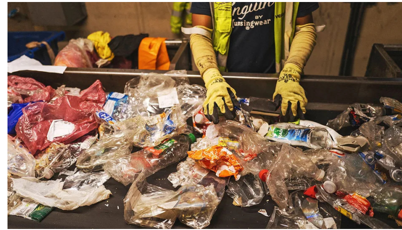
Britain | Modern life is rubbish **Oct 10th 2024**

The biography of a British recycling bag



Do you really have to wash yogurt pots before throwing them away?

Modern life offers many troubling questions. Is AI conscious? How do you stimulate economic growth? And do you really have to take that funny bit of paper at the bottom of the salmon packet out when you put it in the recycling? Also: do you have to wash your yogurt pots before recycling them? And is any of this stuff actually reused anyway? AI and growth are rather tricky. But the answers to the micro-worries are: no, no and yes, definitely.

Massive as cathedrals—the Southwark plant in London, which recycles the rubbish of 2m people, is almost twice as long as St Paul's—but far less lauded, recycling-processing plants provide the coda to modern capitalism. They are where every empty bottle of theatre-interval wine and every coffee cup drained of its fancy flat white goes to be reborn. Few pause to think about this. The essay "I, Pencil", which offers the autobiography of a pencil, notes that it is "taken for granted by those who use" it when it in fact merits "wonder and awe". This is truer still of the recycling bins those pencils might eventually be thrown into.

To understand why, consider the biography of a full recycling bag—though given what happens to it, "autopsy" is arguably a better term. Mere hours after it is collected by binmen, steel-toe-capped and speedy, from outside your house, its contents emerge from the plant within compressed bales of plastic, metal and card. In between, each bag is first disembowelled by a mechanical bag splitter, its rotting contents pouring—a ghoulish supermarket—onto a conveyor belt. To see it is strangely shaming. There is an awful egalitarianism to rubbish; each crumpled Coke can and each discarded magazine might easily have been yours.

It is also redemptive. These plants are not pretty: inside is a midden-like stench and an oceanic roar of machinery. But they are magnificent: the 12-metre-wide nave of the plant in Southwark is criss-crossed by a tangle of conveyor belts and machines of which Heath Robinson would be proud. The process begins with an initial sorting of the materials by hand: in a glass-windowed cubicle people—gloved and goggled—weed out the more egregiously non-recyclable objects from the belt.

Then the machines take over. Cardboard crowdsurfs over twisted and turning poles which separate small pieces of card (which fall between them) from the big (which don't). Farther on, massive magnets cause soft-drinks cans to leap like salmon from a conveyor belt. Farther on still, a machine broods over the belt and then, like a heron fishing, darts down to pluck boxes and cartons from the line. The whole process is over in barely 15 minutes. A compressor then squashes these various materials into neat cubes. Baled metal and cardboard are sold on; plastic is taken to be processed further.

Watch this process and the recycling strictures, which can seem random from outside, start to make sense. Wet card slops about and doesn't separate. Pizza stuck to pizza boxes starts to rot the fibres of the card. The washing of plastic isn't necessary, but it does make life a bit nicer for the people who sort it. Clothing is loathed: tights turn any machine into an intractable Gordian knot.

The astonishing thing is less that there are so many rules, more that there are so few. The plant and its workers cope with almost anything. To the side of one conveyor belt, idiom incarnate, sits a kitchen sink. This the processing facility cannot manage. Though if you want to be a thoughtful person, you should use one to wash your used yogurt pots.

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