsons' next paragraph takes on a moral tone. "The tenement-house districts," he writes, "especially those inhabited by the least educated of the Russians, the Poles, the Scandinavians, the Italians, and the Jewish element, often produce a careless and filthy class of waste, and one containing a low percentage of combustible materials, such as wood, paper, packing-boxes, etc., which is saved and retained for fuel." In fact, the trash of the tenements may have seemed especially filthy, since a low percentage of combustible materials meant a high percentage of fish heads and watermelon rinds. But it was hardly careless. Unlike those who did not even bother to instruct their servants to sift the ashes for coal that could still be burned, the poor took great care indeed to sort through the trash for heating fuel.

³¹ Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities*, 161–62.

³² Burnstein, "Progressivism and Urban Crisis," 400.

Parsons continues,

Such districts could be inspected rigidly with advantage to educate and force the people to deposit their wastes in proper receptacles, rather than to throw them into the streets and other public places. Unfortunately, this educational process is most difficult, due to the ignorance of the people, their lack of order and reverence for things cleanly, the smallness of their abodes, the crowded condition of the tenements, and the political advantage of non-interference.³³

Although he calls his solution an "educational process," his tone suggests police activity, a process to be carried out by means of force and rigid inspections. And his description of ignorant people who lack "order and reverence for things cleanly" suggests that he believed that a "careless and filthy class of waste" was produced by a careless and filthy class of people.

As in so many other areas, reformers' concerns blinded them to the needs and culture of the poor. This was especially evident with respect to scavenging for food. Reformers believed that "the children were without shame or taste when it came to picking through the discarded, spoiled, overripe, and ruined meat and produce," writes David Nasaw about Chicago's Juvenile Protective Association and the Massachusetts Child Labor Committee. "The reformers were a lot more squeamish than the children and their families could afford to be."³⁴

If those interested in refuse during the decades around the turn of the century had turned their attention away from the garbage in the streets and concentrated instead on the generation of trash, they might have perceived a host of new developments. Urbanization and population growth meant that more people lived with less storage space. And mass production literally meant more stuff. Between 1880 and 1910, while the population almost doubled, American industry produced seven times as much pig iron, nine times as much paper, fourteen times as much cottonseed oil, and nearly four times as many railroad freight cars to transport all the new goods made from these basic materials.³⁵

³³ Parsons, *Disposal of Municipal Refuse*, 6.

³⁴ Nasaw, *Children of the City*, 98.

³⁵ See Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed*, 6.

Well before the beginning of the Great Depression, new kinds of household trash and new cultural attitudes emblematic of twentieth-century market expansion and creation were firmly established. There were literally new kinds of garbage, created in support of market growth. Machines for producing cardboard cartons and for processing canned foods became available during the early 1880s. Innovations in packaging continued to attract inventors and investors alike during the ensuing decades, engendering new processes for making and filling disposable packages, and new materials like cellophane and aluminum foil. The corporations that produced packaged foods, cleaning supplies, cosmetics, and other household goods promoted a new kind of product consisting of the container and its contents, the packaging emblazoned with a brand that could be advertised. This was a marketing strategy calculated to give manufacturers control over price, quality, and distribution.³⁶ The approach was a powerful one, and companies such as Heinz, National Biscuit, and Procter & Gamble were selling massive quantities of packaged goods before 1910.

The advertising for these companies produced unprecedented quantities of paper trash. Cyrus H. K Curtis' magazine publishing enterprise and the newspaper businesses of William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer set new standards and policies for publications fat with advertising and with circulations in the millions.³⁷ Manufacturers themselves generated mountains of promotional materials—booklets, trade cards, recipe pamphlets, coupons, and displays. Mail-order merchandisers, led by Sears and Montgomery Ward, blanketed the country with their wish books. Sears alone issued two thick general catalogues every year, flyers during the slack seasons after Christmas and in the middle of summer, sporadic bargain bulletins, a bimonthly grocery catalogue, and more than a hundred special catalogues covering individual lines of merchandise. Circulation of the spring and fall general catalogues, already about three million in 1908, rose to more than seven million in 1925.³⁸

³⁶ See *ibid.*, 29–32.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 32, 91.

³⁸ Boris Emmet and John E. Jeuck, *Catalogues and Counters: A History of Roebuck and Company* (Chicago, 1950), 255, 262–63.

Disposable products, designed to be thrown away after brief use, constituted another new kind of trash. The concept was inaugurated with paper shirt cuffs and paper collars, which first appeared during the cotton shortage of the Civil War; the collars were almost universal by the 1870s. Other disposable paper products became available before the turn of the century, initially promoted as sanitary measures and used in public places. Paper cups appeared first, as part of a public health crusade on trains and in schools during the 1870s. The cone-shaped cups used at soda fountains were introduced in 1914, and by 1925 more than sixty percent of soda fountains used them. Paper napkins were manufactured in America before 1900, but they were common in restaurants, not homes, until after World War II. Paper towels were originally marketed for public restrooms and introduced for home use by the Scott Paper Company in 1931.³⁹ At home or in public places, these products saved labor and time in dishwashing and laundry. They both signified and contributed to a shift in attitudes towards thrift and convenience.

In addition, such products were manifestations of a new concept of disposability that extended far beyond paper products. Chewing gum was disposable food; cigarettes were disposable smoking devices. The safety razor, first advertised in 1903, introduced the concept of the disposable part to the consumer: the razor blade, to be thrown away when dull, supplanted the straight razor, which could be resharpened hundreds of times. For its inventor, King Gillette, the disposable blade landed profits beyond those possible from a onetime purchase. His biographer claims that the seed of the idea came from the inventor of the crimped, cork-lined bottle cap, who suggested that Gillette contrive another disposable product.⁴⁰

The introduction of these products coincided with the passing of the old systems of recycling. Sanitary reformers did away with scavenger pigs. New papermaking technologies substituted wood pulp for rags. Saint Louis, home to fifteen rag dealers in 1880, had only one by 1915.⁴¹ The giant, modern meat packers produced and sold enough by-products to put an end to bone collections from

³⁹ Busch, "Throwaway Ethic," 83–98.

⁴⁰ Russell B. Adams, Jr., *King C. Gillette: The Man and His Wonderful Shaving Device* (Boston, 1978), 18–19.

⁴¹ *Gould's Directory for St. Louis*, 1880, 1164; 1915, 2690.

scavengers. The first fully mechanized glass factory opened in 1917; together with Prohibition, mechanization dealt a blow to the used bottle business.⁴²

The Great Depression and World War II retarded, but did not halt, the development of the consumer culture and its concomitant trash. Economic necessity preserved an everyday awareness of thrift during hard times. The United States was still populated by migrants from agricultural societies on both sides of the Atlantic. Despite the allure of the new consumer culture, most people who were adults during the depression had grown up learning how to sew, how to fix things, how to get along with little. During the war, conservation drives revived recycling and reuse. Mending and using leftovers became patriotic acts, and cities conducted large-scale campaigns to collect scrap metals, grease, paper, and rubber.

On the other hand, the scrap drives may be a better indication of the growth of the consumer culture than of its retardation, for they may have served the war cause better as propaganda than by gathering critical materials. And while the drives promoted industrial recycling, they encouraged individuals to discard things, not to value them. Similarly, organized charities during the depression encouraged people with incomes to part with usable items, contributing them to the poor through Goodwill and the Salvation Army, and contributing to the Gross National Product by buying replacements.

There is economic and material evidence that consumption increased during the depression and the war. According to one study, the total consumption of food and general merchandise hardly changed between 1929 and 1937, the first part of the depression. Although sales of new automobiles declined sharply, the sale of gasoline went up, as did the domestic use of electricity.⁴³ Ten million electric refrigerators were sold during the depression: ten percent of American families owned refrigerators in 1930, fifty-six percent in 1940.⁴⁴ And although some consumer products were unavailable because resources were diverted to war production, per

⁴² Busch, "Throwaway Ethic," 184, 188ff.

⁴³ Roland S. Vaile, "Research Memorandum on Social Aspects of Consumption in the Depression," *Social Science Research Council Bulletin* 35(1937): 18–22.

⁴⁴ Strasser, *Never Done*, 267.

capita consumption continued to grow also during World War II.⁴⁵ With the exception of paper plates—then marketed exclusively for picnics—consumption of disposable paper products rose steadily throughout the depression and the war.⁴⁶

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At this stage of my research, I have to conclude with questions rather than with answers, and with a request to my commentators and my audience for their speculations and suggestions for further research. I have only begun to answer the questions I began with, while new ones have developed along the way. We need to know more about ideological factors and attitudinal changes—the development of the concepts of convenience and disposability, the demise of thrift. How did concerns about style and fashion, once an indulgence few could afford, expand into American culture at large? How have people adjusted to incessant technological change, to things that still work becoming obsolete?

We might also ask questions relating to the environment. How may the story as I have related it be integrated with changes in cultural perceptions of the environment and environmental issues? How does it relate to specific environmental developments? For example, how may the history of suburbanization explain the historical production of yard wastes, now a substantial portion of the waste stream?

Many questions may be asked about the institutions that developed to distribute secondhand goods and waste products. What is the story behind thrift shops, those retail outlets for used goods that are subsidized by charity organizations? How did the secondhand store a few blocks off Main Street become part of American life, its proprietor often a black man, a gypsy, or Jew, who ran his business by old-fashioned barter and bargaining? What of used car

⁴⁵ See Combined Committee on Nonfood Consumption Levels, Combined Production and Resources Board, *The Impact of the War on Civilian Consumption in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada* (Washington, n.d. [1949]).

⁴⁶ Busch, "Throwaway Ethic," 87, 99, 107.

lots? What of flea markets? How and when did secondhand trade by nonprofessionals develop, practices such as classified advertisements in the newspapers and garage sales? And what can be learned about consumer markets in industrial wastes, the disposal of seconds, and overproduction?

Finally, the field is open for cross-cultural and comparative studies. What in this history is distinctive to the American experience, and what may be found in the development of other twentieth-century consumer cultures? What may be said more generally about garbage and human cultures?

At the end of the twentieth century, fundamental concepts underlying the wants of consumer culture—demand created by manufacturers and production driven by marketing—face an unprecedented challenge from those concerned with the environment. Economic growth is fueled by waste—the garbage created by extravagant packaging and disposables—and by the constant change that makes usable objects obsolete and creates markets for replacements. For the historical study of garbage to contribute both to an understanding of the history of the twentieth century and to current discussions of solid waste, we need to know about the development of wanting and wasting alike.

**Probing Urban Waste:
Comments on Susan Strasser's "Waste and Want"**

Gunther Barth

An inquiry into the role of waste and want in recent American history fosters an acute awareness of a dilemma. A wealth of evidence illuminates the subject; however, that very wealth tends to obscure the small portion of the topic that one can only hope to fathom within a reasonable span of time. Occasionally, the range as well as the immediacy of a subject inspires scholars to develop rather idiosyncratic formulations on it, reflecting the great variety of insights derivable from a substantial body of material. Many of these insights form the basis for a distinct approach to the subject. At times, the approach alone seems to gain as much attention as the significant subject itself.

In view of these general conditions that surround Professor Susan Strasser's historical inquiry into waste and want, I should like to make a few observations on the management of the expansive evidence and of this complex subject from the perspective of a student of cultural history. These deal, first of all, with the hazards of conceptualization used as a device to order diverse sets of evidence; second, with the relation of urgency to any subject of inquiry; and third, with suggestions about material on attitudes and artifacts in an investigation of waste and want.

Professor Strasser has kept her wide—ranging reflections on waste and want remarkably free from conceptual burden. In this phase of her investigation, the use of extensive conceptualization would have had the same effect as that of a straight jacket. Against the background of her distinguished work in the field of American social history, Susan Strasser has outlined the strands of her multifaceted approach to her latest subject. She has alluded to the intricate relation of the topic and interdisciplinary studies. Analogous to the range of her two splendid studies, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* and *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American*

Mass Market, Professor Strasser has extended her latest topic into many fields of historical inquiry that are crowded with concepts.¹

The variety of concepts surrounding the topic speaks well for its range. Waste and want, junk and consumer culture, obsolescence and fashion cycle, and any other conceivable concept: they all share a handicap. The hazards of reification—and by that phrase I mean a writer's inclination to treat as real something that is only conceptual—loom large with such a vast subject. The substitution of a mental construct that orders the multiple pieces of evidence in place of the facts themselves can jeopardize any historical investigation.

The question of definitions in such a complex subject as waste and want enhances the problems inherent in working with concepts, as long as the meaning attached to the facts remains vague. The set of ideas that Americans attached to the word "junk" as a component of their emerging consumer culture in the second half of the nineteenth century thrived on a considerable range of feelings associated with that junk. Most were in line with the definition given in Mathews' *Dictionary of Americanisms*, which traced the noun to the *Congressional Globe*, February 23, 1841, and defined junk as "miscellaneous secondhand or discarded articles of little or no value."²

Madame Jane Junk, the heroine of a 539–page novel published in San Francisco in 1876, adhered to the conventional definition of junk just long enough to qualify it for the reader before she attached to the noun quite different, diverse connotations. She identified junk as a source for moral lessons on prison reform, found in the exposure to junk a chance to acquire virtue, and ultimately regarded junk as a component of people's inquiry into humanity.³ My reference to Madame Jane Junk may finally serve as suggestion to any explorer of trash to probe the junk variety of belles-lettres for the light they throw on various meanings of key terms in an investigation of waste and want.

¹ Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York, 1982); Susan Strasser, *Satisfaction Guaranteed: The Making of the American Mass Market* (New York, 1989).

² Milford M. Mathews (ed.), *A Dictionary of Americanisms on Historical Principles*, 2 vols. (Chicago, 1951), I, 919.

³ Oraquill (pseud., Mary Bornemann), *Madame Jane Junk and Joe: A Novel* (San Francisco, 1876).

The subtitle of today's lecture, "The Other Side of Consumption," attests to the heightened awareness and significance of the subject in contemporary society. The lecture exposed the vast realm of consumption that has so often stimulated rather than satisfied the appetite of Americans. In the light of the growing awareness of the finite character of the resources of the United States, the subtitle evokes the feeling of urgency or relevancy, which students of history rarely ignore. Urgency is a constant in their professional experience, and as a rule, they rise to the challenge of putting urgent issues into a broad historical context so as to provide a useful perspective on the present situation. Any exploration of the many forms of consumption will benefit from a broad perspective.

A rapid and unplanned consumption of urban space presaged the intensified urbanization of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which is generally considered one of the factors that prepared the stage for other forms of heedless consumption. The rapid growth of London in the seventeenth century provides one example of such a phenomenon. In 1662 Sir William Petty (1623–1687) observed the westward expansion of London into the direction of the winds for nine months of the year. He noted the effect that poor environmental conditions had on urban growth. As a result of the enormous increase of coal consumption during the seventeenth century, coal fires had turned London into an increasingly unattractive place to live even long before the so-called Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The movement of affluent people to the west of London, away from the stench and smog of the city, had also forced many poor people dependent on the rich to follow them. This process further extended the environmental problem.

Even in the 1620s, the inhabitants of the royal palace at Whitehall, who had regularly been annoyed by such shortcomings of the London scene as bad pavement and blocked passageways, complained about a new environmental problem. Now they were particularly concerned with air pollution, as Thomas G. Barnes stressed in his essay on the "Environmental Control of London Building." The air pollution was "caused by dung and garbage in

buildings and streets and by industrial smoke."⁴ But an intricate set of circumstances that rather decisively curbed royal prerogatives in England during the seventeenth century kept autocratic officials from responding to the urgency of the problem.

Professor Strasser has subordinated the urgency of the subject to her insistence on a historical perspective, which gave rise to many fascinating questions during her lecture. Working under the constraint of time, I should like to comment on one of them. "How did concerns about style and fashion, once an indulgence few could afford," Professor Strasser asked, "expand into American culture at large?" In a variety of ways, style and fashion have always been components of American culture. Historical circumstances, so it seems to me, did not cause or contribute to an expansion of style and fashion into American culture; early on, however, American culture rested on attitudes that favored and produced change, and that is the essential force accounting for style and fashion.

While I have previously taken evidence from the seventeenth century, evidence from the nineteenth century may suffice for the present point. Commenting on the American urban scene, one traveler noted in 1849: "All is moving and removing, organizing and disorganizing, building up and tearing down," in describing what a few years earlier Walt Whitman had called the American "pulldown-and-build-over-again-spirit."⁵ In 1856 *Harper's Monthly* emphasized that New York "is never the same city for a dozen years altogether," and explained why anyone born there forty years ago "finds nothing, absolutely nothing, of the New York he knew."⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville summed up the attitude of Americans, attesting to their fundamental affinity to style and fashion in his pithy statement: "They love change, but they are afraid of revolu-

⁴ Thomas G. Barnes, "The Prerogative and Environmental Control of London Building in the Early Seventeenth Century: The Lost Opportunity," *California Law Review* 58 (November 1970): 1334.

⁵ J[ohn] C. Myers, *Sketches of a Tour Through the Northern and Eastern States, the Canadas and Nova Scotia* (Harrisonburg, Va., 1849), 51; *American Review* 2 (November 1845): 536-37, quoted in Emory Holloway, comp., *The Uncollected Poetry and Prose of Walt Whitman*, 2 vols. (Garden City, N.Y.), I, 92.

⁶ Editor's Easy Chair," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 13 (July 1856): 272.

tion."⁷ Concerns about style and fashion, commensurate with an individual's economic and intellectual means, have always been a part of American society.

My comments on the role of concepts and the role of urgency in an investigation of subjects related to the topic of "Waste and Want" highlight the historical complexity of the subject of Professor Susan Strasser's lecture. This may explain why her present topic has received relatively little attention from students of history in the United States. There is only one historical monograph in the area: Martin Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities: Refuse, Reform, and Environment, 1880–1980*.⁸ Melosi felt inspired for his fine study by childhood memories of the clatter of garbage cans and garbage trucks. However, he never got around to assessing the significance of cacophony in this weekly communal ritual that atones for excessive consumption, and that aspect of the subject, the sounds of waste, has not touched on Susan Strasser's concern, either.

The roles of attitudes and artifacts in the subject of "Waste and Want" are intimately linked in Professor Strasser's lecture. These links, however, strain their cultural contexts at times. The reference to the absence of garbage cans in the early sales catalogues of Montgomery Ward and Sears, Roebuck & Co. ignores the cultural context of a country where neither city nor country considered it necessary to put out garbage in special containers. The absence of special containers reflects the attitudes of Americans towards things they acquired deliberately or incidentally in their pursuit of happiness and then discarded with a minimum of effort. During the closing decades of the nineteenth century, despite anxiety about the problems caused by garbage in the streets of big cities, their attitude also attests to the absence of a regulation or autocratic official.

Paris, in 1883, had such an autocratic official. The reputation of Eugene-Rene Poubelle (1831–1907), George Haussmann's most important successor as prefect of the Seine, rests on his 1883 decree. It required that garbage be put out for collection in galvanized metal containers in the French capital. The Municipal Council of Paris

⁷ George Lawrence (trans.), J. P. Mayer and Max Lerner (eds.), *Democracy in America: By Alexis de Tocqueville* (New York, 1966), 614.

⁸ Martin Melosi, *Garbage in the City: Refuse, Reform, and the Environment, 1880–1980* (Chicago, 1981).

denounced the autocratic measure of the central government, and the *chiffonniers* saw their livelihood threatened. The new garbage can, derisively called *poubelle*, has of course immortalized the prefect's name.⁹ Yet no urban or rural autocrat in the United States decreed the use of a galvanized metal container for putting out garbage at the turn of the nineteenth century and supplied the mail-order houses with a new catalogue item.

Both the origin of the word and the literature on the *poubelle*, however, call attention to the contribution of French scholarship to the topic of Susan Strasser's lecture and to the usefulness of a French as well as an English perspective on the subject. The same, of course, would hold true for central European insights into the topic, but a student of United States history should merely allude to this possibility while being a guest at the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C. French scholarship, or scholarship dealing with France, has addressed such basic components of the subject as smells and sewers. Smells, like sounds, so closely related to waste and to want, smells as a nineteenth-century historical subject, until recently, seemed to have been almost exclusively the domain of Victorian and Edwardian novelists. A few years ago, however, Alain Corbin, in *The Foul and the Fragrant*, brilliantly discussed odor and the French imagination, thereby opening avenues for the investigation of an intriguing subject.¹⁰ Most recently, Donald Reid has explored *Paris Sewers and Sewermen*.¹¹

These explorations of Alain Corbin and Donald Reid into the realm of smells and sewers provide yet another perspective on the rich insights that Professor Strasser has telescoped into this afternoon's lecture. She has shared with us her investigation of a topic that, despite its public character and constant concern, is frequently shrouded in enigma and ignorance. Without the support structure of an extensive monographic literature on the topic in United States history, her scholarship and perceptivity have clarified major areas of

⁹ A[llen] Mitchell, "Eugene-Rene Poubelle," Patrick Hutton (ed.), *Historical Dictionary of the Third French Republic, 1870–1940*, 2 vols. (London, 1986), II, 801–02.

¹⁰ Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986).

¹¹ Donald Reid, *Paris Sewers and Sewermen: Realities and Representations* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991).

obfuscation. Her most recent endeavor, "Waste and Want," promises a much-needed historical perspective on actions and attitudes we all share. We are eager to understand them within their historical context with the help of her path-breaking scholarship.

Wasteland: Wanted Land for Conservation

Wolfgang Erz

In calling for speculations and suggestions for further research at the end of her lecture, Susan Strasser observed that we need more knowledge about the impact of ideological factors and attitudinal changes on the way societies deal with the question of waste and, in particular, about its relationship to environmental developments and cultural perceptions of the environment and environmental issues. While taking Professor Strasser's lecture as a stimulus, I am not actually going to pursue her topic of waste in connection with production and consumption and the dualism of use and uselessness; rather, I would like to follow up on some of her stimulating ideas and methods and to make some suggestions of my own for the new and as yet not very widespread branch of environmental history.

The subject I have chosen is very similar to Professor Strasser's—verbally, ideologically, and as it relates to some of the functions and processes that she has pointed out: the example of wasteland in the context of the history of nature conservation in Germany.

By the term "wasteland," I mean land that is not in use for production (even though it may be productive), also called idle land or fallow land—*Ödland*, or sometimes *Unland* in German. The German word *Ödland* evokes images of desolate areas, even the idea of desperate emotion or dreariness of thought. This is not the case, however, when we call to mind the image of a sand dune coast or a heath, or a walk in high mountain areas or forests not being used for timber production. The meaning and development of wasteland in the United States are not very different from those in Germany. In the United States, the ethics and aesthetics of wasteland were formulated mainly by Aldo Leopold's "land ethic," and in particular in his term "wilderness" (or "wild land"). Some of his ideas can be found in the *Whig Almanac* of 1843. The main difference between wild lands in the United States and wasteland in Germany may best be seen from outer space; there are only very few areas of wasteland in Germany, and the single patches are very small in comparison with the vast areas in the States. But their scarcity makes such areas even more important.

Wasteland is always a highly valued ecological asset for nature conservation. In heavily populated and industrialized countries like Germany, ensuring the existence of a great variety of wildlife species and of true natural beauty is linked, to a certain extent, with the assumption that wasteland will always be available. Wasteland has an ecological and recreational value as open space in urban areas, in addition to its critical value as habitats for a diversity of otherwise disappearing species of animals and plants. In Germany there has always existed a dualism about having any kind of wasteland. On the one hand, its appearance is considered non-acceptable by some—a sentiment based, in my opinion, on the typical German attitudes of orderliness, cleanliness, and what Susan Strasser calls "civic beauty." On the other hand, wasteland has provoked an appreciation of romantic beauty and a fanciful enthusiasm for wilderness similar to those expressed in the *Whig Almanac* or by Aldo Leopold. In an essay on beauty and nobility in 1796, the German poet Friedrich von Schiller praised the "indigenous disorder of the national landscape." Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, a German historian and author of *The Natural History of the German People* probably initiated in some form the ideas for a conservation movement in Germany in 1853 by claiming: "For countries it was called progress to stand up for the 'rights of the acre', but now it is also a matter of progress to stand up for the 'rights of the wilderness'." This early puristic idea in Germany was a reaction to the loss of the last parts of wilderness, of waste land, during the process of the Industrial Revolution, and the beginning of the end of traditional agriculture in Germany, which turned great portions of wasteland into productive land.

Today it is exactly this period around 1850, which still had a high proportion and a wide ecological variety of wasteland, that is used as a reference point for evaluating the disappearance or considerable reduction of populations of wildlife species, which are nowadays recorded in "Red Data Books" of endangered or extinct species of animals and plants. The situation of land and landscape around 1850 has been used as a historically fixed point or as some sort of retrospective idealistic goal for the regeneration and renaturalizing (*Renaturierung*) of wildlife variety in Germany today. Until this period, we can observe a development of wasteland following along lines similar to that of waste caused by production and consumption, which Professor Strasser has pointed out. This development may be characterized by the following points: (1) Wasteland increases in

periods of wealth and affluence and through actions (or non-actions) of prosperous groups in society. (2) Wasteland is reduced during periods of economic depression. (3) Attitudes about the meaning of wasteland to society are based "on a distinction between things belonging to no one and things belonging to someone." (4) The opinion of wasteland is changing due to different land-use cultures—producer and consumer cultures in a broad sense—in the context of changing social ideas, revealing the conflict of economy versus ecology observed today (in the particular case of wasteland showing a slight trend toward ecology). The first two statements reveal the phenomenon that Susan Strasser has cited from Kevin Lynch: that wasteland, like refuse, can "be understood as part of a social cycle of creation and decay that has a model in natural processes."

Wasteland once was a by-product of ancient land use of economic abundance or squandering by some classes of people. Such was the case during the period of feudalism, when the nobility could allow its forests or even the fields of serfs to be destroyed by game. And this was the case, too, in the northern part of Germany during the golden age of commerce of the *Hanse*, a league of merchants—or rather of their cities—ranging from the western coast of the North Sea to the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea from the fourteenth century to the beginning of the sixteenth century. Large areas of forests in northern Germany were turned into still-existing areas of heath by using the timber for building the large fleets of the various Hanseatic cities, for constructing houses (especially their foundations) in swampy grounds near the North Sea coast, for making barrels (used as containers for many goods, especially for herring), and of course for firewood. Thus we owe our largest heath land in Europe to the prosperity of the harbor cities of the Hanseatic League in medieval times. Smaller areas of heath and other forms of wasteland were created during the same period and by similar processes.

In contrast, these heath areas and other wasteland areas were reduced during periods of economic depression. This happened because of two factors: by the demand for more productive land, which resulted in the need to enlarge the space of production by turning wasteland into productive land; and by providing some kind of employment for people out of work, such as during the Great Depression, just after the Second World War, and during times when prisoners of war were used as forced labor during both world

wars. In the latter case, the efforts to provide work were probably more important than the goal to increase productivity of less productive land.

From Susan Strasser's lecture on the phenomenon of waste, we have learned about the distinction "between things belonging to no one and things belonging to someone." This distinction can be observed in the development and appraisal of wasteland as well. We can find higher proportions of wasteland in collective farming systems, in agriculture systems containing large areas of common or collective property, than in systems characterized by more individual property, where areas belong to small landholders. This fact can be made clear in comparing the agricultural areas of the two parts of Germany: the former socialistic eastern part, with its former agricultural collectivisation, and the western part. The existence of some thriving populations of rare or endangered species of animals and plants in the eastern part of Germany indicates a higher proportion of different and ecologically more valuable wasteland habitats within these agricultural areas. At this point, it has to be added that the wide border which separated the two former Germanies has produced one of the ecologically most important wasteland areas: a belt extending from north to south that resulted from its forty-five years of existence as a no-man's land. Similar conditions have been found in such areas as the former railway stations and the former dwellings near the Wall in Berlin. These favorable ecological areas will now be turned into privately used land. Through this change, as the most valuable habitats of the whole downtown area of Berlin, they will lose their ecological importance and become ordinary city grounds for dwelling, commercial, industrial, or traffic use within the process of new political growth of the capital.

These two examples remind us of Susan Strasser's apothegm that "marginal categories get stored in marginal places"; that, in the words of Kevin Lynch, wastelands and waste belong to the "untended landscapes" or "backsides"; and that (to cite another expression) they belong to a "backward economy." But we have to keep in mind that marginal conditions and a backward economy normally lead to favorable ecological conditions in the sense of nature conservation.

Such favorable trends for wasteland can be observed in the "forward" economy of the present agricultural policy of the European Economic Community (EEC), which is really a squandering, surplus economy. In the late 1960s, even during a "crisis of abun-

dance," as the president of the German Farmers' Association called it, the development of so-called set-aside areas in the countryside to reduce agricultural overproduction in the EEC was regarded a national (or even subcontinental) tragedy. There was a demonization of wasteland during this time by the agricultural community, while the ecological movement regarded this development as a chance not only to lower expensive overproduction but also to reestablish ecological conditions through lower input of energy, chemical fertilizers, and pesticides. This allowed a variety of habitats that had disappeared by agricultural intensification mainly in the late 1950s and early 1960s the chance to regenerate and the former richness of wildlife to resettle in these set-aside areas and in other parts of wasteland within agricultural areas, thus functioning as ecological islands.

The time around 1850 has been called the fixing point or vantage point for the reestablishment of wildlife variety. The years around the late 1950s to the early 1960s, just before the agricultural policy of the EEC started to change the entire countryside in large parts of Western Europe, is considered the period of reference for environmental policy to reshape, regenerate, or revitalize the countryside or the "agricultural landscape" (*Agrarlandschaft*). This should be achieved now by lowering agricultural productivity, by a policy that promotes less intensive farming, or by the EEC's program of set-aside areas, i.e. by a process of "land recycling" that turns highly productive land into less productive land or even into wasteland. This can happen because, since the early 1980s, public opinion toward the environment and immaterial values has changed, and a higher appraisal of wasteland can be observed. Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl's declaration of 1853 propagating the "rights of the wilderness" as opposed to the "rights of the acre" has finally started to receive true recognition. By historical standards, one might call this span of 130 years the typical gestation period in nature conservation, or the amount of time it takes for a new idea, an innovation in thinking, to finally become reality.

Today the development of land recycling is characterized by a reciprocal process in comparison to the system of waste recycling, where useless matter is turned into useful matter, as Susan Strasser has pointed out. Michael Thomson's rubbish theory, which claims that "objects move both into and out of the category of rubbish," can be applied to the case of wasteland. It may also be applied to

Susan Strasser's observation that "objects ... no longer desired by some" are (now) "desirable to others," when we regard the increasing desire of a growing part of industrial society for wasteland as an asset for conservation.

Inspired by Susan Strasser's topic of waste, and especially by her methodological approach, I have tried to follow some of her compelling ideas and conclusions while adapting them to a distinctive but still very similar topic—wasteland. My intention has been to show another part of the extensive field of environmental history that is linked to economic, social, and cultural history "open for cross-cultural and comparative studies," as Susan Strasser has concluded, and that demands "complex approaches to historical relationships between environmental issues and economic ones." I regret that my presentation raised more questions than it gave answers. But since I am an ecologist and not a historian, I feel free in anticipating that more and better answers might be given by historians, if more come to join the small community of environmental historians everywhere in the world and are ready to work with ecologists in an interdisciplinary approach.