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Study of "garbology" shows equality of man

United Press International

LOS ANGELES — The garbage cans behind American homes, those battered barrels of coffee grounds and icky-sticky papers, are repositories of knowledge. They say that economic equality marches on in the consumer society.

That is the latest report from a university professor who has devoted his career to reading them.

William Rathje, a University of Arizona anthropologist, is known as the father of "garbology," the study of modern society through its garbage, just as archeologists have for years studied ancient civilizations through their refuse.

After seven years of supervising students poking through the garbage of rich and poor in Tucson, Rathje says differences between economic classes and regional groups are dwindling in the United States.

"The American dream is alive and well in our garbage cans.

"Garbage is, in an ultimate sense, the great equalizer. At the level of what people eat, drink, consume on a daily basis, there aren't that many major differences," between the top, middle and bottom economic groups, he said in an interview while on a lecture stop at the University of Southern California.

"We've just finished a 1½-year study in Milwaukee and although we're still analyzing the results, my impression is that we found little difference from Tucson, certainly not enough to be significant. Even though we were dealing with two cities very different in their cultural background and weather, they had very similar garbage."

Since he began setting his students to cataloguing the contents of garbage cans — by some 150 classifications — the movement toward garbage equality has changed one of his earliest and best known findings, he said.

"In 1973, low income families were paying more per ounce for food — not more dollars necessarily, but pyaing more than middle income families for what they got.

"There were several possibilities maybe because they buy more heavily advertised brands, maybe because they can't afford to go to a distant supermarket, maybe because they have to buy in small quantities.

"But over the years that's changed to the point where we're now dealing with much more similar food patterns in both middle and low income neighborhoods.

Rathje, 34, with a Harvard doctorate in archaeology, got into garbage analysis while trying to teach students at the University of Arizona "what archaeology is about."

Since he couldn't hand out valuable ancient artifacts to students, "I decided we should go out and look at Tucson to see what's going on around us, to relate patterns in human behavior to patterns in materials culture.

"Two students independently came up with the idea of looking at garbage to see if their stereotypes of people fit the garbage they threw out.

"They found out the stereotypes really didn't fit."

The Tucson sampling, begun in 1973, is now a year-round project. The refuse researchers wear gloes and lab coats. Students wear face masks and are innoculated against tetanus.

Friedman's book, TV series show need to diffuse power

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NEW YORK — "The question I always ask," says Milton Friedman, sounding more like a philosopher than a Nobel laureate in economics, "is 'Can you let a man be free to sin.'

"If you really know what sin is, the answer is 'No' because if you let him be free to sin, you're sinning," he says. "The fundamental justification for freedom, in my opinion, is that we can't be sure we really know what sin is."

Groping in an uncertain world, individuals need all their options open, says Friedman. Government meddling with personal choices should be curbed at every turn. A government that does more than umpire — ruling out what is clearly wrong — exceeds its purpose, he believes.

It is here the philosopher Friedman meets the economist.

Friedman's life work in the highly technical reaches of the "dismal science" has molded a personal outlook that sees individual freedom absent without economic freedom and that rates free markets as infinitely superior to anything in the capacities of government.

Friedman's views have been recast into a just-published book and a TV series airing on Public Broadcasting System stations. Both the book and Friedman's TV debut are titled "Free to Choose" and were fashioned in collaboration with his economist wife, Rose.

"There are two possible interpretations," Friedman said of the little change in his views over the years. "Either I'm stubborn, which is true, or I believe I've been right, which is also true."

The 10-part series, he said, is not a response to John Kenneth Galbraith's 1977 production of "The Age of Uncertainty," though comparisons are inevitable.

Unlike the economic history presented by Galbraith, Friedman is using TV to hammer home his beliefs about markets, money and the need to diffuse power in society. Avoiding concentration, he says, requires spelling out exactly what government is premitted to do.

His emphasis on law rather than leaving government to its announced goals or good intentions has brought Friedman criticism for a mechanical and legalistic approach to the world that minimizes — not enhances — the importance of the individual.

Friedman, saying such criticism "never comes home to roost," happily puts his trust in a government of laws rather than men.

"In order for the individual to have freedom and flexibility to do what he wants, he has to know the rules under which he is operating.

He sees the public sentiment swinging rapidly toward curbs on government and there is no question that Friedman's message has influenced economists and even some in government itself.