



## Trash Through the Ages

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“I see you got the good garbage bags,” said my husband.

He meant the white tall kitchen garbage bags with the red drawstring—sturdy white plastic that I can easily grab, tote out to the garage, and fling into the big trash receptacle. We were both instantly aware of the irony. I spent extra money on virgin plastic to gather up my refuse, literally buying trash at the store to put my other trash into so it could be thrown into the trash can outside.

“I’m worth it,” I said, in jest, but the incident got me thinking.

Friends and family love to tease me about my trash obsession, but going green—which I thought was all about reducing, reusing, and recycling—is also about garbage. My obsession began in August 2005 when Hurricane Katrina struck. I remembered sitting numbly in front of the television for several days, overwhelmed by the horror of the storm’s aftermath. One image in particular haunts me. Outside the New Orleans Superdome, several elderly citizens were slumped on blankets. Surrounded by piles of trash that had gone uncollected—water bottles, pop cans, plastic bags, shredded cardboard packaging, food containers—there they were, humans waiting for help, knee-deep in a lot of brightly colored disposable debris. That’s us, I thought. That’s our stuff.

Every human civilization has had stuff, but we twenty-first century people really take the cake. It wasn’t

always this way. I just finished *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* by Susan Strasser, a history professor slightly more obsessed about trash than I am. She describes Americans’ attitudes about garbage from the birth of our nation and onward, demonstrating how we’ve come full circle.

We started out finding reuses for all of our meager belongings, sorting out our old material into rags, turning ashes into soap, making over our clothes. Because most people didn’t own a lot, everything had value—even grease. It was a lubricant, a poultice, and a flavoring. (To this day, there is always a jam jar filled with bacon grease in my parents’ refrigerator. Dad scoops some out to season the skillet for scrambled eggs or gravy.) Ragmen and “swill children” went door to door, collecting any extras like bones or scraps of cloth. Trash, such as there was, was mostly rotted food or the contents of the chamber pot. It was tossed out the back door to the chickens and hogs—even cities had a hog population. Needless to say, it was an aromatic time to be alive!

In the early part of the twentieth century, according to Strasser, the economy grew and many Americans acquired a disposable income despite the Depression and two world wars. People stopped sorting and reusing and began to worship the gods of convenience and disposability. Since housework had been so time- and labor-intensive, who could blame

them? New technologies and products such as aluminum foil and plastic packaging changed our attitude about our stuff. We lost our connection with craftspeople and raw materials. Things got cheap and lost their value. For the first time ever, people had to pay a service to haul stuff away.

Not everyone could afford to be so careless with their possessions or their money, though. So this was the time that thrift stores and garage sales became popular. “Sorting,” Strasser writes, “is an issue of class: trashmaking both understands 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.”

Now, as landfills grow on the outskirts of town, some of us have returned to the reduce-reuse-recycle mentality, sorting paper, plastic, and metal into bins, tearing our old clothes into rags. I really don’t want to return to the nineteenth century. But I do like cultivating the attitude that things I acquire have value and are worth taking care of, and so are the people who make them. And that somehow having less will make me richer. ■

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