

Nancy Hagan
Raquel Gutierrez
Subhana Nisar
Jeff Schauer
Walter Wu
Anthropology 125S (Professor Maurer)
Due: March 20, 2008

Recycling

Money can set you free. Money can imprison you. Or, it can do both simultaneously. The drastic range of reactions to the entity which permeates our lives (money) demonstrates its plurality, and its conceptual existence, parallel to (but often-overlooked in everyday life) its entrances and exits from our wallets. From Georg's Simmel's early twentieth century tract on "The Philosophy of Money," to the musings of a twenty-first century former-cab driver at an Albertson's car park, opinions on money run the spectrum. However, not all uses of money are straightforward transactions in the way that we often think of them. The practise of recycling provides a framework for analysing not only different uses of money (and ways of obtaining it), but different conceptions of it as well. In the course of several interviews, and a tour of a recycling centre, we gained some insight into how people view the money behind recycling, in the form of the California Redemption Value (CRV) deposit, and were able to explore their rationales for partaking in activity that is both obviously global and intensely local. Recycling and its corresponding hidden monies can keep individuals or families in neighbourhoods from total destitution, but can also generate international concerns over labour exploitation. Recycling relates to locally-based initiatives, but also to the international "green movement". A diverse range of experiences puts recycling, CRV, and money into perspective.

Recycling, depending on how it is defined, is an old practise. If characterised as re-using something that would otherwise be thrown away, it is probably as old as humanity, but many of our conceptions of recycling date from the Industrial Revolution, which generated vast amounts of consumer-oriented items on an unprecedented level. Combined with the unparalleled congregation of people into cities, the huge amounts of rubbish became noticeable, and obstructed city by-ways (Woodward 175, Carlson 1255). New York was the first city to undertake a (comparatively) systematic campaign to combat the rubbish overflow, relying on specially-delegated policemen and teeming hordes of child informants. Most crucially, the New York campaign sought to distinguish between different types of rubbish, which were disposed of or re-used in correspondingly different ways (Carlson 1255-57).

The Second World War prompted a new push on behalf of the federal government for recycling. Bringing in one's bits and pieces of metal became the highest form of patriotism, and according to propaganda, contributed considerably towards the war effort (Carlson 1257-9). Militaristic recycling was sometimes derided as gimmicky, however (a charge similarly levelled at household recycling today, the charge being that the focus on individual efforts takes the pressure off of mass users). Recycling gained new importance from the 1960s as part of a broader green movement, and in 1987, California joined other states in passing its own "container deposit legislation". In California's case, it was the CRV (California Redemption Value).

CRV is the value consumers pay whenever they purchase aluminum, plastic, glass, and bi-metal beverage containers, and it is paid back to them when they recycle these products at a certified recycling centre. As part of the California Beverage

Container Recycling and Litter Reduction Act of 1986, the California Refund Value program was established in 1987 to enable higher recycling rates for recyclable plastic, glass, and aluminum beverage containers, as well as to discourage littering. CRV eligible containers are labeled with “CA CASH REFUND”, “CA CRV”, or something similar, with the value of CRV the consumer receives for recycling. Five cents is received for containers less than 24 ounces and ten cents for containers 24 ounces and larger.

Whenever a beverage container is recycled, CRV is either returned to the consumer by way of going to recycling centres to redeem the cash value, or it can help pay for recycling when containers are placed in recycling bins. Containers that are merely trashed end up in landfills.

Some steps consumers can take to efficiently recycle their bottles and cans include separating CRV containers from non-CRV containers, placing the beverage containers into recycling bins rather than the trash, and redeeming containers in groups of fifty or less in order to be paid per bottle or can instead of by weight. Consumers do not need to rinse or clean out the containers before recycling, as that is taken care of during the recycling process. They also should not crush plastic and glass bottles.

Consumers have a number of options for places to recycle, such as certified recycling centres where CRV can be redeemed, drop-off and collection programs, and through local curb side recycling programs such as using recycling bins to be collected on a specific day (Bottlesandcans.com).

One example of a program that uses CRV is an outreach entitled Extra Cans For The Needy (ECFTN), which benefits the homeless through the actions of Hollywood actors. The actors collect empty bottles and cans on sets to hand over to the needy in

order that they may redeem them for CRV and buy basic necessities such as food and water. A number of programs serve ECFTN, such as “CAN The World”, an individual recycling and distribution to the needy program; the “Million CANS March”, which occurred on Earth Day 2007 and lasted 44 days; and “The CAN Collection”, a program in which businesses collect bottles and cans and distribute them to the needy. The programs’ objectives include encouraging the recycling of viable CRV-redeemable beverage containers, donating them to the homeless, and spreading awareness of the issue of homelessness through direct interaction (EXTRA Cans For The Needy.org).

AB 3056, a statute which raised the CRV deposit, has three funding programs (this illustrates the separation of the administration of CRV by the State of California Department of Conservation from the broader recycling industry). The “Market Development & Expansion Grant Program” takes a large portion (\$20 million annually) of the revenues generated. “Competitive Grants to Community Conservation Corps” takes another \$20 million per year, and seems to recognise the importance of local efforts to engage communities. Finally, the “Local Government or Non-Profit Agencies” take another \$5 million for local government, with an emphasis on “multifamily housing low income communities”, and the “Beverage Container Recycling Grants” are also given a (comparatively) small annual sum to “develop and establish sustainable projects focusing on beverage container recycling” (CA Department of Conservation, AB 3056 FAQs).

Most interviewees expressed little knowledge of CRV, focusing instead on the monetary incentives to recycle, without taking account of the ‘deposit’ they had already paid with their purchase. Cynthia, an interviewee in her late forties, expressed her appreciation of California’s CRV deposits, but the cause of her appreciation seemed

ambiguous, as she did not specify whether it was because she could take advantage of the refunds offered to make a living for herself or not. Perhaps she, and others like her who actively obtain others' rubbish to recycle, do not feel the (admittedly tepid) resentment toward CRV that is manifested amongst some other interviewees.

In Subhana's interviews, two other individuals in particular expressed resentment, specifically a South East Asian man and Mexican woman. For Subhana's participant observation, she headed down to the more urban city of Buena Park, California, to gain insight into the mindsets of recyclers in the area. The South East Asian man and Mexican woman were intensely immersed in their recycling that it appeared a natural inclination. Subhana had asked the South East Asian man why he recycled, and he responded, "People in America don't realize the shortage of things that the world will one day have to face." The response of the South East Asian man displayed that he had more cultural awareness of the world and the scarcity of resources that it will one day have to face.

In addition, it illustrates the existence of a complementary relationship between money and resources in the world. For most interviewees, recycling was seen as a favoured choice, both because of the financial returns associated with it, and the moral returns that are based on being 'green'. "Think green: think Waste Management", the customers of said company are urged. The emphasis from Waste Management (WM), for example, is not on products on which redemption could be claimed, but rather on those things which are most in demand for the business side of recycling. WM's online glossary, for example, does not refer to CRV. The money that CRV generates theoretically feeds back into the promotion of recycling.

As a large company with correspondingly broad concerns, WM makes an effort to convey an element of intimacy, concern for the environment, and connection with community in its online advertising and website design. Altruistic though Waste Management's slogan seems ("Think green: think Waste Management"), it epitomises the business side of recycling, which predominates (although not in people's consciousnesses). Research done over the past decades on recycling shows that for most, views on the environment, age, and gender make little difference to recycling behaviour: what counts is the accessibility of the recycling facilities. People are prone to partake when it is made easy for them (Derksen and Gartrell 439). A WM online publication declares, "It doesn't take a heroic effort to become an environmental hero" (Waste Management, *Recycle America*). But profit is a large concern. WM's website has an entire section on Investor Relations, and the company's 2007 fourth quarter revenues were \$3.36 billion (Waste Management, *WM announces...*). If recycling certain materials is not profitable, it will not be done. WM recently found a buyer for plastics 1-7, and so began recycling them. Unsorted rubbish is sold to private firms (such as Potential Industries) to pick through and pull out recyclables.

Cynthia made a specific distinction between "other" money (that is, money not made through recycling) and money made through recycling. For her, recycling is more than a feel-good activity; it is a way of making a living, one which frees her, and makes her feel "like I'm escaping concentration camps". For her and others for whom recycling constitutes "a living", the monetary returns might be more 'real', for the items that they are recycling came to them for 'free', enabling them to get the refund value without having paid the deposit first. This, which some might term 'profiteering', could possibly

explain some of the antipathy of the recycling industry to recycling on the part of non-homeowners (not in the sense of the homeless, but rather, people recycling not from their own household acquisitions, but actively seeking material to recycle). The recycling industry views cans, bottles, etc, as *their* property from the moment it hits the curb. The informal economic system which allows Cynthia to accumulate \$300 per week subverts more structured systems of control, and bypasses Waste Management.

Cynthia described that she was falsely accused of recycling at her work and it worked against her. Whilst working as a cab driver, she was accused of picking up cans from the airport, and was subsequently sacked. In her view, the competition for low-level jobs was so intense that her (alleged) participation in an informal monetary sphere had her forced out of her work, at which point she turned to recycling full-time. Her recycling money was viewed by her co-workers, and apparently, her superiors as well, as differential to her cabbie salary. They found her participation in that sphere objectionable.

Jane Guyer, in her ethnography of West Africa, asserts that “the struggle for control over measures and reductions in the West is central to political economy,” and this struggle manifests itself in the views of the dispossessed towards recycling (Guyer 58). For Cynthia, recycling provided “freedom” in an otherwise hostile world, and although the conditions of our other interviewees were less dire, they too felt that the money from recycling gave them a flexibility they would otherwise not have had. There are multiple dimensions at work here. For WM and the CA Department of Conservation, recyclables should be ideally set out on one’s curb, to be picked up by a truck, and translated into an amount based on a household’s use. If a refund is claimed, that dollar

and cents amount will go back to the household. WM and the CA Department of Conservation can also translate this into an energy unit: X amount of cans recycled is equal to the use of X appliance for X number of hours, or X pounds of paper are equivalent to X number of trees. This in turn is translated into a moral worth: good citizens recycle and help the environment; profit ought not to be their motive, but it is there as a small incentive. For Cynthia and Ben, for example, this differs: they actively seek out recyclables, they and others may “dumpster dive”, thus derailing the theoretically straight and narrow path of recyclables, verging into an informal sector with which industry and government are uncomfortable.

Guyer describes how, “in conversions, commodities and money move in their own directions rather than circulating within a circumscribed social field,” constituting directional asymmetry (Guyer 51). Although research shows that recycling is most successful when it concentrates intensely on “the local”, as we have seen, the recycling industry is precisely that, an industry, and has grander ambitions than the local recycling centre. From Orange County to central Washington and beyond, bales of cardboard are brought together and sent to China (as well as Mexico) where they are used to make paper products. This is business on a global scale. Whilst we have not yet heard any xenophobic rants along the lines of “The Chinese are taking our cardboard!”, this internationalisation of recycling raises many issues. In China itself, there are concerns about the use of human labour and a lack of regulations, and it is ironic that the massive recycling business, which in the U.S. is profoundly suspicious of the informal “spheres” of recycling, has functioned to (perhaps) inadvertently create an informal sector in China

that occupies the other side of the proverbial coin, a “cottage industry” for dismantling and recycling (The Economist).

And this does not even address the concerns of people like Cynthia, Ben and Alex, for whom recycling functions at a local level as anything from a livelihood to that much-needed income supplement (again, the range of uses and dependency demonstrates the uses of recycling across classes). All of our interviewees counted on their income from recycling, and some of them earmarked the funds. Cynthia makes a living from it, and made too much money to qualify for welfare. Ben, in his late-forties, also earns money teaching people how to play chess, and uses money primarily for gas and food, but will occasionally purchase a new DVD, perhaps signifying that he sequesters a small portion of his earnings to use at a later date for this kind of “leisure” purchase, as opposed to the allocation of the remaining recycling funds for “necessities”. He mentioned that he knows many others who use the money for survival needs, and those who use it for beer and cigarettes.

Alex, an immigrant from northwest Mexico in his mid-twenties, earmarks his recycling income for two specific purposes: half of it is for gas, and half he gives to his children. Alex currently works at a Ralph’s recycling centre and recycles his own rubbish fortnightly, earning \$15-20 on each of these occasions. He has been recycling since he arrived in California two years ago, but legally must recycle with a different company than that for which he works, although he did not see the rationale behind this. Another interviewee, Ronald, an immigrant from El Salvador in his late-seventies, walks in his middle-class neighbourhood every morning and picks up cans. He too earmarks money: half is for “vacation money”, and half he gives to his church at Easter Mass.

Wendy, a married mother of one in Irvine, recycles a huge amount of material weekly at her curb side, but she does not recycle for the money or the environment; rather, she recycles simply because it is “easy, and no hassle”. The convenience factor is something that WM takes advantage of by providing “free” recycling for both businesses and private residents, and thus supporting the bottom line of a large corporation that profits from our consumption and waste habits.

Amongst our interviewees, money from recycling was also viewed as somehow qualitatively different from other forms of monetary wealth. For Cynthia, money earned from recycling is “straightforward” and “legitimate”, and repeatedly stressed the harshness of “life”. Her recycling money got her out of her homelessness. She equates “other” money with Nazism, crime, and other negative behaviour.

It is possible that the “greenness” of recycling money (relating to the “cleansing” of money, perhaps) is also an asset. Ben wrote that he began recycling in the 1980s, because “it was stupid to throw cans away and put material in the ground when you can reuse it [...] you might as well get money for it.” In over 20 years, his reasons for recycling have not changed: people did not realise that “the environment was in a crappy position,” and when he pulls up to the recycling centre with a trunk full of cans and several bins brimming with bottles, he is doing it for himself *and* the environment. Not only does Ben collect cans himself, but he is given them by friends who know that he is an avid recycler.

There are interesting connections to be drawn between the recycling habits of our interviewees and the “Green Dollars” of New Zealand. First and foremost, perhaps, the comparison demonstrates that there is no “uniform use”, even of these alternative styles

of currency, or currency use. For most New Zealanders, Green Dollars were supplementary and complementary, inasmuch as they supplemented either another full-time job, or “casual self-employment”, or else complemented the needs of New Zealanders that were not easily satisfied in the climate of economic instability and neoliberalism, by creating an exchange network predicated on specific types of needs and relationships (North 134-9). For some, it was a matter of lifestyle preference, but it allowed others to keep their heads above the hostile waves which declaimed “society” and the social relationships implied therein. Similarly, as the paragraph above shows, recycling filled different functions for different people. For Alex, recycling was a supplement; for Ben, a crucial complement; and for Cynthia, a way of life.

Of our interviewees, Cynthia was the person for whom recycling meant the most at the level of sustenance. It is in her lifestyle that we can see most vividly the conflict between an informality that industry and government (as well as her co-workers at the cab company) find disturbing, and the structured, industrial, profit-driven, international recycling ethos. WM contends that “dumpster divers” create a not-insubstantial financial drain for the company, but do not have official estimates of the monetary loss. There is little formal regulation, and action is only taken if residents themselves complain. The social crevasse that yawns between a sizeable industry and Cynthia, a self-styled independent woman eschewing formal economic institutions, mirrors that which exists between the availability of recycling in neighbourhoods of different social compositions. In affluent neighbourhoods, curb side recycling caters to its inhabitants. In poorer neighbourhoods, most residents either recycle on their own at buy-back centres, or have

their recyclable materials taken by “dumpster divers”. This difference reflects economic necessity, and would seem to point to two possible motivations for recycling.

For the economically oppressed, there would be little sense in curb side recycling, the benefits of which are largely intangible, and do not provide the additional income that the refund from a recycling centre could give them. The economically affluent might be seeking a kind of acceptability that would conform to social expectations, and pressures from neighbours, advertisement, and a desire to be part of the “green movement”. In some ways, this “green” trend mirrors the recycling industry. The news is full of high-profile campaigners promoting high-profile initiatives (Al Gore, Richard Branson, Tony Blair—at least when he is not bringing peace to the Middle East or jockeying to be EU President). Many of these initiatives seek broad regulations of emissions, which by allowing carbon-trading and the like, regulate whilst simultaneously creating an elite informal sphere that could (like the cottage industry recycling in China and India) get beyond regulations. This elite informality is apparently permissible, but it reacts indignantly to individuals like Cynthia, who defy what she calls the oppression (“I feel like I’m escaping concentration camps [when I recycle]”) linked to “other money”.

Though oppositional, industrial recycling and personal, defiant recycling, have similarities. WM ships cardboard to China, for a tidy profit. Cynthia has her own “range” that her recycling activities traverse. In some ways, Cynthia is answering the call of the “green movement” to think beyond her doorstep, but is doing so in an unanticipated manner.

Bibliography

Bottlesandcans.com: California Department of Conservation. (2008). *CRV 101: a simple guide to bottle and can recycling*. Retrieved March 2, 2008 on the World Wide Web: http://www.bottlesandcans.com/assets/crv101_toolkit.pdf.

Carlson, A. (2001). Recycling norms. *California Law Review*, 89 (5), 1231-1300.

Dirksen, L and Gartrell, J. (1993). The social context of recycling. *American Sociologist*, 58 (3), 434-442.

EXTRA Cans for the Needy.org. (2007). Retrieved March 8, 2008 on the World Wide Web: <http://www.extracansfortheneedy.org>.

Guyer, J. (2004). *Marginal gains: monetary transactions in Atlantic Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

North, P. (2007). *Money and liberation: the micropolitics of alternative currency movements*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

The Economist. (2007). *The truth about recycling*. Retrieved March 17, 2008 on the World Wide Web: http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9249262.

Waste Management. (2008). *Recycle America*. Retrieved March 17, 2008 on the World Wide Web: <http://www.wastemanagement.com/wm/environmental/documents/WMRA.pdf>.

Waste Management. (2008). *Waste management announces fourth quarter and full year 2007 earnings*. Retrieved March 17, 2008 on the World Wide Web: [http://www.wastemanagement.com/WM/Investor/ir2008/20080213_WMI_Announces_4th_Qtr_and_Full_Year_2007_Earnings_\(WMI_08-02\).pdf](http://www.wastemanagement.com/WM/Investor/ir2008/20080213_WMI_Announces_4th_Qtr_and_Full_Year_2007_Earnings_(WMI_08-02).pdf).

Woodward, D. (1985). 'Swords into ploughshares': recycling in pre-industrial England. *The Economic History Review*, 38 (2), 175-191.