

BOOK REVIEW

Recyclers Miss the Point

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Heather Rogers, *Gone Tomorrow: The Hidden Life of Garbage*, The New Press, 2005.

Heather Rogers' *Gone Tomorrow* is a *tour de force* social history of garbage. She analyzes the emergence of waste as a social problem and argues convincingly that its environmental dimensions require structural solutions: "Until we address the root causes of America's massive and malignant wastes and work to reduce trash before it gets made, resolving the garbage crisis will remain elusive." [p. 205.] For Rogers, municipal solid waste (MSW) is but a small but important part of the much larger problem. Her theme is clear, consistent, and refreshing throughout the book: "restructure production to eliminate waste before it can be made." [p, 27.]

Rogers recounts how MSW developed as a distinct category of the much larger waste problem. She reviews four aspects of MSW history: reuse of household items, municipal collection, commodification of discards, and separation of discards for re-manufacturing. She uses her 2002 video (by the same name), interviews with waste activists, and historical archives to develop a much-needed comprehensive political ecology of MSW.

Rogers begins by affirming the consensus that recycling will not be adequate to the task: "recycling was presented as a solution to the garbage crisis, but it can't keep pace with the staggering output of throwaways." [p. 6.] Ours has not always been a throwaway species, however: "the waste of pre-industrial and early industrial societies was comparatively minimal and could for the most part be absorbed back into the earth." [p. 31.] To learn more about this story all the reader need do is pursue the many useful references she gives.

With industrialization and urbanization came a new focus on street cleaning, and municipal waste policy moved from departments of health to departments of sanitation. Municipal solid waste management became professionalized and large scale. One consequence was the poor were excluded from scavenging dumpsites.

During the post-World War II explosion of consumerism, waste managers merely continued to collect, transport, and dump an increased amount of garbage. Manufacturers contributed to the MSW abundance by designing products for quick discard. Notable was the increase in single use bottles and cans. In reaction, eleven states passed bottle-deposit programs. A new wave of non-deposit bottles is now arriving on the waste scene in the form of discarded plastic water bottles.

Rogers tells us that the 1960s Keep America Beautiful campaign blamed individuals for littering, totally missing the structural causes of waste. She also notes that waste debases the labor that went into making the commodities: "when manufactured goods are trashed, so

too is the labor that went into making them.” [p. 152.] As she says in a footnote, the anti-littering approach “displaced responsibility for environmental destruction away from industrial production and onto individual consumers.” [fn 45, p. 261.]

Rogers argues for the need to regulate production as an important protection of the environment. She writes:

If it's feasible to create the kinds of facilities that handle our garbage today—to bond poisons with neutralizing materials at the molecular level as they're leaving the incinerator stack, to build a theoretically impermeable underground rubbish cell that can be monitored for hazardous gas and liquid releases—then it surely must be possible to restructure production to eliminate waste before it gets made. [p. 26-27.]

Clearly, government regulation is needed: “industry's inability to regulate itself must be acknowledged and replaced with enforceable environmental measures.” [p. 227.]

Rogers cites the well-known study of East Hampton households, performed by Barry Commoner's Center for The Biology of Natural Systems, which claimed that recycling would be 35 percent less expensive than building an incinerator. She is also correct to point out 1) that recycling steers public regulation away from reducing the production of waste, and 2) that to be successful, recycling must, at this juncture, outperform disposal (it must cost less than disposal in landfill or in incinerators).

As well as arguing that manufacturing must be redesigned to reduce waste, Rogers tells us that recycling increases jobs. “Arguments that reusing discards would eliminate manufacturing jobs are vague and as yet unproven, while recycling actually increases the demand for labor, creating ten times more jobs per ton than landfilling or incineration. What's more, per ton, recycling-based manufacturers can employ up to 60 times more workers than landfills.” [p. 226.]

My understanding of the labor theory of value tells me that at some point, absent government intervention, market forces will cause recycling to be more expensive than it is now. More work and more jobs have to mean greater costs for capitalists. And when recycling costs more than other alternatives, capitalists will not willingly choose it. Sure, recycling costs are being reduced by exporting materials to China [pp. 8, 178], but temporary price declines do not negate the theory that if it takes more work to produce commodities—even recycled commodities—the ultimate result will be more expensive. Marxists, including Rogers, must step onto the recycling platform being aware that if it takes more labor, it is likely to cost more than other disposal methods. Ignoring this reality would be a strategic mistake for those of us urgently wanting recycling to be an integral part of manufacturing (as in design for disassembly).

Of course, recycling, even if it is more expensive, is better than burning or burying potentially valuable resources. Recycling is a cost of environmental protection we should choose to pay. Better still would be not to produce waste in the first place, a theme Rogers consistently plays throughout this wonderfully informative and easy-to-read book.