INTRODUCING FILTH: DIRT, DISGUST, and Modern Life, William Cohen declares: “polluting or filthy objects” can “become conceivably productive, the discarded sources in which riches may lie.” Riches, though, have often been construed as “waste.” The reversibility of the poles—wealth and waste, waste and wealth—became especially apparent with the advent of a so-called consumer society during the latter half of the nineteenth century. A number of the first analysts of that economistic way of understanding modernity, including Thorstein Veblen and H. G. Wells, made this reversibility central to their ideas. But such reversibility has a much longer history, involving a general shift from economic and social theories that seek to make clear distinctions between wealth and waste to modern ones where the distinctions blur, as in Veblen and Wells; in some versions of post-modernism the distinctions dissolve altogether.

Cohen also writes: “As it breaches subject/object distinctions . . . filth . . . covers two radically different imaginary categories, which I designate polluting and reusable. The former—filth proper—is wholly unregenerate.” Given the reversibility of the poles (and various modes of the scrambling or hybridization of values), what is the meaning of “filth proper”? Proper filth? Filthy property? Is there any filth that is not potentially “reusable” and, hence, valuable? Shit is valuable as fertilizer, and so on. Inversions and identifications of the two poles are possible if not always common in all cultures. They become commonplace in capitalist consumer culture, beginning roughly in the mid-1800s in Europe and North America. Modernity, then, can be defined as the age in which even filth
began to seem valuable, and postmodernity as the age in which anything has whatever value a consumer places on it. In *Waste and Want* Susan Strasser writes: “what counts as trash depends on who’s counting.” Our era, although not necessarily the end point or “last” stage of capitalism, is one in which everything can be turned to account, and yet nothing (not even the worker who turns into the valued consumer after work) seems to be worth anything. Wal-Mart has institutionalized this postmodern fact of life.

The equation between waste and money is perhaps as old as money itself. It emerges as a central element of socioeconomic theory, however, only with consumer society, after the initial phase of the Industrial Revolution from the 1780s to the 1850s. The shift in economics from emphasizing production to emphasizing consumption, marked by the “marginalist revolution” of the 1870s and the new centrality of price theory, was paralleled by the increasing subjectivism of aesthetic theory associated with the fin de siècle decadent movement and early literary and artistic modernism. Like the atomistic conception of decadence, the equally atomistic (individualistic, egoistic) notion of limitless consumption meant, in part, that anyone’s values or desires were as worthy or as wasteful as anyone else’s. The marketplace, where all values are valuable and everything has its price, was the central institution of the new consumer society, and the marketplace was increasingly equated with the total fungibility of mass democracy. Two diagnoses of these trends come from Veblen and Wells, one an American maverick economist and the other a British novelist, historian, and Fabian socialist. Central to their analyses is the ironic reversibility of wealth and waste.

This transatlantic similitude suggests that the equation can be found elsewhere at about the same time, from roughly 1870 down to World War I, in, for example, John Ruskin’s notion of “illth,” or in Friedrich Nietzsche’s theory of “the transvaluation of all values,” which influenced Georges Bataille’s insistence on the primacy of expenditure. In *The Insatiability of Human Wants* Regenia Gagnier supplies other examples from the same period. The equation of wealth and waste achieves a postmodern apotheosis of sorts in the lucubrations on consumer society of Jean Baudrillard (who with Veblen in mind writes, “The consumption of leisure is a species of potlatch”), and more generally in “rubbish theory” from Michael Thompson to Arthur Kroker and Michael Weinstein—an apotheosis explored in fictional form in Don DeLillo’s novel *Underworld*.

After a brief survey of the paradoxical imbrication of waste and wealth in economic thinking from John Locke to Karl Marx, we turn to Veblen and Wells. Though the two seem to have been unaware of each other’s work, both were early advocates of a cultural modernism that in some of its avatars repudiated consumerist materialism in favor of a functionalist efficiency that sought to “supplant ornament” with “utility.” In that formulation, “ornament” signifies wasteful expenditure. Both Veblen and Wells looked to science, technology, and efficiency as means to limit waste. They were Victorian and modernist enemies of waste in ways that at least
some modernist thinkers, including Bataille and the Surrealists, would reject. But like Bataille and other modernists, Veblen and Wells saw waste as pervasive—so much so, that for them, as for many postmodernists, it was perhaps the very basis of value. Waste is fundamental if only because, as Mary Douglas and many others have observed, cultural value hierarchies arise and maintain themselves by defining and rejecting it. This means in part that for every positive value there is a negative that is in some way equated with waste (and a negative value is, after all, still a value). It also means that value hierarchies can be contested through symbolic inversion, whereby what is normally understood as positive or as valuable comes to be viewed as the reverse—value is seen as waste, and vice versa. Both Veblen and Wells practiced what might be called a sour social science or a sarcastic objectivity, revealing the hollowness of a capitalism in which value is no longer tied to productivity or utility and whose ultimate product is a social and cultural wasteland. We conclude with a glance at DeLillo’s *Underworld*, in which it is no longer possible to distinguish clearly between waste and value. Postmodernity has been defined both as “incredulity toward metanarratives” and as the collapse of value hierarchies. If today waste and value are interchangeable, or even indistinguishable from each other, that is because of the lax teleology—democratic and economic entropy—that both Veblen and Wells were among the first to analyze in economic terms. For Veblen and Wells, “value creates waste, and waste impels the search for new constructions of value,” although for DeLillo it does not appear that the search leads anywhere beyond individuals and their rational—that is, irrational—choices.

**“Waste” in Economic Theory before Veblen and Wells**

Economics understands economies in terms of production and consumption, regulated by supply and demand. Mediating between these poles in all modern and now postmodern societies is money that, as one standard metaphor has it, *lubricates* exchange at all levels and points of industrial and commercial contact. And as all lubricants can do, money often spills out of the channels intended for it: economies, whether capitalist, socialist, or other (even primitive), are subject to leakage, and such leakage (overexpenditure, speculation, bribery, excess taxation, and the like) is one meaning of waste. But money in general, whenever it remains tied to a metallic or other substantial base, is metaphorically tied to waste: a material dross that resists its “transformation . . . into a purely symbolic representative of its essential function,” which is to serve as the dematerialized general equivalent for all values. As Georg Simmel puts it, “The development of money is a striving towards the ideal of a pure symbol of economic value which is never attained.” One upshot of “never attained” is that money inevitably remains tied to materiality, and hence to waste.

Paradoxically, the squandering of money by spendthrifts and gamblers may seem to promote its quasi-religious “striving towards the ideal” by shedding the
dross, or at least by treating it lightly. After all, the Bible advises the rich to divest themselves of their riches if they are to enter heaven. Although the economic and utilitarian rationality attendant upon capitalism dictates against such advice, forms of wasteful expenditure have their religious significance in primitive gift economies, spectacularly exemplified by the practice of potlatch. Bataille counters “the insufficiency of the principle of classical utility” in bourgeois economics with the “principle of loss” or wasteful expenditure, which he identifies with both religion (including potlatch ceremonies) and poetry.17 In any event, in some circumstances wasting money has the appearance, at least, of a spiritual elimination of waste: ridding oneself of “filthy lucre.”18 This is perhaps also one reason why spending on luxuries, or what Veblen famously called “conspicuous consumption,” at times seems virtuous, as with unworldly millionaire Adam Verver in Henry James’s The Golden Bowl.

The wasting of money can be understood as the elimination of waste through the demand that it creates for ever-greater levels of productivity and efficiency. But whether spent wastefully or rationally, spent money is what greases the wheels of mechanical and economic progress. Simmel further notes: “Money carries within itself the structure of the need for luxuries, in that it rejects any limitation upon desire for it—which would be possible only through the relation of definite quantities to our capacity to consume. Yet money, unlike a precious metal used for jewelry, does not need to balance the unlimited desire for it by a growing distance from direct needs, because it has become the correlate of the most basic needs of life as well.”19 In Britain during the eighteenth century, the discourse on luxury was concerned with “conspicuous consumption” as a type of waste that threatened national security.20 In his essay on “Public Credit,” David Hume contended that the creation of the national debt and the stock market had fostered “a stupid and pampered luxury.”21 Throughout history, moreover, luxury had been one of the causes of the decline and fall of empires. But hadn’t it also and equally been, and obviously so, a sign of the triumph of empires? Once any economy overcomes scarcity, and is able to provide its participants with more than bare subsistence, the question of what to do with the excess—the “surplus value,” to use Marx’s phrase—arises. Luxury names one solution to that problem, and it is almost always, according to Enlightenment theorists such as Hume, the wrong, wasteful solution. But the other, supposedly rational solution—to plow the excess back into more production—only exacerbates the problem by leading to more commodities, more wealth and prosperity, and in short to more money, more luxury, and more wasteful spending.22 Capitalism, it seems, is an economic system geared to the transformation of waste into ever-more waste; according to its spendthrift logic, instead of two separate islands, utopia and wasteland turn out to be the same place.

Although the problem of conspicuous consumption can be seen in embryo in the eighteenth-century discourse on luxury, it was not a main issue for the early cap-
italist economists (Adam Smith through John Stuart Mill). Of course they had to account for various types of waste that are the inevitable by-products of the production of wealth. What value to attach to the tailings produced by an iron mine, for example? They worried much about the wasting of capital through inefficiency, depreciation, nonuse, and unwise investment; they worried less about wasteful individual consumption, and little or not at all about the paradox, implicit in the concept of luxury, of wealth as waste.

According to the early economists, waste was a regrettable but minor, perhaps even irrelevant, phenomenon. In a sense, waste was a noneconomical phenomenon—a sort of waste category, so to speak, in relation to rational production and consumption. Certainly they attached some (monetary) value to some forms of waste, most notably “waste lands” or territories, which from the perspective of European imperialism meant much of the rest of the world. They agreed with John Locke, who in his Two Treatises of Government had linked property to the cultivation of land and its non-cultivation to waste. In Locke's influential formulation, “waste land” is identified both with “Nature” and with the potential for great wealth, readily available throughout the world for those who will settle on it, cultivate it, and convert it into productive property. And Locke also identifies property with the use of money. Throughout the world, he writes, “there are still great tracts of ground to be found, which the inhabitants thereof, not having joined with the rest of mankind in the consent of the use of their common money, lie waste, and are more than the people who dwell on it, do, or can make use of, and so still lie in common; though this can scarce happen amongst that part of mankind that have consented to the use of money.”23 Here, as in the economists from Smith to Mill, money rationally aligns itself with both property and productivity; in Two Treatises, at least, the question of wasting money does not arise, and the paradoxical identification of money and waste not at all.24

Locke's portrayal of “the Indians” as nonindustrious and ignorant both of cultivation and of money suggests that they themselves are waste or human refuse. This suggestion foreshadows numerous European portrayals of supposedly noncivilized peoples around the world as surplus or waste populations: if incapable of becoming “civilized,” then they deserve what many came to see as their inevitable extinction.25 And if there were surplus populations in “waste lands” abroad, so also were there waste peoples at home—most famously, the overpopulating poor in Thomas Malthus's Essay on Population.

From the Malthusian perspective, the poor are always an overpopulation, an excrescence or cancerous growth on the body politic. While some savages might improve and even advance to civilization, almost by definition the European poor were unimprovable. “To remove the wants of the lower classes” is impossible, Malthus declares; “the pressure of distress on this part of a community is an evil so deeply seated that no human ingenuity can reach it.”26 Money only adds to the dilemma, because the more money the poor possess, the greater their inducement...
to overpopulate. In other words, their expenditures beyond bare subsistence can only produce more waste (or wasted lives). For some observers, such as Victorian sage Thomas Carlyle, it was just a short step from recognizing “waste” populations at home to seeing home—Britain, in Carlyle’s case—as an industrial wasteland.

Adam Smith had at least been optimistic that the poor, through thrift and hard work, could gain a modicum of “luxury.” Indeed, Smith redefined that term in part by extending it as a possibility to all levels of society, and not just the “opulent.” One question Smith addresses in *The Wealth of Nations* is what to do with wealth, once a nation or an individual possesses it. He uses “opulence” interchangeably with both “luxury” and “wealth,” and from “luxury” he removes some of the moral and political stigma that earlier thinkers had attached to it. Nevertheless, starting with Malthus, the capitalist economists often equated the poor themselves with waste: wasted lives equal waste matter. In the Rev. Sidney Godolphin Osborne’s pungent phrase, they are “immortal sewerage.” Osborne’s 1853 essay of that title, written in the wake of the Irish Famine of 1845–1850, advocates “the draining of civilization” through emigration to waste lands abroad. So, too, in 1826, economist J. R. McCulloch, urging Parliament to transport at least one-seventh of the population of Ireland to the colonies, warned that a “tide” of Irish paupers was “inundating” England. “[H]alf-famished hordes . . . are daily pouring in from the great officina pauperum” or sewer of Ireland. Pauperism “will find its level. It cannot be heaped up in Leinster and Ulster without overflowing upon England and Scotland.”

From the Malthusian perspective of early economics, prosperity is the goal, but prosperity produces overpopulation and, for the vast majority, poverty: wealth inevitably results in human waste. Smith did not reach that dismal conclusion, but Malthus made it a key issue for subsequent economists. Smith, however, considered another, more traditional version of the wealth as waste equation by arguing that “the prodigal” or spendthrift “encroaches upon his capital . . . By diminishing the funds destined for the employment of productive labour, he necessarily diminishes . . . the quantity of that labour[,] which adds a value to the subject upon which it is bestowed, and, consequently, the value of the annual produce of the land and labour of the whole country, the real wealth and revenue of its inhabitants.” Smith fails to recognize that what “the prodigal” spends, wasting his private “capital,” may well pay for “productive” labor of various sorts. He divides labor into “productive” and “unproductive” categories, and then links “prodigality” only to the latter. For Smith, “prodigality” or “profusion” means wasting money on “the passion for present enjoyment,” which implies (among other types of wasteful activities) frivolous entertainment:

Of two or three hundredweight of provisions, which may sometimes be served up at a great festival, one-half, perhaps, is thrown to the dunghill, and there is always a great deal wasted and abused. But if the expense of
this entertainment had been employed in setting to work masons, car-
penters, upholsterers, mechanics, etc., a quantity of provisions, of equal
value, would have been distributed among a still greater number of peo-
ple who would . . . not have lost or thrown away a single ounce of them.29

In this passage Smith does not consider the possibilities that “masons, carpenters,”
and so on might be employed to help produce the “great” and wasteful “festival” in
the first place, much less that they might very well partake of that festival. There is
no reason why a “productive” worker cannot be employed for the “profusion” of
others, nor why, at least when not working, he cannot himself be a “prodigal.”

Perhaps through a similar line of reasoning, Marx in Capital offers only the
briefest consideration of workers in relation to “luxury.” During his comments on
“luxury production,” directly in response to Smith, Marx notes that there are cir-
cumstances when “wages generally rise, and the working class actually does
receive a greater share in the part of the annual product destined for consump-
tion.”30 However, because his main theme is the immiseration of the working
class under capitalism, he cannot go farther than this, to imagine a situation in
which workers themselves begin to imitate the upper classes through wasteful
spending on frivolous entertainment or ostentatious display. Workers may be
ignorant (blinded by ideology), but they aren’t wasteful, because they possess
nothing to waste: surplus value belongs to the capitalists. Yet because they are
productive, but treated as waste, workers—Marx hoped—would become revolu-
tionaries. Human nature, however, was perhaps both more productive and
more prodigal than Marx assumed.31

Marx was certainly right in contending that capitalism in general is wasteful,
and especially so in regard to the lives of the working class. “From the standpoint
of the capitalist,” Marx declares, any expenditures on the health, safety, and edu-
cation of the workers “would be a senseless and purposeless waste. Yet for all its
stinginess, capitalist production is thoroughly wasteful with human material,
just as its way of distributing its products through trade, and its manner of com-
petition, make it very wasteful of material resources, so that it loses for society
what it gains of the individual capitalist.”32 In short, the ultimate “prodigal” isn’t
the private spendthrift or gambler, but capitalism. Marx was right in many ways,
not least in claiming that capitalism wastes lives. It remained for Veblen to rec-
ognize that through all aspects of its economy and culture, modern (and now
postmodern) capitalism—or so-called consumer society—is characterized by its
prodigal, wasteful ways.

Veblen’s “Gilded Age”

If for Malthus the ultimate forms of both economic and human waste were rep-
resented both by savagery and overpopulation (or by primitive mankind and
modern paupers), Veblen thought differently: “peaceable” savages were exemplars of “the instinct of workmanship,” and the wastefulness of modern capitalism lay only partly in poverty, or the immiseration of workers; it lay also in war and in its ability to generate and squander surplus value or wealth, which in turn promoted the survival of “barbarian”—not “savage”—“predatory” customs into the present. Though benefiting from “machine discipline,” modern civilization is threatened by the wasteful ways of the new “barbarians.” The struggle for the future lay between the “vested interests,” who wasted, and “the technicians. There is no third party.” On one side, the “parasites” who squander; on the other, those who promote technoscientific efficiency. Veblen’s most familiar concept, “conspicuous consumption,” means also “conspicuous waste,” which functions “to absorb any increase in . . . industrial efficiency or output of goods, after the most elementary physical wants have been provided for.”

In Veblen’s Theory of the Leisure Class, as Theodor Adorno puts it, “Leisure and waste are granted their rights, but only ‘aesthetically’; as economist Veblen will have nothing to do with them.” In other words, while Veblen insists on the centrality of leisure, luxury, and waste to modern capitalism, he does so through the lens of techno-rationality, including the values of efficiency, “industry,” and “the instinct for workmanship.” The result is a necessary disjuncture between rational method and irrational subject that helps to produce his “corrosive sarcasm.” Repeatedly, Veblen tries to give his key terms, including “waste,” “conspicuous consumption,” and “pecuniary emulation,” a technical significance to pry them loose from their moralizing connotations, but his very choice of these terms makes him, as Adorno recognizes, as much satirist as scientist.

Veblen voiced many of the concerns that other “progressives” and socialists of his era expressed. He did not agree with William Graham Sumner, under whom he studied economics at Yale, that success in business indicated Darwinian “fitness” in the struggle for life, but perhaps he did agree with Sumner’s 1885 pamphlet Protectionism: The Ism That Teaches That Waste Makes Wealth. He certainly agreed with Henry Demarest Lloyd, who, in his 1894 exposé of the Standard Oil Company, Wealth against Commonwealth, wrote: “The man who should apply in his family or in his citizenship this ‘survival of the fittest’ theory as it is practically professed and operated in business would be a monster, and would be speedily made extinct.” According to Louis Filler, Wealth against Commonwealth “can be regarded as the first muckraking book,” and Theory of the Leisure Class belongs in the same genre—a text exposing the fallaciousness of modern social arrangements, including the production and squandering of wealth during America’s “Gilded Age.” Theory of the Leisure Class and Veblen’s other books and essays were written with the same moral vision and intensity as many contemporary realistic novels, which portrayed the lifestyles of the rich as vacuous ostentation and “pecuniary emulation”—William Dean Howells’s The Rise of Silas Lapham (1885), for example, or Edith Wharton’s House of Mirth (1905).
Like Veblen, earlier economists try to restrict or eliminate this moralizing strain from their supposedly scientific discourse. Unlike Veblen, however, they often wound up with a “hedonistic calculus” that reduced all values to prices, and economic motivations to a utilitarian psychology that was both one-dimensional and unfathomable (whatever gives anyone pleasure is valuable, for whatever reason). In the 1870s William Stanley Jevons, theorizer of marginal utility and, hence, of consumer society, struck the first word from the traditional phrase “political economy” while helping to mathematize economics. But economics obviously kept its critical—political and moralizing—edge in socialist thinkers, including Veblen, although his socialism, like that of H. G. Wells, was highly idiosyncratic. And even orthodox economics moralized in its popular versions, as in Samuel Smiles’s 1875 *Thrift*: “Extravagance is the pervading sin of modern society. It is not confined to the rich and moneyed classes, but extends also to the middle and working classes.” Veblen might have added to this proposition that when the lower classes practice “extravagance,” they do so because of “emulation,” which—like Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony—helps to explain why those classes do not rebel against “the leisure class.”

Veblen recognizes that economic processes are not the rational, efficient, progress machine that the early economists and Smiles posited. Even Marx, Veblen notes, through his materialist version of Hegelianism, treats economic history as a progressive teleology. Both capitalist economics and Hegelian/ Marxist dialectics install a thin rationality at the heart of history—a rationality that, according to Veblen, Darwinism eliminates: “The evolutionary point of view . . . leaves no place for a formulation of natural laws in terms of definitive normality.” The end—goal, but also meaning or value—of any evolutionary sequence is never predetermined by any version of progressive teleology.

Adam Smith’s belief in the “invisible hand” that regulates markets is typical of early economists’ tendency to treat economies as rational progress machines. This was, according to Veblen, a secular version of “natural theology.” In contrast, Veblen recognizes that economies cannot be isolated from their societies and cultures—that they are inextricably bound with values, processes, and institutions that, from the viewpoint of both the classical economists and Marx, are neither rational nor predictable. For Veblen, moreover, the main psychological force underlying capitalism isn’t the profit motive, the utilitarians’ pleasure principle, or rational self-interest, but “emulation,” “the strongest and most alert and persistent of the economic motives proper”: “In an industrial community this propensity for emulation expresses itself in pecuniary emulation; and this, so far as regards the Western civilised communities of the present, is virtually equivalent to saying that it expresses itself in some form of conspicuous waste” (110). According to Veblen, there is something “invidious” to begin with about “ownership” and “property.” Property did not derive in the first instance from the need to settle and cultivate land, as Locke believed, but from “predation” and war.
Including women and slaves, “property set out with being booty held as trophies of the successful raid” (27), Veblen writes; it follows that “the motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation” (25). He continues: “Ownership began and grew into a human institution on grounds unrelated to the subsistence minimum. The dominant incentive was from the outset the invidious distinction attaching to wealth, and . . . no other motive has usurped the primacy at any later stage of development” (26). In short, although civilization has entered a “quasi-peaceable” stage of cultural evolution, “barbarism” has continued into the modern, industrial, capitalist era in the semi-tame but nevertheless “predatory” form of the “leisure class” itself.

The “barbarian” “leisure class” acts as a drag on progress: “The office of the leisure class in social evolution is to retard the movement [forward] and to conserve what is obsolescent” (198)—and of course both obsolescence and the retardation of progress name two more types of waste. Veblen includes both hereditary aristocracies and bourgeois nouveaux riches in the modern “leisure class,” both acting as brakes on democracy as well as on industrial efficiency and progress. The businessman, too, belongs to this wasteful category; contrary to some social Darwinists, such as Sumner and Herbert Spencer, the businessman’s financial success does not mean he is “fittest” to survive in “the struggle for existence.” Veblen had no doubt that “The life of man in society is a struggle for existence” (188). But the members of the “leisure class,” whose “barbarian” ancestors were fit enough, have come to be “sheltered” from economic necessity. Businessmen still live by “predation,” however, practicing “chicane” rather than conquest to profit from the labor and intelligence of others. In so doing, they contribute to the unfitness of capitalist society to survive.

If businessmen indulge in “conspicuous consumption” and “pecuniary emulation” in their private lives, they also engage in wasteful behaviors on the production side of the ledger. According to Veblen, “sabotage” is practiced by management as well as workers; the term refers to any activity that impedes productivity. To maintain profitability by limiting supply, businessmen regularly throw economic monkey wrenches into the machinery. Obviously, too, any enterprise that produces and sells goods for “conspicuous consumption” is “parasitic” on the community at large. Advertising is an example, as are “competitive selling” and war. Such activities undermine the society that engages in them: “A disproportionate growth of parasitic industries, such as most advertising and much of the other efforts that go into competitive selling, as well as warlike expenditure and other industries directed to turning out goods for conspicuously wasteful consumption, would lower the effective vitality of the community to such a degree as to jeopardize its chances of advance or even its life.”

Once production exceeds necessity, fashion in food, clothing, and shelter comes to the fore as an essential element of capitalism. According to sociologist
Jukka Gronow, fashion is “a typical form of waste.” Citing Veblen, Gronow adds that fashion “leads to a faster exhaustion of products: when the style is out of fashion, the product is useless even if it is still in perfect condition.” And with fashion in commodities, the importance of consumer “taste” emerges. Veblen maintains that there is an innate faculty of judgment or taste for the beautiful, but that in modern “pecuniary culture” genuine taste is almost never separable from a vulgar, wasteful preference for “expensiveness,” whether beautiful or not: “The marks of expensiveness come to be accepted as beautiful features of the expensive articles” (130). In everyday practice, in short, taste is no different from “invidious distinction,” which amounts to saying that taste makes waste.

For Veblen, “ emulation” and “the law of conspicuous waste” (116) apply to most areas of modern culture and society. Besides the consuming parasitism of “the leisure class,” there is the annoying wastefulness involved in snobbism, whereby the middle and even lower classes struggle not just to make ends meet, but also to emulate the “leisure class,” typically by spending beyond their means. In the area of “devout observances,” moreover, Veblen sees nothing but “conspicuous consumption” and waste at work (293–331). He says he is not talking about religion as such, but only about clerical and liturgical fashions; yet he points to modern “animism” as an “archaic” remnant of barbarian belief, and he cannot resist including a paragraph on saints and angels as members of “a superhuman vicarious leisure class” (317). Nor do secular culture and “the higher learning” come off any better—that is to say, any less wastefully. As he would later do in The Higher Learning in America (1918), Veblen treats colleges and universities as having fallen under the “pecuniary” spell of “the leisure class.” This has led to much wasteful expenditure of time and energy on such useless topics as dead languages and “the classics,” while the useful sciences have languished. And rivaling the classics as “honorific,” sports—“not only a waste of time, but also a waste of money”—have begun to take “primacy in leisure-class education” (397). Veblen considers, however, that sports and other competitive leisure activities are less wasteful of life and property than the barbarian practice of war. Thus, in modern “peaceable” conditions, “chicane” replaces “devastation,” though “only in an uncertain degree” (240).

For Veblen, Darwinian fitness accords with the values he most clearly approves: scientific rationality, efficiency, and industry, which he equates with (potential) social progress. However, the evolutionary model conceals a contradiction. Certainly evolution is productive, but is it thrifty and efficient like the steam engine or the dynamo? On the contrary, evolution in nature is enormously prodigal—Darwin’s famous “tangled bank”—and so it is also in capitalist society. “Veblen demonstrates that society functions uneconomically in terms of its own criteria,” Adorno writes⁴⁹; in doing so, he demonstrates also the failure of earlier economic discourse to comprehend the centrality of the forms of wasteful prodigality it had...
underestimated or condemned. Thus, Veblen agrees with Marx’s analysis of capitalism as progress and catastrophe together, or as “creative destruction.”50

H. G. Wells and Don DeLillo

From the 1850s on, numerous novelists in Britain as well as America expressed versions of Veblen’s theme of conspicuous consumption while suggesting that wealth and waste were in some sense identical, or at least opposite sides of the same coin. Thus, in Our Mutual Friend Charles Dickens makes the equation between wealth and waste explicit in Boffin’s valuable mountain of “dust” or garbage. And the shady financier Merdle in Little Dorrit and Anthony Trollope’s equally shady Augustus Melmotte in The Way We Live Now reveal how fraudulent forms of money and credit can be simultaneously wealth-begetting and wasteful. Both Merdle and Melmotte are forerunners of Veblen’s businessmen and financiers, who rake in money from industry without doing anything genuinely productive themselves. They are also forerunners of H. G. Wells’s Teddy Ponderevo, inventor and huckster of the quack medicine “Tono-Bungay.”

Like Veblen, Wells sought to synthesize Darwinism and socialism through what he called “evolutionary speculation.”51 Veblen hoped “the instinct of workmanship,” embodied in “engineers” and “technicians,” might one day free society from the “barbaric” customs, including war of “the leisure class”; Wells hoped science and industrial efficiency would “release” mankind “more and more from the stranglehold of past things,” leading to a future utopia under a pacific world government.52 Standing in the way of genuine progress was a capitalism that, through its false forms of productivity (making money from nothing, from “parasitism,” or from shoddy goods), threatened to squander any chance for a rational outcome of history. In Wells’s most ambitious novel, Tono-Bungay, a sweeping portrait of society in the panoramic style of Dickens and Trollope, waste is the central theme—indeed, Wells thought of that term as an alternative title for his “condition-of-England novel.” Wells shares with Veblen a desire to see something redeeming and rational emerge from the wasteland of consumer society, like the order and efficiency he advocated in his nonfiction books.53 But just as for Veblen, biological imperatives and the indeterminacy of evolution threaten to undermine his hopes for the future.54 And to evolution, Wells added the also threatening idea of entropy.

By the end of the century, novelists and intellectuals had begun to associate entropy—the inevitable wasting away of energy, as indicated by the Second Law of Thermodynamics—with both the squandering of wealth and the “degeneration” of traditional conceptions of cultural and moral value under the impact of capitalism and the arrival on the political and economic scene of “the masses.” For many turn-of-the-century intellectuals, the masses were Malthus’s specter of illiterate, overpopulating paupers now equipped with the vote, with half-
educations, and with money to throw away on vulgar entertainments and tawdry goods. Among fin de siècle British writers who take up these issues, none is closer to Veblen in his alertness to the complicities and contradictions between wealth and waste than Wells, who is also one of the first novelists to make entropy a major theme.

In *Tono-Bungay* Wells captures many of the features of a wasteful, “leisure class” culture. The novel depicts an ostensibly progressive story of capitalist entrepreneurship and “self help.” The narrator and protagonist, George Ponderevo, recounts his rise from a lower-middle-class, provincial background. After squandering his early promise as a scientist, George is hired by his Uncle Teddy to help produce and market Tono-Bungay, a patent medicine that for a while is hugely successful. As an entrepreneur, Uncle Teddy embodies the characteristics that Veblen ascribed to businessmen in general. Veblen’s entrepreneurs are “simply supersalesmen,” as Daniel Aaron puts it; “adepts at getting something for nothing . . . ‘sabotagers’ of industrial productiveness,” parasites who succeed by “exploiting mass credulity.”

Uncle Teddy associates what he is doing with America; “I wish to heaven,” he tells his nephew, “I’d been born in America—where things hum.” This is the America—and Britain—of entrepreneurial hype and financial bluff. Uncle Teddy’s “passage from trade to finance” (225) reveals his increasing distance from any genuine productivity. He admits: “I’d like to know what sort of trading isn’t a swindle in its way. Everybody who does a large advertised trade is selling something common on the strength of saying it’s uncommon’” (144). Reflecting on the fraudulent business practices he and his uncle engage in, George frequently sounds like Veblen; toward the end of the novel, he acknowledges: “I and my uncle were no more than specimens of a modern species of brigand, wasting the savings of the public out of the sheer wantonness of enterprise” (399).

Mainly through advertising, George and his uncle quickly become rich, but just as rapidly the bubble bursts and their financial empire collapses—a rise and fall that follows an entropic pattern infusing the narrative and, Wells believed, history itself. Embedded within this entropic pattern are various forms of waste, which are all symptomatic of a rotten society and the wasting away at the heart of the British Empire. The chief emblem of this waste is the patent medicine Tono-Bungay, a commodity—which George derisively calls “mitigated water”—whose value is created by hype and marketing rather than any actual utility. While there is little or no “conspicuous consumption” in buying it, the patent medicine is a symbol for the generative power of capitalism, which can produce wealth from wishful thinking. Soon Uncle Teddy diversifies by producing and marketing Tono-Bungay Hair Stimulant, Tono-Bungay Mouthwash, Tono-Bungay Lozenges, and Tono-Bungay Chocolates. George concludes, however, that “he created nothing, he invented nothing, he economised nothing,” while adding no “real value to human life at all” (237). Through advertising, Uncle
Teddy is able to transform Marx's general formula for capital, M-C-M, into a formula for capitalizing on waste, M-W-M, “in which waste provides the middle term for capital’s reproduction.”

For George, the chief ethical dilemma is that he knows from the outset Tono-Bungay is worthless. For Uncle Teddy, however, that is exactly the point: “the quickest way to get wealth,” he claims, “is to sell the cheapest thing possible in the dearest bottle” (149). The patent medicine’s value derives from illusion. Its promotion is financed by the penniless uncle by playing investors “off one against the other” (141); in their scramble for wealth, they are eager to invest in the next new thing even if it is worthless. For the consumers of Tono-Bungay, Uncle Teddy claims that faith is all his customers desire, a faith that “makes trade! . . . A romantic exchange of commodities and property. Romance. ‘Magination’” (145). Even George’s bohemian friend, Ewart, sees the patent medicine as “poetry” created by advertising, a fantasy pursued by its purchasers who wish to be “perpetually young and beautiful.” “You are artists,” he says of George and his uncle; “The old merchant used to tote about commodities; the new one creates values. He takes something that isn’t worth anything . . . and he makes it worth something” (168–69). Or as Veblen puts it, once “business” has divorced itself from “industry,” its “realities” became mere “money-values, that is to say matters of make-believe . . . The business man’s care is to create needs to be satisfied at a price paid to himself.”

Indeed, Tono-Bungay does produce wealth, leisure, and opportunity. Even its purchasers who are apparently throwing their money away gain, as Ewart claims, a faith or illusion that may have a value of its own. But for George, the fortune and power gained not just through Tono-Bungay, but through capitalism more generally “is all one spectacle of forces running to waste, of people who use and do not replace, the story of a country hectic with a wasting aimless fever of trade and money-making and pleasure-seeking” (412). Uncle Teddy, for example, converts much of his wealth into a wildly wasteful instance of conspicuous consumption. In an ironically titled chapter, “Our Progress,” George gives the reader a tour through a series of houses purchased and built by Uncle Teddy, each one bigger and more spectacular than the last. One implication is that everything is up for sale, including England’s tradition-bound country estates. His uncle becomes, George claims, part of “that multitude of economically ascendant people who are learning to spend money.” He continues: “They plunge, as one plunges into a career; as a class, they talk, think, and dream possessions” (264–65). Like garbage, they “stink” of money (266).

Houses, however, have a relative permanence that runs counter to the riot of wasteful expenditure and consumption that Wells depicts. Architecture slows the circulation of money and commodities, and in that sense undermines the dematerialized workings of capitalist productivity and prodigality. Accordingly, the beginning of the end of the Tono-Bungay financial empire lies in Uncle Teddy’s final, unfinished architectural project, Crest Hill, a “twentieth-century
house” that “grew, and bubbled like a salted snail, and burgeoned and bulged and evermore grew” (292). Like the Back Bay mansion that Silas Lapham builds in Howells’s novel, Crest Hill is a marvel of ostentation, only far more so. “Sooner or later,” George declares, “modern financiers of chance and bluff . . . all seem to bring their luck to the test of realisation, try to make their fluid opulence coagulate out as bricks and mortar, bring moonshine into relations with a weekly wages-sheet. Then the whole fabric of confidence and imagination totters—and down they come” (294). According to this logic, the value of conspicuous consumption, including its use of signs that stand in for wealth, is diminished if overly materialized or preserved. At the same time, Wells suggests that the genuine wealth and cultural value identified with that which has a certain material solidity and permanence, such as Bladesover, the traditional country house that George contrasts to Crest Hill, have been changed beyond recognition.

The deceptive nature of material possessions is further illustrated by a subplot late in the novel. To recoup their financial losses, George and his uncle engage in another ill-conceived venture: to convert “quap,” a rare radioactive mineral found on a West African island, into much-needed cash. When George tries to sail back to England with a load of quap—after a trip that replicates the imperial violence of resource extraction in, for example, King Leopold’s Congo—the radioactive cargo eats through the hull, sinking the ship.62 The episode signals a dark turn in the narrative, an apparent speeding-up of entropic processes, and provides a stunning figure for George’s loss of faith in human progress; in the final analysis, George thinks, human endeavors will all lead to “no splendid climax and finale, no towering accumulation of achievements but just—atomic decay!” (355). Like Tono-Bungay, quap may be potentially of immense value, yet it also epitomizes the waste and decay that Wells sees at work in capitalist modernity.

Nevertheless, however much Wells attempts to make waste carry the weight of his critique, it constantly threatens to transform itself into something valuable. This is evident in the novel’s representation of the consumers of Tono-Bungay—the masses. From time to time Wells, like Malthus, intimated that certain populations were superfluous, and in Anticipations he even advocated the extermination of “countless, needless, and unhappy lives” through “the euthanasia of the weak.”63 George describes London as “the unorganised, abundant substance of some tumorous growth-process, a process which indeed bursts all the outlines of the affected carcass and protrudes such masses as ignoble comfortable Croydon, as tragic impoverished West Ham.” The masses are a cancer on the body politic. “[W]ill those masses ever become structural,” George asks, “will they indeed shape into anything new whatever, or is that cancerous image their true and ultimate diagnosis?” (109). But waste, like the wealth and abundance generated from Tono-Bungay, can simultaneously be valuable. However diseased and useless, the masses and the city they inhabit are also described by George in stimulating, desirable terms. Shortly after the passage about the cancerous masses, George
asserts that London was "so enlarging and broadening . . . The whole illimitable place teemed with suggestions of indefinite and sometimes outrageous possibility, of hidden but magnificent meanings" (113).

So, too, at the end of his story, after describing the novel's manuscript as an incoherent "heap" and after deciding that he is himself an embodiment of "decay," George nevertheless claims that "something comes out of" the "crumbling and confusion, of change and seemingly aimless swelling, of [the] bubbling up and medley of futile loves and sorrows" (419). Even when describing a romantic affair following his failed marriage, George vacillates between seeing love as wasteful and as somehow precious: "Love . . . is a thing adrift, a fruitless thing broken away from its connections . . . [but] It glows in my memory like some bright casual flower starting up amidst the debris of a catastrophe" (403). George would have us believe that everything fits into his entropic vision of eventual, total destruction, and yet each of these examples points to something of value in the midst of "catastrophe." "Something comes out of" the waste and wreckage of modern capitalism, including George's own growing self-knowledge and maturation.

The novel expresses Wells's reflections on waste and value, but it is also itself, as cultural commodity, a form of both waste and value. Its value resides in part in its critique of the other forms of waste and entropy it depicts, but in the last chapter George asserts that he should have called his manuscript *Waste* (412). Moreover, the novel regularly exhibits its failure and anti-progressiveness in diegetic terms. For a narrator who identifies himself as a technically inclined positivist similar to Veblen, George exhibits a surprising enthusiasm for describing the illusions of advertising, mass cultural forms, and "pecuniary emulation." He frequently also falls into various attitudes of aimlessness and indecision; even his futuristic experiments with airplanes are mostly dilettantish. George's life gains an ironic value, however, when his technical interests lead him finally to invent new munitions and war machines, expressing something like Veblen's high valuations of efficiency, engineering, and "industrial workmanship." Both Wells and Veblen, however, placed the machines of war in the immense and growing category of waste. At the very end of his story, George sails into the future having achieved the critical and ideological distance necessary to write his novel (and then to reject it as "waste"). But the cost of gaining both self-knowledge and critical objectivity about the general wastefulness of capitalism and human history is his militarized self at the helm of his experimental "X2 Destroyer," itself a product of modern industrial know-how and super-utility that can and presumably will inflict the ultimate "wasting" on whatever it targets.

A century after Veblen and Wells, the value of many commodities and patterns of economic and social behavior continue to be inextricably bound with their wasteful and often fantastic features. E-money has accelerated the apparently entropic process by which waste and value have become increasingly interchangeable. Arthur Kroker and Michael Weinstein have identified postmodern
“excremental culture” as “a waste-management system . . . a vast plumbing machine for managing the discharge of image effluents.”65 Some postmodern industries, moreover, are learning to treat waste products as so many “resources out of place.”66 In an age that Zygmunt Bauman describes as “liquid modernity,” nothing is allowed to be valueless.67 Today there is money, and a lot of it, to be extracted from waste, whether through its reclamation (recycling) or through trying to deep-six it like Wells's sunken “quap.” Simultaneously, in postmodern culture the value of waste proliferates as a metaphor for that which eludes a rationalized, instrumentalized utility. In DeLillo's Underworld, for example, the central character, Nick Shay, is a waste management expert. On assignment early in the narrative, he visits the recently closed Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island: “He looked at all that soaring garbage and knew for the first time what his job was all about. Not engineering or transportation or source reduction. He dealt in human behavior, people's habits and impulses, their uncontrollable needs and innocent wishes, maybe their passions, certainly their excesses and indulgences but their kindnesses too, their generosity, and the question was how to keep this mass metabolism from overwhelming us.”68

At one level, like Wells's novel, Underworld is a tale of hyper-capitalism, of consumption and superabundance as an engine of desire and excess that ultimately produces mountains of trash. As Ruth Helyer puts it, the novel “demonstrates the problems, not only of disposing of waste, but of identifying waste in the first place.”69 But as with Wells's treatment of entropy, it also expresses a theory of history that allows DeLillo to embrace rather than completely reject the logic of waste. Radioactive waste, like Wells's quap, is one of the categories that most concerns DeLillo. Although the threat of ultimate annihilation hovers in the wings, DeLillo's waste management expert nevertheless reads garbage's irreducible materiality as the price of the ineffability and ordinariness of human activity, as though waste signifies unquantifiable and obscure features of existence, such as passions, habits, impulses, and excesses—perhaps even priceless experiences that no amount of money can buy.70 “Maybe we feel a reverence for waste,” Nick says, “for the redemptive qualities of the things we use and discard.” Quoting this remark, Todd McGowan comments: "In Underworld, waste is everywhere, and it has become holy.”71

From the standpoint of capitalist economics and of the writers we have cited, there is nothing, not even waste, that is not potentially valuable or value-producing. The production of value is also wasteful, and there is nothing valuable that is not potentially wasteful or waste-producing. Nor are the paradoxical linkages between waste and value merely the result of natural cycles of growth and decay. They arise in large measure because, like an empty bottle of Tono-Bungay, the concept of value at the heart of capitalist economics is hollow, a container waiting to be filled by whatever individual agents—producers or consumers—wish to put in it, whether gold dust or quack medicine. In this regard, Veblen's critique of
economic orthodoxy as merely a “hedonistic calculus” is correct. Like money and debt, value and waste are two ends of a spectrum that—today more than ever, when waste management has become big business and shopping or consumption-as-usual is touted as how the average American can best wage the war on terror—forms a closed circle.

Notes

3. Cohen and Johnson, Filth, x.
5. See Gagnier, Insatiability of Human Wants.
6. For “illth” in both Ruskin and Charles Dickens’s Our Mutual Friend, see Gallagher, Body Economic, 86–117.
10. Assuming that postmodernity is, in Fredric Jameson’s phrase, “the cultural logic of late capitalism,” according to that logic, money, via computerization, appears to float free of all material encumbrances, taking on the quasi-theological non-properties of credit (or fiduciary “faith”). See Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991). In much postmodernist fiction and film, including DeLillo’s Underworld, reality has an unreal or irreal (close to insub-
stantial, but not surreal) quality even as the world seems to be inundated with the excrement—“data trash” (Kroker and Weinstein), garbage, ruins, literal shit—of a consumer culture that seems to have no external limits, but only the internal possibility of becoming clogged by its own manic excess or overproduction.


13. Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso, 1993), 95. The reduction of “taste” to the “rational choices” of individual consumers by recent economics can equally well be understood, as both Veblen and Wells understood it, as a *reductio ad absurdum*; that is, to the irrational choices of individuals that add up only to, for Veblen, “conspicuous consumption” and “pecuniary emulation,” and for Wells, to “mitigated water” or “Tono-Bungay.”

14. We take “waste” as a larger, perhaps more vacuous, category than “filth,” in part because of its economic meanings as inefficiency and squandering of money or resources. These, too, can be treated as “filth,” of course, at least metaphorically. To lubrication, compare the metaphoric monetary term “liquidity.” Like “value,” “waste” has countless specific meanings. It is a capacious garbage bin for whatever one cares to throw into it. Its most general meaning, allowing it to cover all of the specific meanings, is that which is deemed to have either no value or only negative value.


16. Ibid., 157.


22. This is, of course, the solution according to orthodox, capitalist economics. For Marx, the solution entailed the revolutionary abolition of “surplus value,” and with it private property and the exploitation of labor.


24. “And thus came in the use of money,” Locke declares, “some lasting thing that men might keep without spoiling, and that, by mutual consent, men would take in exchange for the truly useful but perishable supports of life” (ibid., 139–40). Locke
does not consider the possibility that “men” might exchange money for what is not useful—in other words, that they might waste it—much less that the “lasting thing” could itself be identified with waste (could be, for instance, considered “spoils,” or the result of exploitation: one society’s prosperity based on laying waste to another society). In his essays on money and the recoinage controversy of the 1690s, however, Locke does ruminate about the wasting away of money through, for instance, the clipping of coins. See Constantine George Caffentzis, *Clipped Coins, Abused Words, and Civil Government: John Locke's Philosophy of Money* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1989).


29. Ibid., 449.


34. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899; repr., New York: Penguin, 1979), 110. Unless otherwise indicated, parenthetical page references to Veblen are taken from this work.


37. Daniel Aaron calls Veblen “a moralist” whose America “was a land full of Yahoos” (Men of Good Hope: A Story of American Progressives [New York: Oxford UP, 1961], 213). Susan Strasser writes that Veblen both “analyzed and satirized the rise of consumerism and the expansion of ‘pecuniary emulation”’ (Waste and Want, 198). Though disapproving of “prodigality,” Adam Smith had certainly approved of progress, wealth, and prosperity in national terms. From Malthus through Marx and Mill, however, economics had great difficulty in maintaining a scientific as opposed to moralistic stance toward its main subject, the production and consumption of wealth. In several essays Veblen criticizes his predecessors for basing their arguments on concepts of “natural law” and societal norms that hypostatized capitalism and the “beneficent” workings of free markets. “Of the achievements of the classical economists,” he writes, “the science may be justly proud; but they fall short of the evolu-
tionist’s standard of adequacy” (The Place of Science in Modern Civilisation and Other Essays [1919; repr., New York: Russell and Russell, 1961], 59). He means in part that they treat economics without regard to institutional, cultural, and historical factors; they also treat present arrangements as morally superior to all others, yet Veblen’s own terminology is insistently moralizing.


40. American realists from Howells through John Dos Passos were influenced by Veblen. See Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Literature (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942), 130–35; Clare Virginia Eby, Dreiser and Veblen: Saboteurs of the Status Quo (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1998); Michaels, Gold Standard, 51; and Michael Spindler, Veblen and Modern America: Revolutionary Iconoclast (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 126–41. Howells’s two articles on The Theory of the Leisure Class “helped to launch Veblen’s book” (Aaron, Men of Good Hope, 209). Unlike American realists before World War II, H. G. Wells seems not to have been aware of Veblen, which makes his thematization of “waste” in Tono-Bungay all the more suggestive of a cultural conjuncture that included both the United States and Britain during which that concept surfaced in a variety of contexts.

41. Veblen, Engineers and the Price System, 250.

42. For the marginalists, writes Regenia Gagnier, “Value no longer inhered in goods themselves . . . but in others’ demand for the goods. Political economy’s theory of the productive relationship between land, labor, and capital thus gave way to the statistical analysis of price lists or consumption patterns.” From the 1870s on, the orthodox economists dealt “with wealth rather than welfare” (Gagnier, Insatiability, 4: 44). Because of his emphasis on consumption, it is tempting to see Veblen as contributing to the marginalist revolution in economics. But the evolutionary and ethnological factors in his work make him more akin to Nietzsche than to, say, William Jevons. And he was always some version of a socialist. See “Limitations of Marginal Utility,” in Veblen, Place of Science, 231–51.

43. Samuel Smiles, Thrift (1875; repr., Chicago: Belford, Clarke, 1889), 252.

44. Veblen, Engineers and the Price System, 409–56, 76.

45. Ibid., 144.

46. Ibid., 1–25.


49. Adorno, “Veblen’s Attack on Culture,” 84.
52. Ibid., 648.

Freeland focuses on Wells’s *The Time Machine*, though Tono-Bungay is just as obviously about entropy and “waste removal.” For the entropic trajectory of history, see Wells’s *Anticipations of the Reaction of Mechanical and Scientific Progress on Human Life and Thought* (1901; repr., London: Chapman and Hall, 1902); and also his *The Outline of History* (New York: Macmillan, 1920).
59. See, for instance, Wells’s 1895 science fiction classic, *The Time Machine*.
60. William Kupinse, “Wasted Value: The Serial Logic of H. G. Wells’s *Tono-Bungay,*” *Novel* 33, no. 1 (Fall 1999): 57. Kupinse adds that the major preoccupation of *Tono-Bungay* is the “abandonment by ‘modern commerce’ of established determinants of value and waste” (51).
62. On the trip, George quite gratuitously shoots and kills a “native”—another form of waste or of wasting a life.
64. Sociologist Stjepan Meštrović takes up many of these themes, with Veblen as his main precursor of postmodernism. See Stjepan G. Meštrović, *The Barbarian Temperament: Toward a Postmodern Critical Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
70. Evans, “Taking Out the Trash,” 131–32.