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The Throwaway Society: A Look in the back mirror

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Abstract

Whilst public criticisms of an increasingly wasteful consumer society emerged already in late 19th Century, the specific concept of a "Throwaway Society" was first used in the early 1960s. This note on a passionate debate around planned obsolescence and oversaturated consumers offers a short historical glimpse at a persistent, existential problem that still awaits effective solutions.

The term "Throwaway society" does not pertain to well-documented genealogy (Cooper 2005, 2010). At least since 1974, the composite word „throwaway society" has been used in academia (Scott 1974), whilst the shorter notion „throwaway" was mentioned as early as the 1920s (O'Brien 2013; Slade 2006; Strasser 2000). The phenomenon that these terms denote, however, was already recognized toward the end of the nineteenth century, particularly in metropolitan areas (Slade 2006; Strasser 2000; Trentmann 2016).[1]

In 1955, Life Magazine published a short feature entitled „Throwaway Living," where the author reflects on a photograph of a young couple surrounded by flying household objects, suggesting that they are throwing these objects away (see also, Whiteley 1987). In the same year, according to Susan Strasser (2000, p. 274 f.), the term „planned obsolescence" was published for the first time, namely, in the commercial magazine Business Week. However, it was Vance Oakley Packard's (1960) bestseller „The Waste Makers," which first sparked a broader academic as well as societal discussion about the throwaway society.

„The Waste Makers" was the first popular science publication to explicitly expose the throwaway society thesis.[2] With it, Packard joined a discussion that John Kenneth Galbraith (1958) had initiated two years earlier with his provocative book on „The Affluent Society." Galbraith predicted that affluence would lead to oversaturation, which in turn would reduce consumer demand, thus diminishing economic growth. This was considered a threat for the economy, because oversaturation implies the risk of economic stagnation, which is highly

dangerous for the economy and for society. Packard reiterated this idea by describing it as „the haunting problem of saturation."

To prevent stagnation of demand, Packard (1960) argued, Corporate America relied on three strategies: The first strategy was obsolescence of function, the second obsolescence of quality, and the third obsolescence of desirability. According to Strasser (2000, p. 275), Packard did not invent, but adopted this threefold differentiation from an earlier article authored by Martin Mayer (1959).

Obsolescence of function refers to the tangible, technological, and objectively measurable improvements in the features of new products vis-à-vis their predecessors. Obsolescence of quality, in turn, refers to what is now called planned obsolescence, i.e., the deliberate design of product components to wear out soon after a minimum warranty ends, or promoting cosmetic, incremental changes to products as significant improvements that warrant buying the newer version (Cooper 2010; Mayer 1959; Pope 2017). Finally, obsolescence of desirability refers to those advertising practices that aim at systematically educating consumers over generations to appreciate the newest as the best, leading to a universal acceptance of neophilia (addiction to newness). Throwing away possessions has thus become a feature of the current consumer Zeitgeist, whereas the practice of keeping and safeguarding possessions is in decline (Whiteley 1987). We would call this a fast-fashion society.

Obsolescence of function, however legitimate, was not Packard's primary concern. He was apparently more interested in exploring the other two forms of obsolescence, using a wide range of examples to illustrate his point.[3] His book draws particularly on cases from the North American auto industry that he believed was leading the practice of manufacturing qualitative obsolescence and the obsolescence of desirability. For both types of obsolescence, he considered advertising to be the primary driving force. Furthermore, the concurrent popularization and democratization of consumer credit enabled American consumers to fulfill their emerging desires for the new and to replace the old, even without having sufficient financial resources (Cohen 2003). With credit universally available, everyone seemed able to acquire the next fashionable new thing, despite their possessions still being in good working order.

Packard also reflected on the societal consequences of a throwaway society. He noted, for example, that manufactured obsolescence significantly accelerates the depletion of scarce resources and, as a consequence, exacerbates environmental pollution.

In addition, Packard discussed the broader social consequences of a consumer society enamored of novelty. Despite initial economic arguments against oversaturation and the danger of recession, the core issue with a throwaway society is a societal one. The real threat is a new lifestyle that not only manifests in the constant depletion of consumer goods, but also in substantial changes on what constitutes (American) society. Thus, citizens of a throwaway society value merely what contributes to their self-worth and self-confidence, neglecting the eigenvalues of goods and services. Everything converts to a means of self-assurance and social status demonstration. Paying adequate respect to carefully manufactured things and compe- tently delivered services plays a vanishing role. Moreover, an influential attitude of mindless- ness and institutionalized irresponsibility is constantly spreading. Consequently, later authors used notions such as "throwaway culture" or even „throwaway ethic" (Bernheim 1992; Cooper 2010; O'Brien 2013; Slade 2006; Whiteley 1987) to refer to such broader implications. It can also be observed that this throwaway ethic works even beyond the economic sphere and infects non-economic realms such as higher education (Furedi 2009; Newson 2004) or intimate relationships (D'Angelo and Toma 2016; Ward 2017).

Packard himself already used the notion of hedonism (see also Bell 1976). Hedonic consumption, he argued, has acquired the status of predominant modern lifestyle and con- sumer orientation. Everything evolves around individual happiness, nothing else deserves more relevance. In other words, everything becomes consumption and everyone becomes a consumer. Herein lies the irony (or tragedy) of the throwaway society: Everyone is pursuing personal happiness and the good life based on consumption. At the same time, this very consumerist quest for happiness is diminishing social ties, increasing toxic imbalances, and destructing the environment. What may prove effective on an individual scale proves fatal on a collective scale. Happiness here, disaster there. In this sense, the early debates of the throw- away society foreshadow later accounts of social consequences summarized under the notion of „affluenza" (Hamilton and Denniss 2005). Particularly in the realms of food, fashion, and tourism, the propensity to throw products away is extremely high.

In recent years, researchers have tried to redress the negative reputation of the throwaway society by studying consumers' specific motives for replacing and disposing of possessions (Evans 2012; Strasser 2000). Gregson et al. (2007), for example, explore why consumers buy and dispose of the things they own and suggest that each decision to pick out and eliminate certain consumption objects seems reasonably founded from the viewpoint of these consumers rather than overtly wasteful. For Gregson et al. (2007, p. 697), these insights demonstrate „the paucity of the thesis of the throwaway society." However, there is no denying that despite their reasonable motives, these consumers still contributed considerably to keeping the new- replaces-old consumption cycle going.

The diverse contributions to understanding the throwaway society certainly do not constitute an empirically based social theory of its own, but rather a diagnosis of a consumerist zeitgeist. However, this diagnosis has correctly characterized some important facets of an emerging consumer culture over recent decades, and there is no end or solution in near sight. Instead, on land and sea and even in space—just consider the space debris surrounding our planet, which is beginning to pose a severe threat to our satellites—the throwaway society is leaving its marks.

Nevertheless, it should not be ignored that not only do newer publications like „Waste" by Tristram Stuart (2009) support the first, highly critical part of Packard's bestseller but also more and more books argue resolutely against this „throwaway culture" and promote ways of consumption which spare resources. For instance, „Waste and Want" by Susan Strasser (2000) combines both problem analysis and solution proposals, while „Zero Waste Home" by Bea Johnson (2013) represents a growing amount of popular-oriented publications which propagate a radical renunciation from the throwaway society on the micro level, mobilizing

individual consumers to do the right thing. Following this development, strong symbolic expression can also be found in numerous new social innovations like repair cafés and barter clubs, or through let's-do-it-books like „What's Mine is Yours" by Botsman and Rogers (2011), „The Maker Movement Manifesto" by Mark Hatch (2013), or „Free to Make" by Dougherty et al. (2016).

At the same time, consumers are considerably more aware of planned obsolescence, and governments have already started political programs to change these widespread throw-away habits. However, these programs are still insufficient, given the fact that real progress requires a significantly stricter industry and retail regulation. So, it continues to be a substantial and important challenge for consumer policy makers to tackle the throwaway society.

We conclude that the term, thesis, and reality of the throwaway society continues—even despite some populist exaggerations—to describe contemporary consumer culture plausibly, notwithstanding whatever might have been done to avert it. The more successful an economy becomes, the more it turns into a throwaway society, and no society to date has seriously tried to apply the „Tools of Conviviality" that Ivan Illich proposed in 1973, referring to a global practice of all-embracing modesty, self-limitation, and resources saving. As long as this situation remains, the throwaway society will continue to thrive.[4]

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