RESOURCE AND WASTE: CURRENT AMERICAN CULTURAL CHANGE

by Leonard Plotnicov

There is an ideological revolution present in contemporary American society more widespread and penetrating than those exotic forms, like the new religious or psychotherapy cults, that have captured much attention. This ideological revolution, with no formal dogma, no coherent body of principles and objectives, is a cognitive and evaluative revision of American conceptions of material goods, the physical environment, and people. It is a new cultural definition of resource and waste.

While the concern for conservation of physical resources became national policy at the beginning of the century, only during the past decade has that concern escalated into warnings of imminent ecological disaster for the United States or the world as a whole. Such warnings now come from reputable sources and are issued with increasing repetition and intensity: the continuing heedless misuse of finite and diminishing resources, unless checked, will result in the loss of the essential material requirements for survival and/or the loss of those elements that provide aesthetic and other humanistic qualities that make our lives worth living.

The modern industrial juggernaut has been permitted to exploit and deplete the world's physical resources. But on the other side of the ecological crisis coin is the irreparable loss of valued aspects of the environment as a consequence of industrial activity. It is especially these consequences that have provoked public outcry, ranging from the deforesting and eroding of West Virginia mountainsides and valleys by strip miners to the loss of dolphins in tuna fishnets, to the flooding of scenic wilderness by the construction of hydroelectric and irrigation dams, to the ecocide of inland waterways, estuaries, and bays through massive and continuous infusions of sewage, crude and bilge oil, industrial wastes, nonbiodegradable plastic debris, and insecticides carried in runoff. If protests have focused on abuse of the physical and natural environment

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rather than of people, who are as vulnerable to the ill effects of ecological mismanagement as are other living things, it is perhaps because it is believed that other voices speak up for people's interests. But the process, and therefore the category, is the same. Industrial effluvia are discharged into the air as well as into rivers, and if most people suffer only mild irritation with air pollution, there are others whose lungs are chronic repositories for industrial garbage—those who work with coal, cotton, or asbestos, or whose livelihood traps them in urban traffic.

Anderson (1969:267), writing as an anthropologist whose social conscience has been pricked, repeats what ecologists and environmentalists have been pointing out, that a tremendous overuse of resources has been "matched by tremendous waste and inefficiency in resource use—the use-once-and-throw-away economy." He states also (1969:265) that "anthropologists have been slow in awakening to this problem," although he provides no clear guidelines as to how they might express a professional responsibility toward understanding or providing practical solutions.[1] Anderson does, however, allude to the cultural component of the problem when he contrasts Oriental and Western religions for their respective moralities and influences on attitudes about mastery over or harmony with nature and the universe (1969:273).

I am concerned here with the cultural antecedents of this problem and of the current efforts to alter American perceptions and habits. The initiative for change comes from diverse sources—government, private industry, and alliances of concerned citizens—institutions and individuals that ordinarily do not seek such common identification. The phenomenon seems sufficiently great to warrant its being considered a social movement, but I leave that for others to judge. It is sufficent to regard the present time as a good one for ethnologists to turn their attention again to the well-worn path of examining basic American perceptions and cultural values. Possibly the American national "spirit" or "genius" (Sapir 1949 [1924]) is undergoing profound change in a critical area. Possibly it is continuing to show tendencies others have described as "schizoid" (Bain 1935), contrasting, contradictory, or dualistic (Hsu 1972; Laski 1948; and Myrdal 1944), for in contemporary American society two opposing cultural strains are present: to waste or not to waste. I will argue that wasting is a singularly American habit, more pervasive and ramifying than has been generally recognized by anthropologists. While this trait persists, it is opposed by a growing tendency to regard waste as sinful. This does not preclude the validity and value of alternative interpretations that may account for the same phenomena, nor is there any attempt here to assess the importance of wasting as an American characteristic relative to other themes or orientations (cf. Kluckhohn and Kluckhohn 1947).

Before we proceed further, it is wise to acknowledge the hazards of such an essay. I have in mind particularly the warning attributed to Marston Bates that anthropologists, when they shift their attention "from nonliterate tribes to literate communities . . . [tend] to over-simplify, sometimes to the point of caricature" (Lantis 1955:1117). One might add that any attempt at making ethnological generalizations about the core values of a pluralistic society of over two hundred million people, particularly when these values are asserted to be challenged and changing, traverses a fine line between courage and foolhardiness. But, given the nature of the topic, oversimplification is unavoidable.

WASTE AND WASTING

The immoderate and wasteful consumption of goods and resources is a powerful habit Americans find difficult to kick. It does not readily respond to exhortations or appeals to reason. Take, for example, the attempts to persuade Americans to drive slower in order to conserve gasoline. The widely publicized arguments for doing so have appealed to both patriotism and self-interest, but with little effect. Most people appear not to believe or simply to disregard the declarations that the country will face an oil shortage of catastrophic dimensions; that the present inefficient utilization of automotive fuels has direct consequences for household supplies and industrial needs; that the situation could result in work stoppages and in the curtailment of the manufacture of products, like plastics and fertilizers, on which we heavily depend; that a suffering economy is aggravated by an adverse balance of payments stemming in large measure from the need to import oil; and that the increased use of public transportation in commuting to and from work would not only conserve fuel, it would reduce the amount of air pollution stemming from vehicular traffic. Governmental attempts to reduce inefficient and uneconomic automotive fuel consumption through increases in gasoline taxes and penalty taxes for luxury automobiles have not prevailed. Only the fifty-five-miles-per-hour speed limit has been legislated (and justified because it saved lives as well as oil—conservation and safety were mixed into the same beneficial package). But where in America is this restriction being observed voluntarily, even with the grace of an additional five miles per hour? What the law has spawned is a camaraderie of highway travelers using citizen-band radios to circumvent its effective enforcement. Those who voluntarily conform to the speed limit remain saliently rare.

Over a generation ago, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., aptly stated that a tradition of wasteful living, fostered

> by an environment of abundance, had fastened itself on the American character, disposing men to condone extravagance in public as well as in private life. . . . In their personal lives Americans were improvident of riches that another people would have saved or frugally used. (1942-43:235)

Schlesinger finds the root cause of American improvidence in the colonial and agrarian experience, following a tradition established by the 1893 seminal essay of Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," from which emerges the characteristic American theme of subduing nature to the demands of human will and determination. For Schlesinger and others, the American pioneer was ruthless (as well as rootless) when it came to utilizing (exploiting) the available resources. He was "indifferent to aesthetic considerations. To the farmer a tree was not a symbol of Nature's unity but an obstacle to be reduced to a stump and then quickly replaced with a patch of corn or vegetables" (1942-43:233). He "encountered harsh criticism from foreign visitors because of his practice of wearing out the land, his neglect of livestock, and his destruction of forest resources. But Old World agriculture was based on a ratio of man to land which in the New World was reversed" (1942-43:235). "Since the agriculturist regarded his farm only as a temporary abode rather than a home" (1942-43:236), he "abandoned the intensive cultivation of the Old World. It was simpler to move on to new fields when the fertility of the old was exhausted" (1942-43:230).

Gorer takes a similar position but stresses the singularity of this American characteristic and extends its ramifications when he says,

> the dominant American attitude toward raw materials, toward things . . . is an attitude which is not, as far as I know, shared by any other society. It can perhaps best be expressed negatively. It is completely opposite to the traditional attitude of peasants, for whom the land and its products are, as it were, part of themselves, of their ancestors and descendants. . . . there is no identification between man and his raw material; man is superior and apart, imposing his will on the human universe.
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> These attitudes are seen most clearly in the case of land itself. Land is not something to be loved and succored, but something to be exploited. Crops are extracted from a piece of land until it is exhausted, in exactly the same way as metal is extracted from a vein until that is exhausted and the mine is abandoned.
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> Of course this treatment of the land had disastrous results in erosion and the creation of dust bowls—man-made deserts—and conservation has become imperative. But this has not deeply changed the attitude toward land. (1964 [1948]:155-156)

In his classic article on the plantation as a social system, Thompson (1959) provides an analysis suggesting that the American southern plantation economy may have been more important in developing this attitude than has been properly appreciated. "Southerners on the land were not quite reconciled to being farmers, at least not in the sense of

the European peasant or squire. They fought the land and exploited it. The planter . . . entered the business to make money and not to pursue a traditional way of life" (1959:32). Further:

> For the plantation system to be viable in its society the ideologies of other institutions had to be articulated with it. Control of the state was a matter of crucial importance: universities and colleges were needed to rationalize and naturalize the planter's authority, churches were needed to make it coincide with the authority of God or *vice versa*. Ultimately, every institution in the society probably became involved in the support of the plantation system. (1959:34)

Thompson extends this analytical theme to show how a plantation economy affected personality characteristics and political relations as well as national institutions. "The man who became a planter was of necessity a man of hard character. . . . he needed determined ruthlessness . . .[and] became par excellence the type of entrepreneur who must first destroy in order to create" (1959:32). What is destroyed is not only soil and forests, an apparently invariable consequence of plantation monocrop culture (Anderson 1969:280), but also societies and people.

> Laborers are imported where native people are insufficient in number or cannot be induced or coerced to supply the necessary labor, and where the native society cannot be broken up and reconstituted in line with the planter's purpose. . . .
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> In those areas of the New World where native Indians were shoved aside and Negroes from Africa were imported to work, to breed and never to govern, classic plantation systems were developed. (Thompson 1959:31)

More recently, Hughes has related this argument to the model of colonial expansion and exploitation. Particularly in the subtropical regions of North America, ecological conditions were suitable for producing sugar and other crops Europe needed but could not cultivate. There thus "developed the usual 'colonial' formula of large-scale agriculture using involuntary labor from what is now called the Third World" (Hughes 1975:16). In short, nature, culture, and people were bent to the will of the planter and farmer.

Hughes also suggests that this formative period in American history has an ecological dimension when it is considered that the colonists and those who pushed into the frontier viewed their progress as settling an "empty" continent (1975:16, 18).[2] Hughes's reminder to us that ecological conceptions are culturally relative is well taken. By pointing this up I do not mean to restate the obvious—that materials and objects are resources only when they are conceived of as instrumental toward some objective, that pork chops to the Muslim are not food. I mean that the way Americans have defined resources is as characteristic of their national culture as are other idiosyncratic traits, and that this American peculiarity is to perceive a resource within a narrow range of potential.

A resource is either earmarked for a specific purpose (or a restricted set of uses) or else it is considered as having a limited life-utility. Like other national traits, this is not characteristic of all segments of the population—certainly not of the poor—and, like other traits, it has undergone diffusion. There are also notable exceptions in American history, such as George Washington Carver's versatile use of the peanut. But if we discount current challenges, this trait is diagnostic of much that is regarded as peculiarly American, whether it is the vision of an empty continent or categorizing an object as a use-once-and-throw-away item. It is a cultural perspective that is compatible with industrial efficiency, accepting the short-sighted view that if a region contains coal, its other attributes are hindrances to the mining process. Unless they can be profitably marketed, which has rarely been the case, these attributes are not resources or even potential resources but only waste products. This attitude serves the industrial economy by the production of goods that are not intended to last. With modern industrial technology it is more efficient, hence more economical, to replace appliances and buildings than continually to revitalize them. The attitude is promoted through the marketing industry, which tries to convince consumers that last year's battery-powered digital watch should be replaced with today's solar-powered model, that the most advanced safety razor produced last year has been superseded by one with a swivel head.

Without affluence this attitude is not possible, but, in itself, affluence is not a sufficient explanation of the American proclivity for intemperance and improvidence when it comes to using resources and goods. Turner's thesis of the opportunity present in frontier America has much merit in understanding how the notion developed. The Europeans who came to colonize America left a country where, for the most part, new lands were not available to an expanding population, where even hunting was legally restricted to the rich. In America these peasants could freely hunt, fish, and claim ownership over "unoccupied" land. The bounty of the continent seemed infinite. When the land was depleted, one could move on to new areas in the unalloyed faith that, with hard work, appetites would be satisfied. Even with the closing of the physical frontier, around 1890, "effect-optimism" (Du Bois 1955:1234) was encouraged by the substitute frontiers of commerce and industry. Success went not to the timid but to the bold, and boldness bordered on ruthlessness. Boldness and aggressive activity became the entrenched keys to success in a milieu where it was believed that resources were present in near-infinite quantity and, if anything, appeared to increase through industrial technology. Time was the only limited resource; it alone could not be wasted.

With time more precious than resources, the competitive climate of free enterprise in America fostered an economic mentality based on rapid

consumption. Little heed was given to the inevitable problem of garbage accumulation. Americans learned to live with garbage, not necessarily to love it. Foreign visitors were appalled at the litter in American cities; they rarely had the chance to see the garbage-clogged streams or the highway shoulders strewn with empty beer cans and soda pop bottles. The air of Pittsburgh was so darkened with smoke and particulate matter that lights had to remain on during the day. Waste and garbage were accumulating at rates unprecedented in human history. Some American municipalities were running out of disposal areas during the 1960s and 1970s. A turnabout began shortly after World War II when municipal authorities and urban planners injected the concept of social cost into cost-benefit analysis.

The American attitude toward goods and resources is almost entirely unknown in traditional societies, which is perhaps why we find such rare exceptions as the potlatch so remarkable and interesting. Those Americans who have lived and traveled abroad, especially in Third World countries, must surely be impressed with the contrastive orientation in which objects are made to last, to be repaired again and again until repair becomes impractical. Even then some other use is found for what remains. Where industrial products have entered traditional societies, the conservational perception remains. Old tires are converted into sandals, scrap metal into tools, and junk into children's toys. There, recycling is so naturally a part of life that there is no self-consciousness about it or concept for it. Only where modern cities have been established is there any problem of garbage accumulation.

Poverty or a dearth of resources undoubtedly constrains people to get more use out of what little they have. Certainly this is true in the United States where, during the Great Depression of the 1930s, the city children of my experience designed elaborately constructed games with chalk on sidewalks and streets, used pop bottle caps as counters in some of these games and banana peels as pieces in others, made toy guns from orange crates to shoot squares cut out of scrap linoleum, converted old skates into scooters, and constructed "racing cars" from the wheels and axles of abandoned baby carriages.

IDEOLOGY AND ANTI-IDEOLOGY

For most Americans hope remains that the way in which the mess was made is the way out of it. Retaining an untrammeled faith in the miracles of modern science and technology (Mason 1955:1268), people hold onto the basic premise that man is master of the universe mechanistically conceived (Du Bois 1955:1233). American effort-optimism is today expressed in the belief that vast reservoirs of oil are yet to

be discovered, that oil will be squeezed from shale or coal, or that by mysterious means the men in white coats toiling in laboratories will pull a rabbit out of a hat and produce a pill to convert water to gasoline. Effort-optimism requires only that we stretch our imagination to see that physical frontiers still exist so that with science fiction turned real we will populate and exploit the ocean bed and outer space in vast and ever expanding, hermetically sealed, self-sufficient colonies. To believe that we have reached our limit is perhaps to recognize that the American way of life has no future, a condition we are naturally disinclined to accept. This unwillingness to accept a finite Earth with finite and depleting means of physical survival, when we had all along been oriented toward an expanding universe, may go a long way to account for the extreme popularity of two recent science fiction films, *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. These films proclaim that there is a future—not necessarily utopian but at least it is a future—and the future is full of futuristic science and technology. To continue as we have been is comforting.

Whether we can continue as we have is an objective question. Whether we think we can, or whether we want to, are subjective and evaluative questions. The new conservationists have found the answer. They express a new mood, the extreme of which appears to be a modernized Luddite ideology; but whether in extreme or moderate form it is the system itself and the values underlying it that are challenged. Like Anderson (1969:277), many declare that energy consumption and all production must level off, and others question the wisdom of building yet more hydroelectric power dams, more nuclear power plants, and still bigger supertankers to carry oil. The effort to block the supersonic Concorde airliner from landing at American airports expresses both a rejection of the notion that faster is better and the fear of continuing ozone depletion of the upper atmosphere.

Some people express this new mood by opting out of the consumer society, following the homespun advice and practical suggestions of the *Whole Earth Catalog*. Its offspring journal, *Mother Earth News*, continually warns its readers that the industrial world is on a course of self-destruction. The journal's pages provide self-reliant measures for coping with the ominous inevitability, with much of the practical advice running along the lines of do-it-yourself recycling. Such people pursue sound ecology as if it were a religious ideology.

Others are trying to effect change from within the system. Some volunteer their time to patrol rivers and other areas for signs of illegal industrial pollution, taking evidence and reporting cases to environmental control authorities. Of equal determination are those who attempt to halt the proliferation of oil tanker harbors, oil pipelines, dams, and nuclear

power plants when these are believed to endanger those aspects of the environment hitherto not considered resources, that is, those which have only recently been redefined as resources. Such efforts can assume massive proportions, as when, in May 1977, over fourteen hundred people were arrested for trespassing as they demonstrated on the site of a proposed nuclear power plant. They were protesting the construction of the Seabrook facility on the New Hampshire coast because they believed that the discharge of heated seawater would endanger marine life. Similar protests continue today unabated.

These activities are indicative of sharp breaks with what some anthropologists have regarded as fundamental American characteristics. Where previously much of American public life could be said to have had "all ideals sacrificed to a limbo of cynical grabbing" devoid of moral responsibility (Mead 1942:203), the popular ecologists express a social concern that responds to a moral imperative they hold higher than the extant legal code. In addition, their outlook runs counter to Gorer's observation that "in America there is a growing tendency to regard each aspect of the universe separately and discretely, as though each existed independently of the other" (1964[1948]:151).[3]

Except for those areas where environmental pollution controls threaten the viability of certain uncompetitive industries and would result in a loss of jobs, popular ecology is an issue with very wide appeal. In various ways it receives support from government, industry, universities and research centers, the news media, and volunteer citizens' groups. From the news media we learn that the Milorganite fertilizer used for lawns and gardens is one product of a vast recycling project that converts a quarter of a million tons of Milwaukee garbage into usable goods—metal, glass, gravel for road building, and fuel to supplement coal in producing electricity. Other American cities are building similar conversion plants or are contemplating doing so, and the Grumman aircraft company proudly advertises that it will supply plants for waste recovery systems. From time to time newspapers carry fillers reporting that a professor of engineering at UCLA has developed a method of making utility poles from coal ash and bottle glass, or that electric power plants in Washington, Michigan, and Vermont are being fueled with cull wood—a combination of scraps, branches, roots, sawdust, and leaves. Recycling centers have appeared in cities throughout the United States. Staffed by volunteers, they serve as depots for the weekly collection of bottles, cans, newspapers, tin, and aluminum foil to be reprocessed.

In Pittsburgh there is also a Creative Recycling Center, a pilot project now federally funded but aiming to be self-supporting, which encourages the homecraft conversion of scrap materials, collected from local industries, into playground equipment, toys, furniture, and decorative

and utilitarian products suitable for home or school. The Center was recently publicized through the Carnegie Museum of Pittsburgh with a special exhibit that demonstrated how government, industry, and individuals could see the potentiality of new products and energy sources in things now thrown away. It is not by chance, but as a reflection of this new mood, that the popular journal *Newsweek* recently carried a full page commentary on the topic, one section of which could serve as the guiding principle of the Creative Recycling Center: "Today's artists have been telling us for years now, and suddenly it becomes loud and clear, that in junk, in the objects we too quickly discard in this time of planned obsolescence, there can be value and beauty, if it is utilized by creative, productive, visionary minds" (Genauer 1977:27). Recent years have also witnessed the appearance of books with titles such as Scrap Craft, Making Treasures from Trash, and How to Make Presents from Odds and Ends, an indication that some publishers see this topic as marketable.

Municipal governments have for many years practiced creative recycling with children's playgrounds—utilizing old vehicles like jeeps and fire engines or making climbing and tunneling constructions from old tires—and are now sponsoring urban renewal projects by way of rehabilitating old houses that are tax delinquent. Previously, these abandoned houses were left to harbor rats, suffer vandalism and perhaps arson, and, until they met the wrecker's ball, contribute to the growth of slums. Now they can be bought cheaply. The new owners, who must renovate and live in them for a specified time, receive tax breaks and low-interest loans for repairs. Support and funding come from private institutions and government agencies at local, state, and federal levels. There is no way yet of determining the success of this venture.

Garage sales, flea markets, rummage sales, and their equivalents in auctions and house sales (in which only the contents, not the house itself, are sold) have experienced a phenomenal growth in American cities during the past decade. This particular means of recycling possessions has made strong inroads into the middle class, if my observations are correct. Advertisements for such sales predominate in suburban and urban middle-class neighborhoods, as indicated in the classified want-ad section of Sunday newspapers. The rummage sales that are held to raise funds for religious and civic organizations and private elementary schools also support the interpretation of a middle-class locus, and, by their appearance, these events mainly attract a middle-class clientele. The less affluent tend to patronize the resale stores run by Goodwill, the Salvation Army, or the St. Vincent de Paul Society, and similar stores privately owned. The economic advantages are not to be denied. The middle-class style of life is expensive, and this is one good way to cut the cost. But

there is an ideological element too: Middle-class people are purchasing others' discards. Buying what would otherwise have been donated to Goodwill is hardly the same thing as buying an antique clock or even a used car. While some of the items may be treasures in disguise, like Oriental rugs, rare books, old hand-forged tools, or antique furniture, the vast bulk are quite mundane and consist of children's toys, cheap books, clothing, ordinary furniture, tools, kitchen utensils, and the like. A very telling symbolic instance of this new evaluative structure was observed at the site of one garage sale. Outside was a bold sign reading GAR(B)AGE SALE.

It is curious that these same people are also garbage pickers, in the literal sense. In Pittsburgh there is an institution, the national distribution of which I am ignorant of. Each neighborhood is given about a week during the spring and summer months when residents may dispose of material that would ordinarily not be accepted by the municipal sanitation personnel. The curbside heaps include the debris of home repairs in broken concrete and plaster, tree and bush prunings, tires, plumbing fixtures and pipes, mattresses, broken furniture, and large and small appliances. Many of the trash piles contain perfectly good items that have simply been replaced by newer ones: old-fashioned porch furniture, for example, or wooden file drawers. At other times the homeowner would have to pay for hauling such matter to legal dumping grounds. But, for a short period each year, designated blocks display piles of assorted discards, the enumeration of which would constitute a Sears catalog. These ephemeral minidumps attract scavengers, of whom some are professionals, who move from neighborhood to neighborhood in pickup trucks or old cars hauling away mattress springs, lamps, and whatever else they deem valuable. The other trash-pickers are the middle-class residents who poke through their neighbors' piles in search of reusable lumber, children's toys that show promise of rehabilitation, or parts that can be salvaged and applied toward the repair of some item like an outdoor charcoal grill. Such behavior certainly supports Hsu's (1972) contention that self-reliance is a core American value, but there are other elements as well. There is frugality here, but frugality expressed by middle-class people picking through garbage is, I believe, something new on the American scene.

Up to this point I have described a relatively familiar social phenomenon. In the next section I will again describe familiar material but I will also try to show that the new and growing re-evaluation of resources pertains to people as well as to material goods and the physical environment.

PEOPLE AS RESOURCE AND WASTE

Many anthropologists, as well as other scholars, have recognized that in the United States certain categories of people are treated as the equivalent of exploitable resources. Gorer, as one example (and like Sapir 1949 [1924]:316), writes how the bodies, muscular strength, and even psyches of American workers are perceived by industrial engineers as adjuncts to machinery, "raw materials to be exploited in the most efficient and economical way" (Gorer 1964 [1948]:142, 162).

While it is true that in a free enterprise system profits take precedence over personnel, it is also true that American industry has a notorious history in the treatment of workers. It is sufficiently well known and does not require repeating here. Among all the measures used to sacrifice laborers for profits, the one that is the most humane is mandatory retirement. But even this defines the worker as expendable and productively exhausted, like an obsolescent or worn-out piece of equipment. As, in our society, we relate the social worth of adults to the kind of useful work they perform, abrupt retirement has tended to be traumatic for most Americans. Many are able to preserve a sense of personal dignity; equally many, if not more, live in poverty and loneliness, or suffer small or outrageous humiliations in geriatric hospitals and nursing homes where, as the expression goes, they have been dumped. How different from the deference accorded aged people in traditional societies, where they are regarded as repositories of wisdom and where they perform useful functions as the patient socializing agents of children, as mediators in disputes, and as links with the supernatural.

Gorer writes also:

> The more the workers were patently alien, patently non-white-American, the greater the tendency to treat them as things. For nearly half its history chattel slavery was current in a great part of the United States, and the treatment generally accorded to the floods of immigrants up to 1924 approximated closely to the treatment of things, of raw material. (1964 [1948]:162)
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> Naturally enough, the poor immigrants were housed in the least desirable slums, their poverty often forcing them to live under conditions of great and unsanitary overcrowding. (1964 [1948]:192)

White, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class appearance and behavior was the yardstick by which social worth was measured. As the population and heterogeneity of the country increased, more and more groups and categories of people fell below the ideal standard and were given ascriptive positions along a continuum, the negative pole of which was social trash. A circular logic prevailed with its own built-in, self-fulfilling prophecy. If some individuals or some groups are intrinsically of inferior social worth, it is the

same as saying that the potential for reaching the ideal standard is lacking or insufficient. It is foolish, then, to invest social and other capital where such limitations prevail. The ideal Horatio Alger hero is not black, yellow, red, or ethnic.

Supporting this perception of intrinsic human potential were folk expressions like "you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear" and "you can't change the leopard's spots." To the extent that groups were perceived as social trash, to that extent were they associated with activities and conditions identified with waste. There are, to be sure, exceptions, but consider that when such groups are housed in slums it is not only a matter of economics. It is also very much a matter of cultural definitions. Slums are the decayed and worn-out portions of a city. In an emic as well as etic sense, slums are urban refuse. Slum landlords have characteristically viewed their investments in tenements as having a short but profitable life. There is no sense in trying to maintain property that is from the start destined to be abandoned as garbage. The people who live there are similarly perceived.[4]

It is not by chance that we describe convicted criminals as "rotting" in prison. Little more than lip service has been paid to the ideal that penal institutions, including "reform" schools, are supposed to rehabilitate, that is, recycle human beings. It is much the same with mental hospitals. "Upon examination, many of these establishments have proven to be hopeless storage dumps trimmed in psychiatric paper. They have served to remove the patient from the scene of his symptomatic behavior, which in itself can be constructive, but this function has been performed by fences, not doctors" (Goffman 1972:335).

I am arguing that American cultural definitions of how resources, material goods, and people are to be used are fundamentally similar. This has contributed to a serious problem of waste disposal, what to do with ever increasing amounts of material and human refuse. The preference is to dump and keep garbage out of sight, but that is no longer possible. We have been creating garbage at a rate faster than it can be processed by natural recycling and we have run out of dumping places.

Prisons and mental institutions are almost everywhere in the United States overcrowded; the incarcerated cannot be processed quickly enough. The system has backed up all the way to unmanageable court calendars. One result of this congestion has been the establishment of halfway houses in residential neighborhoods. Whatever the rationale and justification, the intrusion is usually opposed by local residents, but only middle-class neighborhoods have successfully resisted their implanting. The situation has prompted a lower-class Pittsburgh resident to complain, during an interview for a television news broadcast, that there were too many halfway houses in his neighborhood. "They're dumping on us," he said, and he demanded that all the city's neighborhoods receive "their fair share." He

has used the idiom of democracy to express his estimation of his new neighbors.

Some people are indeed "treated like dirt," and they are the poor, the chronically underemployed and unemployable, and all those who are regarded as lacking the potential for social worth. They tend to be dumped into the neglected areas of our cities, and the welfare doles they are ungraciously given remind them, and convince the more fortunate others, of their social definition. Those who may have started with idealism in becoming social workers and police officers quickly wake up to the fact that they were hired to do dirty work: to handle and process the waste of contemporary American society.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to show that people, material goods, and natural resources are conceptualized similarly at some level in American culture and that this conceptualization has been undergoing change in recent years. As it is a pervasive conceptualization, it is reasonable to suggest that the various civil rights movements that have appeared during the same period have played a part in this change. For it is logically inconsistent to demand political and economic equality while maintaining a cultural premise that groups and categories of people are defined as objects that may be used and discarded, or that their social utility is ascribed, limited, and humble. This applies as well for the depressed racial groups as it does for women, old people, and even ethnic groups, all of which have organized and acted to redefine their potential utility and esteem.

There are parallels and some syntheses suggesting that the flowering of the popular ecology movement and the development of civil rights organizations on the American scene are products of the same historical forces. As an instance, consider the changing popular conceptions of exotic, primitive peoples. Previously they were considered as impediments to the progress of modern civilization. Now, a new respectful attitude has emerged toward the primitive mentality, and the metaphysics and other cultural attributes of primitive peoples have been promoted by the writings of Levi-Strauss and other anthropologists with more popular appeal. There is a developing notion, particularly among younger Americans, of cultural relativity and respect for the integrity of exotic ways of life, and there appear to be enough such people to support organizations like Cultural Survival Inc., which is devoted to exactly what its name implies. It is concerned with the survival of cultural integrity of all societies threatened by modern political and industrial developments, from Brazilian Indians to Canadian Eskimo to Appalachian mountain-

eers. Rivers, whales, and people (read cultures) threatened with extinction are now being given the same concern.

The identification of people with material goods and resources probably remains below the level of surface consciousness, but if their equation is, as I believe it has been, part of the same set of cognitive and evaluative perceptions, then we may expect that changes in the perceptions of one category (say, material goods and resources) will necessarily be accompanied by changes in the other. If I am correct, this does not mean that Americans are on the verge of entering Utopia, nor that these new perceptions necessarily will result in successful adaptation or accommodation to present and future environmental stresses, nor even that new problems will fail to replace the old. If I am even partially correct, then this essay will, I hope, continue to encourage anthropologists to turn their attention to the pressing issues of their own society and time.

NOTES

1. Since Anderson wrote, quite a few anthropologists have shown professional interest in researching matters pertaining to environmental pollution, notably (for this volume) Harumi Befu and Edward Norbeck, who have given their attention to the Japan Inland Sea.

2. "One of the concepts of ecology is 'the carrying capacity' of an environment; carrying capacity is obviously related to technology, social organization, and other characteristics of social systems" (Hughes 1975:19).

3. Gorer explains that "most primitive people view the varied phenomena of the universe they know as deeply and intricately interconnected, so that actions in one sphere will influence or be influenced by actions in a completely different sphere. . . . In Western Europe many of these connections are rejected, but the universe is still conceived as composed of multiple and intricate interconnections" (1964 [1948]:151).

4. It is pertinent to note that an appeal for donations by the Glenmary missionaries, which has appeared in newspapers and magazines, pictures a black boy, about five or six years old, in a setting of poverty. The bold caption reads, "god (sic) made me god (sic) doesn't make junk."

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