

Recycling Idiocy

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
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Here comes the recycling crowd! As usual, liberal thinking is wrong, mistaken, and twisted. We do not need to be forced to recycle anything. If it is worthwhile to recycle, the free market will automatically provide incentives to do so.

But liberals do not believe it. They say that the free market fails to encourage proper recycling behavior, as it should, and thus governments should coerce people into recycling their waste: glass, aluminum, cardboard, paper, plastic, etc. It is obviously better, they say, to recycle a reusable resource rather than throw it away.

But they are wrong. It is generally *not* worthwhile to recycle, especially in wealthier nations like America. In fact, the time and energy it takes to recycle is inefficient and nonproductive. Most people would be better off throwing away the potentially recyclable good and go about other productive activities. In so doing, they will produce more economic good than they would by some recycling effort. For instance, let's say a person can earn \$15 per hour at his job, or an equal amount of satisfaction from a leisure activity. If he can, alternatively, only earn \$10 net profit (per hour of labor exerted) by recycling used goods by sorting them and taking them to a recycling center for sale, then recycling is an inefficient activity. Recycling does not make sense since it does not result in the most socially efficient behavior.

That is not to say that some people, who have low production capacity, might not do better by recycling used goods. For them it makes sense to do so. For instance, the person who only has the ability to earn \$5 per hour at his job might do better by undertaking recycling activities. That is why many poor people, especially in Third World nations, can be found voluntarily collecting and neatly sorting recyclables from garbage bins in wealthier neighborhoods. No one needs to coerce them to recycle garbage (even if it is not their own garbage). They do so voluntarily and enthusiastically. I saw this behavior first-hand for several years while living in South America.

Contrary to what the modern neo-socialists and liberal environmentalists want you to believe, the free market does not fail to recycle used goods. Instead, markets allocate labor resources to their highest valued use. Thus, professionals and wealthier people should not recycle, and have no incentive to do so in the free market. Yet the opposite is true for many poorer people. The market provides proper incentives for both classes. It is idiotic to think that public policy can fix market failures, especially when it comes to environmental concerns. Indeed, it is government failure that has led to the greatest environmental disasters and degradation that the world has ever known—witness the pollution and other environmental debacles that have plagued and scarred the former communist nations in Eastern Europe and Asia.

Let's do our best to quickly squelch the rising tide of recycling idiocy and allow people to undertake the most efficient and productive activities that they possibly can. In so doing, we will be sure to encourage the highest degree of social welfare and enjoy the highest standards of living and freedom. Alternatively, letting neo-socialists with their liberal environmental (recycling) policies control our lives will only lead to economic slow-downs and social grief. Their ranting and whining may be moving to some, but it is at bottom merely idiotic and unreasonable from an economic point of view.