

Köster, Roman

Rubbish

A DIRTY HISTORY OF HUMANITY.

Hardcover. 422 pages

**Roman Köster** is a research associate at the Historical Commission of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences and Humanities and wrote his habilitation thesis on German waste management after the Second World War.

## Contents

Introduction . . . . .	7
I. Pre-modernity . . . . .	19
1 Early history: First experiences with rubbish . . . . .	21
2 The city: unhealthy place and accelerator of evolution . .	33
3. the difficult and useful coexistence with animals in the city . . . . .	57
4 The dictates of scarcity: recycling in the pre-modern era . . .	75
5 Excursus: Hygiene - a clean story? . . . . .	91
II. The industrial age . . . . .	103
6 The second revolution: industrialisation and its consequences . . .	105
7 The invention of rubbish collection . . . . .	127
8 Colonial urban hygiene: power and modernisation . . . . .	155

9 Global cycles: Recycling in the industrial age . . . . .	173
III Mass consumption . . . . .	205
10 The emergence of the throwaway society . . . . .	207
11. rubbish bins and ‘male pride’: modern rubbish collection . . .	229
12 Removal, disposal, treatment, burial, incineration . . . .	252
13 Rich and poor: recycling as a policy and survival strategy . . . . .	282
Epilogue: Into the sea . . . . .	312
Notes . . . . .	319
Bibliography . . . . .	379
Picture credits . . . . .	417
Subject index . . . . .	419

Humans and rubbish - it's a long and intimate relationship. Even the Neanderthals found things useless, sorted them out and threw them away. Ancient Rome struggled with waste problems, as did the metropolises of the 19th century. But everything fades behind the mountains of waste of the present day. Based on the production and handling of waste, Roman Köster writes an illuminating history of our species and shows how life with waste has changed from the time we settled down to the present day. His book offers the first thoroughly dirty history of mankind, because waste is always being thrown away.

In pre-modern times, waste was primarily a practical problem. It lay around, smelled bad and obstructed traffic. In the course of the strong and worldwide urban growth since the late 18th century, the attention for hygienic problems caused by waste, which favoured the spread of typhoid or cholera, increased. Today, however, rubbish has gone from being a question of urban cleanliness to a global environmental problem. In his global history of rubbish from early history to the present day, Roman Köster traces the causes of these

developments and shows how throwing away, disposing of and recycling has changed over the course of history. After all, rubbish and attempts to dispose of it have shaped the face of settlements and cities as well as the lives of their inhabitants - from the Stone Age to the present day.

Waste problems are therefore not new, and yet they have changed fundamentally throughout throughout history.

In the pre-modern era waste was primarily a practical problem. It lay around, had a bad odour and obstructed traffic. The aim was to keep the cities clean and to present a good image, for example when a lordly visitor came by. In the course of strong and global urban growth from the late 18th century onwards, however, there was an increasing awareness of the problems caused by waste, which favoured the spread of typhoid or cholera. After the Second World War, on the other hand there were other dangers lurking in the rubbish: Infectious diseases were increasingly brought under control, but the sheer quantity of waste and the and the pollution of the environment with toxic substances could not be dealt with.

This book examines the causes of this development. It offers a global history of waste - from early human history to the present day. It tells a story about what people have declared to be dirty, dangerous, disruptive or non-functional.

The book describes the problem that waste posed, it shows how throwing away and recycling have changed over the course of history - and how rubbish has changed from an urban issue to a global environmental problem.

Looking at the history of waste is interesting for many reasons: For example, we would know much less today about the way of life, diet and customs of early history if archaeology did not unearth their waste. This also applies to the Middle Ages and the early modern period, whose waste pits provide information about everyday life and economy of the people living at that time.

Surprisingly, this is still the case today: with garbology.

Garbology has developed into a whole branch of research that digs in not so old landfill sites in order to find out something about people's consumption habits during the 1970s, for example.

Just as interesting, however, is what is not found in the rubbish pits. Humans have developed extensive reuse and recycling practices over many centuries.

Stones, ship planks, cooking pots and texts have been reused and allow conclusions to be drawn about networks of communication, for example, value chains, maritime connections and ideas of value and disvalue that societies developed over time. The reconstruction of these practices allows a wide range of insights about the material foundations and economic practices of past times - but also on changing perceptions of dirt and cleanliness, order and danger connected to the handling of rubbish.

Last but not least, the examination of waste also provides starting points for a history of consumption from below. It focuses less on the consumption of nobility and the bourgeoisie than what fell from their tables. The collection and utilisation of discarded, seemingly useless items enabled countless poor people to make a modest living and develop creative survival strategies.

To a certain extent, reutilisation also repeatedly created the opportunity to participate in consumer society and to express themselves in the social world according to their own ideas through second-hand clothes, furniture or accessories. This offers insights into a world that is often left out of consumer history and whose mechanisms are perhaps less evident in Western Europe, but still play a major role in countless places around the world.

The topic offers so many conclusions in terms of economic, social and environmental history: In the background, the book - obviously - has another intention: to uncover the roots of our current waste problems, which could hardly be more dramatic. According to a study by the World Bank, in 2016 an estimated 2.01 billion tonnes of household waste was generated in 2016: an almost incomprehensible amount. In terms of plastic waste alone, humanity produces the weight of around 100 Eiffel Towers every day. The amount of waste has increased exponentially, especially since the Second World War.

The forecasts are not very optimistic. If no drastic measures are taken, around 3.4 billion tonnes of waste will be produced worldwide in 2050, around 75 per cent more than at present. Reducing waste has been one of the major goals of environmental policy since the 1970s, and for at least the last 15 years, zero waste has been a much-used buzzword for at least 15 years. In reality, however, we are further away from this goal than ever.

Collecting, disposing of and recycling this waste without poisoning the environment or preventing it to end up in the sea is currently one of the greatest challenges mankind has to face.

However, the book not only describes how we came to this point. It is also about showing how closely waste reflects the way we organize our daily lives, procure food, live, dress, move and entertain ourselves. This was just as true in pre-modern times as it is today, waste is also a mirror of the respective historical periods. But that is precisely why it has more to do with us than we would like to admit.

Over the centuries, surprising forms of recycling and throwing away, of frugality and waste, have repeatedly emerged, which cannot be squeezed into the scheme of a linear history of decay - from a circular to a linear economy. The world has become increasingly complex in material and organisational terms over the last few centuries - and it is precisely this increasing complexity that explains why clichéd images of the emergence of the modern throwaway society often mislead us.