
BOOK REVIEW

Susan Strasser: *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash*.
New York: Metropolitan Books, 1999.

Much is written about trash: the technicalities of its removal,¹ its history,² the mob and corporate control of the carting industry,³ even the archaeology of artifacts as a window to understanding past societies.⁴ In her new book, historian Susan Strasser takes a different tack and asks a different question. She uses the research methods of historians to interpret the social implications of sorting trash in different periods. By offering a social history rather than a technocratic vision, *Waste and Want* is a refreshing history of trash.

Susan Strasser is a consummate researcher, although one reviewer criticized her for focusing on the production of the disposable feminine napkin Kotex, originally the commodity form of left-over cellucotton, "the material...developed for bandages during World War I."⁵ (p. 163) Strasser describes the sorting, sale, barter, and reuse of a wide variety of commodities over time, material by material over the last 150 years.

Strasser tells us of Morillo Noyes, an 1880s Burlington, Vermont manufacturer of tin ware, who bought, sold, and bartered for items like rags and rubber obtained from households.

Noyes's extensive memoranda and barter lists provide a peek into the daily workings of the early industrial "recycling" system. Although the word did not yet

¹Magazines such as *BioCycle* and *MSW Management*.

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

³Louis Blumberg and Robert Gottlieb, *War on Waste: Can America Win its Battle with Garbage?* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1989), and Harold Crooks, *Giants of Garbage: The Rise of the Global Waste Industry and the Politics of Pollution Control* (Toronto: James Lorimer, 1993).

⁴W.L. Rathje and Cullen Murphy, *Rubbish!: The Archaeology of Garbage* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992).

⁵M.G. Lord, "Litterbugs: A Study of Trash and How It Has Changed Our Culture," *New York Times Magazine*, September 19, 1999, p. 34.

exist, the process — the return of household wastes to manufacturers for use as raw materials — was inherent to production in some industries, central to the distribution of consumer goods, and an important habit of daily life. Indeed, the disposition of waste products is an integral, if unrecognized, part of industrialization, linked to the processes of production, distribution, purchase, and use. (p. 72)

We also learn that as early as the late 1800s “Goodwill Industries and the Salvation Army would repair and resell...[discards], providing both work for the poor and a store where even paupers could go shopping.” (p. 114) These services continue to this day. In another example, Strasser tells how scarcities of the Second World War transformed waste into valuable materials when there were scrap drives “for iron, steel, tin, rubber, and rags.” (p. 243)

New forms of waste have been created with the production of single use commodities (commodities that are used only once and then are discarded). Strasser offers the example of the efficiency movement of the early 1900s which lead to the development of disposable paper products (not just Kotex). A single use of paper was seen as a time saver for housewives, but it also accelerated the production of waste.

Strasser is at her best when describing social interactions. Readers will find her history of consumption and exchange rich in detail. For Strasser, “trash has always been a product of sorting and...what counts as trash has always depended on who was counting.” (p. 289) Strasser’s book truly is “a history of trashmaking as a social process.” (p. 19)

There are two weaknesses in this book: Strasser does not consistently see trashmaking as an integral part of the production process, and fails to bring her story up to date.

On the first point, people make decisions about production of commodities that quickly become trash. What should be produced? How should it be produced? Out of what materials? How much packaging should there be? Out of what materials should the packaging be made? The answers to these questions change over time and are part of the social history of trash. Production of single-use commodities could not occur outside of an established system designed to collect discarded materials. It does not matter if these materials are remanufactured into new commodities as happens with aluminum soda cans, or if the material is simply collected and sent to long-term storage in a landfill or to thermal processing in an incinerator which is the destination of almost 50 percent of discarded paper packaging. Slightly more than 50

percent of packaging is recovered for recycling (1996 figures). If all our waste had to stay in our homes, we would stop buying commodities that quickly lead to discards. We would need to find another alternative. And manufacturers would not produce short-lived products. Production and consumption are closely bound together. The history of consumption and exchange is central to understanding capitalism, but that is not enough. The history of production also informs the generation of waste.

On the second point, Strasser would argue that bringing her story up to the present was outside of the task she set for herself. That is too bad. She clearly understands that the discarded coat, textile, bone, pot or pan is a commodity that can be manufactured into a new commodity with beneficial use or even be seen as a product with beneficial use as is. What she does not explore is that heterogeneous municipal solid waste has itself become a commodity. Garbage is an item of interstate commerce and the process of trash becoming an item of commerce is an important aspect of contemporary social history. It underpins our profligate consumer society.

Waste and Want's weakness lies in what it does not cover, but this does not mean it has a narrow focus. *Waste and Want* is rich with the historical detail of how waste permeates the fabric of our society. An environmental movement attempting to stop ground water contamination, air pollution, and resource destruction cannot succeed without knowing the history. For that story, *Waste and Want* is must reading. Future descriptions of the history of trashmaking will have to bring the story up-to-date while integrally including the social history of the production of trash. — **Maarten deKadt**

