

The Utopia of Recycling

Abstract

Is recycling the solution? If current consumption patterns continue, the Earth will reach a point of no return in 30 years, warn scientists gathered at COP26. In response, the European Union has adopted an ambitious 'Circular Economy Action Plan,' while Latin America follows various governmental policies that have a lesser impact on ecological outcomes. Recycling is a key component of the circular economy, offering one solution to the environmental crisis. However, the success of a circular economy depends on the willingness of individuals, communities, and enterprises to change their behaviour. The documentary traces the research journey of two Brazilian anthropologists, Carmen Rial and Cornelia Eckert, who visited European cities, particularly in the Netherlands. Their goal was to examine how recycling is implemented in domestic spaces by both public and private sectors and to explore potential improvements for recycling processes in Brazil. Through interviews with waste management workers, city residents, and recycling entrepreneurs, the film maps the current recycling landscape and highlights the challenges and opportunities it presents. The documentary offers an insightful look at these experiences and raises an important question: Is recycling an unattainable utopia?

Keywords: Utopia, Sustainability, Recycling, Circular economy

QR-Code for the film



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Is recycling the solution? If we continue to consume as currently, within 30 years the earth will reach a temperature of no return, say the scientists gathered at The Glasgow Climate Change Conference 2021 (COP26). The EU has adopted an ambitious 'circular economy action plan', Latin America has different government politics with less impact on the ecological outcome, while in China the circular economy (xunhuan jingji) has been enshrined in law since 2008 (UNPD 2023: 200). The circular economy has identified recycling as one so-

lution to tackle the problem. Implementing a circular economy approach relies on the ability of people, communities, and enterprises to change their behaviour.

The Netherlands have serious territorial constraints. They are a country established, mostly, on embankments that extend into the sea, but space is minimal. Where will all the garbage this society produces go if it cannot be exported? How to deal with these inconveniences in order to maintain the ‘habitability’ of the Netherlands with ‘responsibility’? Recycling, and importantly, privatisation of the recycling economy, is one of the possible answers. When discussing privatization, the focus is often on achieving profitability. However, sustainable development is a valuable ethical principle that can also lead to financial gains. Garbage to be recycled implies profit and savings in collection expenses (Eckert 2023: 22; Rial 2023: 22).

In the Visual Project ‘Utopia of recycling’, we follow the research trajectory of two Brazilian anthropologists, Carmen Rial and Cornelia Eckert, who visited European cities, especially in the Netherlands, as part of an academic exchange funded by research institutions – Brazilian Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (Capes) and the Dutch organization for internationalization in education (Nuffic). We wanted to verify how recycling is being activated in the domestic space, by the public and private sector with the goal of mapping, comprehending and discovering what could be done to improve the current process of collection and recycling in Brazil.

This visual project presents the results and reflections on recycling experiences in The Netherlands and Brazil. It focuses on the challenges linking waste management, creativity, and other environmental issues such as climate change and social vulnerability. The documentary images present solid waste recycling as a dynamic process that can be part of a ‘circular economy’. Thus, the project reflects upon the contradictions of the industrial world with special regard to the exhaustion of consumption practices, considered to be abusive to the environment. The image narrative reports through a street photography process and interviews with interlocutors, situations observed and recorded, reflecting on residual phenomena, removed from the vision field, the invisible. This way, attention is paid to the foreground and the different regimes of invisibility of waste.

More than fifteen interviews were conducted with workers of the public and private services of garbage collection, inhabitants of cities

and rural areas, and notably with owners of recycling enterprises in two terms: in 2019, dense ethnographic research was carried out in Zaandam for a case study of municipal waste treatment. In 2021, the ethnographic research focused on the activity of small and medium-sized start-ups dedicated to recycling plastics and in the delivery of recycled materials at eco spots in different Dutch municipalities. The documentary narrates the interviewees experiences regarding the possibilities and limits of recycling. Is recycling an unattainable utopia?

The visual project also aims to show alternatives to ‘postponing’ the plastic collapse in the world, referring to the ideas of David Krenak (2020), in his book ‘Ideas to Postpone the End of the World’. The project reflects on the destruction caused by policies and economic actions that undermine and collapse the ecological balance. Shifting attention to what we are wasting, visualizes human relationships with waste materials and the possibilities to circulate for as long as they can.

In conclusion, *Utopia of Recycling* analyses how humans in different contexts (be they eroded landscapes, small or large neighbourhoods, residences, communal houses, towns or large megalopolises) deal with these realities that have been as Earth itself, in a permanent ‘metamorphosis’ (Beck 2016: 37). Solid waste is not just treated as ‘rubbish’, but as a polysemic and provocative category, as it reveals the social structures that produce inequalities within different social groups and also points to new uses and creations. Thus, the documentary invites its viewers to ask: Are humans ‘planetary inhabitants’ in a new form of ‘universalism’ or is earthly thinking a way of thinking of humans as inhabitants of the small village, our blue planet?

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