Rubbish!

Richard Girling

Introduction

Like our simian-browed ancestors of the African savannah, we waste without constraint. Pigs haven't seen swill since 2001 (when it was blamed for an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease). We live in the chew-and-spit age of bubble-gum and the text message, when even language is dispensable. Junk is not so much a by-product of modern life as the foundation of it. We have a daily diet of junk mail, junk food, junk emails, junk celebrities whose fleeting hours of fame are created by junk television. In a throwaway culture, nothing is designed for the future. It is fashion, not utility, that governs the lifespan of what we buy. Good, workable mobile telephones become junk as soon as manufacturers launch their new ranges. Clothes become junk twice a year, in spring and autumn, as fashion changes its mantle. Music becomes junk the moment we've heard it. Waste is endemic in our systems of government, law and education. For everything we buy, there is something to throw away. Empty buildings are waste. A crumbling rail system is waste; leaking water mains are waste; traffic jams are waste; subsidised agricultural over-production is waste. Early deaths from bad diets or bad habits are waste. Copycat programming on multiple television channels is waste.

But waste is sexy. Fashion depends on it. Pleasure, almost by definition, thrives on inessentials, not on organic bread and filtered rainwater. Conservationists, with their environmental audits and sustainability fetish, are the new puritans. They are enemies of choice, zealots in big knickers who would have us recycle our own ordure before they would let us eat a Big Mac. Their determination to prevent us doing what we want increases in direct proportion to the strength of our need to do it. It is as unreal as alchemy, as if they think there's a recipe for turning base humanity into self-denying nuggets of moral gold. To deny us our appetites is both an offence against nature and an infringement of our liberty. We do not want to go everywhere by bio-fuelled bus, or wear clothes made out of recycled hamburger packs, or live on roots and pulses. We want the right to choose, and, where the choice is between sex and sustainability, no-one should expect an overwhelming vote for virtue.

Recycling

November, 2004. Oddly, as I stand on an elevated walkway inside a waste separation plant near Norwich, I am reminded of Scottish salmon. The real thing, that is - the truly wild North Atlantic fish, Salmo salar, not the flaccid, fatty cage-potato of the supermarket chill cabinet.

This is, I concede, an odd thought with which to begin a description of a waste facility. Not much ocean freshness here. The air is dry with dust, not wet with spray, and the thunder of heavy machinery could hardly be mistaken for the crash of breaking water or the whining of fishermen's reels. And yet the simile is exact. Before

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me runs a fast-moving stream of paper on a conveyor. Every few seconds an individual piece leaps high into the air, twists and disappears while the stream below surges inexorably onward. The only faults in the analogy are that in this case the "salmon" are swimming with the flow rather than against it, and that their leaping is a mark not of lusty exuberance but rather of banishment in disgrace. Like the real thing, however, they have got this far only because they escaped the attentions of fishermen downstream. Very much unlike the real thing, the leaps are duplicated as tiny coloured dots flipping across a screen. It is all authentically mesmerising.

Downriver, the ocean parallel collapses into bathos. The journey begins, without romance, at the head of the Norfolk waste stream, to which I am a minor contributory. Inside my gate since July have stood two large wheelie bins, one grey, one green, each holding 240 litres. The council dustcart empties each one on alternate Tuesdays - grey one week, green the next. It is with a genuine feeling of guilt that I confess I've never been outside early enough to see it in action - the bin-men in rural North Norfolk are beaten for early rising only by the blackbirds and sugar beet lorries - but the evidence all points to speed and efficiency. No litter is spilled in the road or garden; and if, as occasionally happens, I forget to put out the right bin, the men come in and fetch it themselves. Bravo for them.

In return, I do all I can to be a good citizen. In the kitchen are two smaller bins of my own. Into the first of these go junk mail and other clean waste paper, cardboard, drinks cans, foil, rinsed plastic bottles (caps removed) and yoghurt pots (washed and dried). Into the other goes all the rest. The former empties straight into the green wheelie bin. The latter, sealed in plastic bin liners, goes into the grey. Newspapers are bagged separately and left out for collection on green bin days. Bottles and other glass go, unsorted, into the village bottle bank. Other stuff when it arises - textiles, old computer keyboards, voiceless answerphones, chainless bikes - to a civic amenity site just outside Wells-next-the-Sea whose custodians have developed the collection of rubbish into a new kind of community art form. There are separate skips for every kind of recyclable material from rubble to books, and the brute functionality of the place is sensitively softened with flowers, like a memorial garden for your emptied attic. Bravo for them, too.

But back to the wheelie bins. The bagged-up contents of the grey one still follow in the footsteps of the cave-dweller to a landfill site. The unbagged contents of the green one are taken straight to the county-council-owned (but commercially run) "materials recovery facility" on a bleak - you could hardly expect it to be otherwise - half-built industrial site at Costessey, not far from the Norfolk Showground on the furthest outskirts of Norwich. A neighbouring landfill "cell", being fed by dustcarts and levelled by bulldozers, lies beneath a snowfall of trash-crazed gulls that are distracted only briefly by the bang of a bird-scarer. In due course, the car park may disappear beneath an anaerobic digester or some other, more mannerly treatment system that will replace the landfill once the government gets its policy straight. As always, there is time pressure. To design, plan and build a plant on the necessary scale will take around five years, which is the approximate, estimated lifespan of Norfolk's remaining landfills. With time leaching away, every lost day potentially is a day of disaster banked for the future.

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Part of the future, however (and for once it is a good part), is already here, though it can't be said that many citizens of the present have gone out of their way to welcome it. This whole business of sorting stuff into separate bins, of having to think about rubbish rather than blindly chuck it away, does not strike all council-tax payers as value for money. That the reverse is true - that the value of the service increases proportionately with rising need - is a stark illustration of the government's failure to drive home a message that is every bit as pressing as wartime thrift.

"Margaret Beckett," said one senior official in a large English city, "neither understands nor cares." One problem with recycling has been the lack of any clear consensus, or firm official guidance, on what might constitute "best practice". There are targets to shoot at, but not much agreement on how best to aim and fire. Which materials should be recycled? How and when should they be sorted? By the householder into a range of colour-coded bins and boxes? By the dustmen at the kerbside? By hand at a processing plant? Automatically, by machine? Which method produces the most recyclable material? Is this method (whatever it is) inevitably the one that will yield the greatest benefit for taxpayers and make the best economic sense? Is all recycling unquestionably good?

There is no single or simple answer. What is right for a rural county like Norfolk, with its thinly dispersed population, might make no sense for a densely populated city. Rural, however, need not mean backward. Norfolk Environmental Waste Services - reduced, inevitably, to NEWS - has invested £6.5m in technology imported from San Diego, California, and it's as close to rock 'n' roll as a waste plant will ever get. It's the first of its kind in Europe, one of only seven in the world. I am led initially to a huge conference room with cinema-size DVD screen and rows of expectant chairs that testify to the stream of visitors it has received since it opened in April 2004. Through a large internal window you can watch the lorries turn into the reception hall, where they disgorge on to the concrete floor great slews of "dry recyclables" - paper, cans, plastic. If it's a Tuesday, my own stuff is here by 11am. One JCB shoves the new stuff on to the mountain. Another nibbles away at the base, shovelling it into a pit whence the first of many conveyors will feed it into the plant. Appropriately in a place called NEWS, the dominant background colour is of newsprint, though the stack is sequinned with the many colours of junk mail, glossy magazines, drinks cans, plastic bottles. You know even before you utter it that your joke about the Turner Prize will not be original.

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