

**Finn Arne Jørgensen**

***Recycling***

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Recycling is often viewed as the most basic of environmentally responsible behaviours – a gateway behaviour that is easy and affordable and leaves us feeling good about ourselves as ecological citizens. Recently, however, the positive impacts of recycling have come under question. Does recycling really help? Do the resources saved through recycling warrant the resources we use to recycle?

In the preface to *Recycling*, Finn Arne Jørgensen answers these questions with a noncommittal ‘It depends’. The answer alludes to the complexity and context dependent nature of recycling. Jørgensen points out that ‘recycling’ is not a single process. It varies greatly both by material and by location, making ‘it depends’ the best short answer possible.

*Recycling*, the book, is part of the MIT Essential Knowledge series, which includes dozens of pocket-sized books with titles implying similarly expansive topics, such as *Robots*, *Sustainability*, *Smart Cities*, and *Waves* (four separate books). In the opening and concluding chapters, Jørgensen takes a broad view, describing issues that pertain to recycling writ large. These include an origin story of the ubiquitous three-arrowed recycling symbol and brief coverage of disagreement over the origin of modern-day recycling. Did we begin recycling post World War II as a response to concern about filling up landfills or rather, was it the result of ‘deliberate attempts of business actors to shift responsibility for waste management onto individuals or the public sector’ (p. 9)? This is just one of the interesting questions that Jørgensen raises but never really attempts to answer. He quite rightly points out that we cannot assess the value of recycling without ‘knowledge of where the waste goes and what actually happens with it’ (p. 16) and explains that ‘this book is set up to give an overview of information we have on recycling and to point readers to where they can go find out more’ (p. 16). That overview, unfortunately, includes very little about ‘where waste goes and what actually happens to it’ in contemporary waste management system.

Jørgensen’s more central question is as follows: ‘If our actions as consumers have an ecological footprint, and recycling is intended to reduce that footprint, how do we really calculate this? Where do we begin and where do we stop when we try to evaluate the environmental impact of anything?’ (pp. 83–84). Instead of answering this question, Jørgensen makes the case that the question is unanswerable. Indeed, Jørgensen is sceptical of any effort to quantify the impacts of current waste management systems, explaining that ‘the actual benefit of recycling depends on a whole range of factors, many of which it is not possible to get reliable data’ (p. 95). He points to critiques of life cycle

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analysis methodology as a case in point: ‘LCA can never include all relevant factors, owing to the simple fact that it is impossible to fully capture the complexity of the world in models’ (p. 95).

Jørgensen’s scepticism about quantifying the impacts of recycling is understandable and well-documented. Jørgensen provides enough detail about international trade to establish it as a tangled web of international connections in which many of the transactions are unregulated and undocumented. Still, if there is a weakness in this text, it is in the lack of empirical evidence. If one cannot quantify the impacts of recycling writ large, is it possible to quantify specific cases (e.g., Norway’s management of reusable PET bottles, which Jørgensen describes) to provide insight about best practices?

This is not to take anything away from what Jørgensen does provide. If he is sceptical about the material benefits of recycling, Jørgensen is more sanguine about the potential for recycling to foster other environmentally responsible behaviour: ‘Recycling may be an imperfect solution for an imperfect world, but it is no less valuable as a point of potential environmental engagement’ (p. 162). While recycling (the act) may work well as a jumping-off point – an easily achieved action that can lead to broader environmental concern and action – *Recycling* (the text) works well as a jumping-off point for broader investigations into the waste produced by our own personal habits and decisions.

The book is inviting to the general reader. Chapters 2 through 8 are organised like an advanced solid waste management centre, covering organic waste, paper, cloth, glass, aluminium, plastic, and e-waste in turn. A historian, Jørgensen provides a brief but thought-provoking trip through the origins of each material and the evolution of how the waste from each has been managed. Each chapter is filled with interesting, waste-focused historical facts or anecdotes, such as the story of a 130-ton glob of congealed fat and trash (dubbed ‘fatberg’); the importance (and shortage) of paper during World War II (e.g., for propaganda pamphlets and bullet cartridges); origins of the word ‘shoddy’; the politics of soda containers in the mid-1900s; and the central role that Agbogbloshie site in Accra, Ghana plays as a global hub for e-waste.

These bits of history act as effective hooks that keep a reader’s attention while Jørgensen weaves his broader argument about recycling as a set of processes that may assuage our guilt as consumers but are not as environmentally benign as we would like to believe. For Jørgensen, if we really want to reduce the environmental and social impacts of the waste we produce, we need to produce less waste. In other words, seeing the three-armed recycling triangle does not take us off the hook as consumers.

Early in the text, Jørgensen raises, almost as tangential musing, the question of scale: ‘How do we bridge the gap between tiny, individually insignificant actions and the immensity of the global environmental challenges the world is facing?’ (p. 27). One way is to produce an eminently readable book that pulls back the current on recycling just enough to show the reader that everything

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is not being taken care of at the larger scale, that our own individual actions can combine to make a mess larger than anyone can clean up. This is what Jørgensen has done. The combination of interesting historical anecdotes and broad, thought-provoking questions makes this book useful for encouraging a general audience to think more deeply about the waste it produces and the impacts that result.

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