

Recycle, Ideas from the Past: The Complex Nature of Recycling

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Recycling is a highly complex, but also a universal phenomenon, whether studied from today's or from the perspective of past cultures and communities. It is a set of social, economic, political, as well as religious ideologies of a society or an individual. However, a wider understanding of the phenomenon has still been neglected within the scope of social sciences and the humanities. The ways and motivation that drove man in the recent or distant past to repair, reuse and recycle objects and /or materials are deeply rooted in different social spheres, but primarily in man himself.

In the past, recycling was a part of everyday life and was done almost routinely, just like today. It can be said that the phenomenon of recycling is temporally universal, and the reasons for it are mostly based on sustainability, the renewal of resources and raw materials, meaning that recycling was, essentially, of a practical nature. In the past, recycling was not seen as a moral or ethical choice, nor was it brought on by trying to preserve the environment, as it is usually thought of today. Recycling was also directly influenced by changes in technology and the materials associated with such changes. It also occurred when the value of a certain material increased in a situation when raw materials or artisans who knew how to process it become less available. Changes in the intensity of recycling a certain material in the past can indicate specific economic situations or cultural transformations.

Despite the complexity of recycling patterns, today and in the past, evidence of this practice can be found in all segments of human society, in both recycling and reusing everyday things made of different materials (pottery, glass, bones, stone, metals, textile, wood), and in the "recycling" of space (structures, cemeteries, sacral spaces, and the like). In the past, a man used different natural materials, and the most common ones discovered by archaeologists during excavations include: pottery (clay), bone, and stone, while artificial materials, such as glass and metal alloys, appear somewhat less often, depending on the studied historical period. Precisely such durable materials contain traces of use-wear, repairs, reuse or material recycling. The main reason for the frequent practice of repair, reuse or recycling of objects and materials was of practical nature, and the focus was on the maximal usability of raw materials - a consequence of limited resources or their limited availability.

Although the practical nature of recycling was of primary importance in the past, just like today, there are numerous examples where practicality partially overlaps with ideological motives and the symbolic reallocation of individual artefacts. There is a list of examples where artefact reuse became part of a ritual or was purely symbolic. In the past, such activities took place on daily basis, and are still a part of the contemporary lifestyle and relation to artefacts. In these processes, the main role was played by artefacts that most often did not belong to the period in which they acquired their symbolic meaning, i.e. their “manufacturing date” is probably a lot older, making the artefacts some kind of memorabilia. The reasons for their safekeeping, that is, their symbolic use, are never easy to explain, just like the connection between man and artefact or what it symbolizes. The reuse of an object does not only include the change of its function but can also reflect the social identity and status of its owner, as well as the social, economic or symbolic meaning that the item held for the individual and/or the community. In that sense, the meaning of an artefact is not static but gets transformed with the change of its context of use. In every new situation where an artefact acquires a new meaning (new function), new relationships develop between man and artefact. The transformation of space essentially represents the continuity of man’s impact on the environment. Such effects changed with generations, cultures and natural conditions. Man’s awareness of his own transiency, his ancestors and past cultures is especially visible and long-lasting once its mark is left on the environment. Such occurrences can be viewed as the systematic use of the same area, be it for the same, or some other purpose. In these examples, the reasons for “recycling” are highly complex and enter different spheres of the human conceptualization of both the material and the spiritual, but, this time, in a given landscape.

Even though, in the past, recycling was of practical nature, same as today, examples where practicality partially overlaps with ideological motivation and the symbolic reallocation of specific artefacts cannot be neglected. Despite the complexity of recycling practices, the evidence seen on archaeological artefacts represents potentially very valuable records of the different spheres of life from the past.

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