

Recycling: the big smokescreen.

How circular economy has become an excuse for disposable products

Synopsis

This book warns about the limits, the pitfalls and even the dangers of an all-recycling policy, which can encourage a system based on disposable and single-use products. Such a strategy will eventually worsen waste and overconsumption issues, rather than solving them. The book also unveils and highlights how recycling and the circular economy can be used as greenwashing instruments, part of a marketing and lobbying strategy, for big business.

Throughout this book, the author, and Zero Waste France, state that we must prioritise the end of disposable products and give recycling its rightful place; as a last resort for materials that have truly reached the end of their life, after having been re-used and repaired.

The reasons behind this book

This book is based on the grassroots activist experience of Zero Waste France in the late 90's. The book centers around observations such as:

- The fact that the waste treatment hierarchy – which should prioritise waste reduction at source – is just not applied. Although it has been present in French and European legislation for several years, it has been swept away by economic and industrial logics that keep giving priority to waste "treatment" (recycling at best, but too often giving preference to incineration or landfilling) over waste prevention.
- More recently, recycling appears to have become the main alibi helping the disposable industry to justify its model.
- Recycling has been promoted as a positive solution repeatedly over the past 30 years, so that recycling is now considered an adequate and ultimate green gesture. Moreover, it is considered as sufficient in the collective imagination.

In light of this, Zero Waste France's historical position to always note the limits of recycling now appears to be too soft. Through this book, Flore Berlingen proposes an evolution towards a stronger warning message.

What are the main points formulated in the book?

The first part of the book takes up and summarises the limits of recycling both as a set of techniques, and as an organised system.

The physical/technical limits of recycling:

Depending on the materials, the possibilities of recycling vary and the degradation linked to the recycling process is more or less significant. However, whatever the material, recycling produces losses. It cannot be considered as intrinsically beneficial from an environmental standpoint (as it is too frequently described). The term and concept "infinite recycling" is also a myth that has to be deconstructed.

Criticism of the French recycling sector *modus operandi*:

The extended producer responsibility channels of governance leave the control of strategic decisions (application of eco-modulations on contributions, research and development funding, marketing) to the manufacturers and producers. This results in lower efficiency and actions which are too often contradictory to the waste reduction goal.

The second part of the book explores how recycling is used as a tool for green-washing, marketing and lobbying purposes, with the final aim of avoiding any binding regulation on the use of disposable products or the products end of life.

- x Recycling is used as an alibi for the continued use of disposables or even as a sales argument:
As people are increasingly worried about the environmental impact of waste (particularly plastics), theoretical or effective recyclability is used as a justification and a smoke screen. Recycling instrumentalisation is based on typical greenwashing communication acts and sometimes, direct sales support (e.g.: vouchers offered in exchange of clothes brought back to shops belonging to major fast fashion brands).
- x The strategy of voluntary commitments and announcement effects:
The illusion of recycling is put at the forefront of lobbying strategies, supported by "voluntary" action plans put forward by companies with the objective to avoid the establishment of a more ambitious, binding and legal frameworks.

The third part of the book contextualises the **origin of these pitfalls**, observing how the industrial and economic model of recycling perpetuates overconsumption.

- x Parallels between the recycling industry and a linear economy:
Although recycling activities are associated with a circular economy, and therefore often presented in opposition to a linear economy, most of them follow the same industrial and economic strategies (the logics of "exploiting" a resource, revenues based on volumes/quantities treated, and thus an incentive to grow even when there is no longer an environmental benefit).
- x Recycling as a way to avoid tackling overproduction:
Like programmed obsolescence, recycling can be seen as the new outlet for the overproduction that characterises both a capitalist economic model, and the productivist system, instead of tackling the root of the problem.

The fourth and last part of the publication presents some of **Zero Waste France's proposals** to end the era of disposable waste while genuinely improving recycling, through:

- Mandatory and progressive re-use quotas
- Relative packaging standardisation
- Organised support for the repair sector
- Renovation of EPR (Extended Producers Responsibility) channels including a change in their governance.

Is it a publication against recycling?

No, it is not. This book does not criticize recycling as such. It criticizes attempts to recycle products or packaging that shouldn't exist in the first place due to their negative (social and environmental) impacts. In a society where disposable waste won't exist anymore, recycling will remain the best solution for products that cannot be recovered, and have reached their real end of life.

The "recycling all" policy is criticized for its counterproductive effects (as it encourages and/or perpetuates over-consumption of resources). It prevents us from asking the right questions: what are the priorities for our society when it comes to the use and share of our resources?

Is it a specifically French book?

No, it is not. Although the part related to the producers' responsibility is illustrated by French examples, the analysis could be applied to other contexts. Other examples and references in the publication are both French and international in nature. The overall issues highlighted in the book do not belong specifically to the French context, they are due to a production model that has now become global.