

# Recycling: Essential Knowledge

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This book will give readers a comprehensive and accessible overview of *recycling as an activity and a process* at the *intersection of the material and the ideological*. From a technical point of view, recycling is a series of activities that includes collecting recyclable consumer and industrial materials and products, sorting and processing the recyclables into raw materials, and manufacturing the raw materials into new products. But recycling also has an ideological and cultural component. At its core, recycling is about *transformation* and *values*, where material waste is transformed to have potentially useful purposes. This raises the questions: What is waste? What is useful? What is valuable? Who shall be responsible for this transformation? What are the alternatives?

Post-consumer recycling—the kind of recycling that the readers of this book would be most intimately familiar with—inevitably draws our attention to these issues. There has been considerable debate about the value of recycling in both economic and ideological terms. When John Tierney wrote a 1996 *New York Times* article claiming that “rinsing out tuna cans and tying up newspapers may make you feel virtuous, but recycling could be America's most wasteful activity,” a storm of responses flooded in. People are passionate about recycling. But when economic values meet environmental values, controversy often follows. This *valuation cycle*, where material is continually appraised and reappraised from different value perspectives, will be a key organizing principle of the book.

In the book, I argue that *materials matter*—“humans and their cultures are *made of and from* matter and cannot logically exist in isolation from it,” as Timothy LeCain argues (2013, 19). The recycling of materials thus gives us a window into the processes in which people, societies, and markets ascribe value to materials and actions. The act of *following* as a method is equally important. This is what historians do; we follow people and institutions—but increasingly also material things—in an attempt to learn something about the world. For the purposes of this book, *following materials* becomes a heuristic for opening up the complex world of recycling to a nonspecialist audience. The book pays close attention to materials, using paper, textiles, glass, aluminium, plastic, batteries, motherboards, and ships as examples, building on existing scholarship from myself and others. I follow these materials and artifacts—their origins and their destinations—across the planet and over time, with a particular focus on points of transformation and valuation. I have previously called such points “recycling junctions” with reference to Ruth Schwarz Cowan’s classic concept “consumption junction” (1987). While many see consumer recycling as an individual action, this book argues that most modern recycling takes place within large sociotechnical systems and thus must be understood in the aggregate form. We will follow materials as they enter into evolving systems and as they move back and forth between producer and consumer, under continual transformation and valuation.

The book is structured in ten short chapters that explore the emergence of modern recycling as a modern phenomenon and its transformation from a scarcity-driven activity to one predominantly motivated by other concerns. I demonstrate how recycling becomes repacked as an environmental and an ideological activity, driven by motivations that change over time. This is also where new tensions arise, between consumers, policymakers, and businesses. Recycling systems are no longer local, but extend far beyond the immediate surroundings of the recycling junction, with some materials even crossing halfway across the planet to be processed and recycled.