

The rude awakening of the recycling adventurers

by Pedro Ferraz de Abreu

From green action to market law

Two years ago, MIT students started a recycling program. But when they began dropping off trash at a Cambridge recycling center, they got bad news: Cambridge does not want MIT trash. "We have not marketed it to students"[1], said city officials about their recycling center.

For years, the Dutch schoolchildren, community and church groups, ran recycling low-profit networks, enhancing their finances by "selling to the mills at a guaranteed minimum price"[2] (a success of environmentalists). Together with small dealers, they were an important part of the town collection systems. But recently, wastepaper from the USA invaded the market, and the price dropped from 8 cents to 1 cent per Kg. Instead of paying, dealers started "even demanding money"[2], and many of those groups gave up, disrupting seriously the system.

In Jamaica Plain, volunteers of the Recycling Initiative got at first about \$10/ton for their newspapers and glass; but soon their market was saturated. "The brokers got smart"[3], and the recyclers had to start paying instead.

Is there a trend in these events? I think so. Recycling activists are winning; but with this success, what started as a kind of world-greening effort became a big market operation. Where before ecologic enthusiasm and community cooperation ruled, now the laws of market competition rule. For years, recycling was out of the "main-stream"; now, it's serious business.

Is this a good thing? Most activists believe it is inevitable, and many think it is positive. After all, they are winning: recycling is expanding and that is what matters most, isn't it?

Is it? In the two USA cases (MIT, Jamaica Plain), the activists didn't seem to worry too much about what they considered temporary setbacks. There is a strong "realistic" current, that believes that playing the market "right" is the only chance to have the job done. But as many European environmentalists begin to realize, the sacrosanct market doesn't have an environmental conscience. It takes you down, as easy as it got you up.

Listen to how the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries sees it: "The 'new'

recycling movement of the late 1980's is fundamentally different from its predecessor. The driving force is not the ideology of 'Earth Day'. Rather, today's recycling proponents, who include many state solid waste officials and legislators, are pragmatically motivated (...); [they] are looking to recycling as a solution to part of the solid waste disposal costs"[4].

Recycling activists are winning. In the early days, they had small scale victories; their successes were dependent mostly on increased environmental conscientiousness. Now, they are having large scale successes; but those victories are generally associated with "skyrocketing costs of waste disposal"[5], which brought with them the "pragmatically motivated" allies, that is, allies not driven by "Earth Day's ideology"...

Should we fear success, then? I don't think so. It is possible to use the situation to the advantage of the recycling cause, provide activists keep their eyes open. Look at the Jamaica Plain experience:

"It's Earth Day 1990", says the Boston Magazine, about Jamaica Plain Recycling Initiative, "and recycling - beloved of do-gooders and tree-huggers - is making a comeback. For once, good environmentalism and good business seem to be dancing cheek-to-cheek"[6]. But reality is somewhat less rosy. State and town officials, including the governor, committed themselves to support the initiative, only to walk away when financial and other crises determined other priorities... Were it not for the incredible mobilization, clever strategy and great determination of the activists, the administration would have approved only a token, meaningless program [3].

The point is: we must not forget, in the euphoria of the megatons recycled, that if we fail to transform the way society interacts with environment, we may well lose the race between increased waste production and increased recycling; that our "pragmatic" allies will pull the carpet under the recycling feet at the first market turn, in name of the same "pragmatism"; that our best accumulated capital to protect our successes and to expand them, is a growing environmental awareness and consequent popular mobilization. Just the same as in the good old days, when small was beautiful.

In the meanwhile, and now that the matter is in the capable hands of the "pragmatically motivated", you'd better brace yourself: the market laws are coming after you.

Public trash, private trash ... exported trash

This is how MIT students got to learn that not all trash is born equal.

It is really simple. The town's recycling center gets more trash than they can handle. The town invested in the center because they wanted to reduce garbage-collecting costs. MIT, being a "commercial enterprise"[1], is not served by municipal waste disposal. Therefore, it has no right to use the town's center. Ergo, accepting trash from MIT at the center, means loss of money for the municipality.

"It's really a cost-saving mechanism", said the city officials; "MIT needs to develop its own program to deal with recycling (...) through a private hauler"[1].

So there is private trash and public trash; and therefore private recycling and public recycling. It seems reasonable. But soon things get more complex. Profit attracted private sector to business; so they don't want competition from state facilities. "With rubbish collection costs going up", says one of the entrepreneurs, "commercial business are banging our door down. That's welcome. But as far as the State setting up processing facilities that may compete with existing, private recycling companies, well, I'm against that"[7].

With or without the state, the competition is there. On the other hand, out of 600 mills in the US, only about 200 make intense use of waste paper. In these conditions, the best way to profit from the recent recycling boom, is to export: "Within the past five years", says the same source, "export has become a major factor affecting prices. Because of diminished mill capacity (...) export can make the difference (...) to a firm's profit margins"[7].

There are no islands within capitalism

So export they do.

From 1970 to 1986, US waste paper exports went from 0.4 to 4 million tons [8]. The result: the disruption of the recycling arrangements in Europe, particularly in the Netherlands. *"For 50 years the Dutch have been collecting and recycling their paper"*, writes Marlise Simons; *"Almost 70% of the paper used in newspaper, tissues and cardboard comes from waste (...) But because of the new paper glut, dealers are now paying little or nothing for paper, or even demanding money, so the system is collapsing"* [2].

The situation got serious enough for the Dutch to appeal to the CEE in order to ban waste paper imports. But only waste exports can be stopped under international agreements; wastepaper counts as a commodity, as a raw material, so they fall within free trade rules.

A full circle is completed; what the market helped to build in one continent, is helping to destroy in another.

Maybe we can trick the system for a while, here and there. But this is the same system that has people burning potatoes, throwing fish back to the ocean, etc, just to keep prices high, while others die of hunger. The same pattern, the same logic; the Dutch problems are no accident. Why should we accept the sanctity of capitalism? Is a society driven by profit-seeking and ruled by omnipotent market laws really the best that humankind can come up with?

From grass-roots to institutionalization ...

These phenomena cannot exist without impact in the activist movement itself. *"The new dimensions of the solid waste scene enter the framework of the paper recycling industry ... and vice-versa"*, writes Richard Hertzberg [7]. This seems to be true in many different ways.

For instance, much of the work in the chain of the recycling process, is accomplished by volunteers. Yet, it feeds a profitable industry. In these circumstances, for how long can they last as voluntaries?

This problem is not unique to recycling, or to non-governmental-organizations. I recall the case of Calcutta. Voluntary workers in a kind of a "bare-foot" health service in the Calcutta slums, have until now worked with minimal remuneration. They *"are currently trying to unionize and demand the higher wages and benefits that are due other government employees"* [9].

But other aspects of this impact are more subtle. With the institutionalization of the recycling, its integration into business as usual, what happens to the actors of this movement? Are grassroots

movements becoming institutionalized too?

Members of the Jamaica Plain Initiative, will be now sitting in official town committees [3]. Is that the natural step forward, or is the beginning of the end of the group mobilization, as an independent agent for change?

One faction of the German grünen thinks of acceding to power as a fate worse than death: the contamination of the ideals of the movement - therefore, their strategic destruction. Yet, it was through their election to the parliament that they achieved a tremendous impact and influence, not only in Germany but in all Europe. Recently, though, they lost all seats and seem to be neutralized. Who is right?

Grassroots movements play by different rules. *"(...) [they] did not simply use reports; they used demonstrations, civil disobedience, the erection of a tent city"*, writes Lisa Peattie. Institutionalization seems to imply "responsible behavior", to work more for consolidation of the acquired, than for innovation or for the change of the status quo. She compares their nature with their function: *"The traditional planners worked within an established set of ideas as to the nature of things and the problems to be addressed; the social movements needed to change ideas as to the nature of things, and to redefine the problems"* [10]

If that is so, we would need to work with both. Someone said, I don't recall who, that all grassroots movements cease to exist as such, in the moment of success. More likely, I'd say that their function in the process changes. But ultimately, it depends on how people adjust to a new phase. Some just can't; a famous case was Ernesto "Che" Guevara, who felt his role was finished in Cuba with the victory of the revolution, and went away to fight in Bolivia. On the other hand, Castro was able to do the transition (at least for a while, one can wonder about now).

Also, neither all grassroots movements are progressive, nor all institutions conservative. There was a grassroot movement in Chile that supported Pinochet; and the Institute Marx-Engels in Soviet Union during the 30's was the source of inspiration and leadership for many anti-colonial movements (Mao and Ho-Chi-Min were colleagues there...).

But beyond stereotypes, when grassroots activists are coopted into the system, a number of changes usually occur. Patricia Hynes describes this within EPA, saying that *"the language, the knowledge, and the internal life and order of the institution function to justify and sustain its political worldview. They make the institution appear different from, larger than, and more important than the*

Also, people in institutions tend to lose contact with their roots, and position themselves in "the embattled middle" [11], between the grassroots movement and the system. I found fascinating the case of EPA, with former activists now worrying as much about industry action as about Greenpeace reaction...

...And back to grass-roots.

So, what can we do? As Monsieur De La Palisse would say, there are no easy answers.

Hynes has an optimistic view. "Institutionalization is not irreversible", she says; one can "(...) create islands of deinstitutionalized existence which would be creative sources of energy, policy, and ideas for the Agency" [11]

What I have experienced so far, tells me that these islands are unlikely to survive, unless they have strong horizontal ties with others in other agencies, and unless they are in frequent contact with activists. The reason is that you need to draw your strength to resist routine, frustration, cynical pessimism, etc, from a broader pool of equals; you need to feel that you are a part of an alive movement - not trapped in an isolated island.

With this kind of network support, then some islands might do more than survive. Individually, they probably wont last long. But while some disappear, others will surface; and what began as an adventure, might grow into an irresistible agent of change.

References:

- [1] The Tech, Dec 11, 1990
- [2] New York Times, Marlise Simons, Dec 1990
- [3] Sue Minter's talk, MIT, 27 Sept 1990
- [4] "The Scrap processing industry and the new recycling movement", Phoenix Quarterly, Winter 87
- [5] Recycling and incineration, R. Denison, J. Ruston, EDF
- [6] "You do recycle, don't you?", Kevin Convey, Boston Magazine, Apr 90
- [7] "The business of wastepaper reuse", Richard Hertzberg, Biocycle, Aug 87
- [8] "Dealing with our trash", Boston's Special Committee on Solid Waste Management, 1988
- [9] "Politics and Institutions in Urban Development: The story of the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority", Biswapriya Sanyal, Menu Tewari, MIT, 1990
- [10] "New politics, the state, and planning", Lisa Peattie, 1986
- [11] The Recurring Silent Spring, H. Patricia Hynes