



THE BIG POND

A US-GERMAN LISTENING SERIES

Sorting Out Recycling

by Nina Bohlmann

Nina Bohlmann: There are three common words. Three r's that we always hear when we talk about trash: reduce, reuse, recycle. Because trash is a part of all of our lives, and our apparent inability to deal with it properly has become an increasingly unavoidable problem on a global level. One of the main ways that we can prevent our trash from ending in the ocean or in landfills is recycling. And it is something we can all get behind.

Dr. Seldman: Recycling is a cross-gender, cross-class, cross-race, cross-ethnic phenomenon, and it literally has won the hearts and minds of the American people.

Nina Bohlmann: But the recycling system in most of the United States is not working. In my home town of Baltimore, the recycling rate is a mere 28 percent.

Dr. Seldman: To the extent that the US cities are stagnating in recycling, is because of the institutions, not because of the will of the people.

Nina Bohlmann: So today, I am going to take a look at recycling in Baltimore and in Berlin, Germany - the capital of the country with the best recycling rate in the world. Is recycling really the answer to our waste problems or have we been barking up the wrong trash can? So, recycling is handled differently in every country, and in the US, even in every state. So, to start out, I talked with Rebecca Sparks, who lives in Baltimore County and works at an ecological restoration company in the area. This is how she recycles at home.

Rebecca Sparks: We basically have two bins in our kitchen, we have one for trash, and one for recycling. So, everything goes in one - glass, paper, plastic and metal - that all goes down once a week, take it to the end of the driveway and it gets picked up.

Nina Bohlmann: So, Baltimore has this single stream recycling system. Single Stream has been adopted by a lot of states in the past decade in an effort to make recycling simpler for the individual. But Rebecca has seen some of the difficulties of recycling first hand. In high school, she was the president of HOPE Club: Herford's Organization for Protecting the Environment.

Rebecca Sparks: Before I got there, the club had kind of fought to get recycling, because I think, initially, the school just didn't have recycling - which is absurd when you think about how much paper a school goes through. And the agreement was that we could have recycling if the club was the one who dealt with it. So, every week, we'd assign students to different hallways and we'd go and collect the recycling and take it out to the recycling dumpsters. There were times when we'd go into a classroom to collect the recycling and like the big blue box would be empty and the trash can is full of paper, so occasionally, like if we had time, I'd go in and just like pull the paper out and put it into the recycling bin. And there were also some times when teachers would be really dismissive of the whole system - I don't know if it's just a generational gap and not understanding the impact or if it was... I don't think it was actively hostile, but there were some teachers or substitutes in some cases where I'd point out that something, they threw in the trash can, could really go in the recycling and "Hey, can you recycle that," and they're like "Oh, it all goes to the same place" and it's like "Actually it doesn't - we come around once a week and make sure it goes to the right place." So, it was kind of frustrating hitting those kinds of roadblocks, just people being really dismissive of it when it's something that you care about in reducing the impact of waste.

Nina Bohlmann: Apart from people simply not recycling, another problem with single stream recycling has shown to be that what is simpler for the individual actually makes the job a lot more difficult for processing facilities - resulting in a lot of materials ending up in the wrong place. In the industry, this is referred to as contamination. So, in Berlin it's a little bit different. This is Rahel Schemionek. She is a friend of mine from university and also happens to live in my neighborhood.

Rahel Schemionek: Alright, so we separate basically into four different trash cans the stuff that we use and throw away. We have one for everything that is organic - so for everything that is leftover food or thin papers, stuff like that - that goes into one trash can. Then we have another one for plastic and recyclable hard plastic stuff. And then we have another one for paper. So, for example, if I am using up a yogurt, then I would pull off the paper that is around the yogurt cup, and then I would put it into the paper trash bin, and then the rest would go into the recyclable plastic trash bin. And then we have another section for glass, but we don't really have a bin for our glass at home, we just have a corner in the kitchen where we put all the glasses.

Nina Bohlmann: So, this is called Dual Stream recycling. And in a global comparison, this has proven to be pretty effective - Germany's recycling rate is 64 percent - one of the best in the world. But Rahel also has concerns about the current system.

Rahel Schemionek: I think, it's better than just throwing everything into one bin and not separating it at all, because that means you can recycle things better and in a more efficient way. It's good for the environment, but sometimes I feel like it's a little bit too much as well, because I'm not even really sure if everything is, you know, staying that separate as we separated it, because sometimes we hear stories "Oh, it's going to end up in the same place anyways". I should inform myself about that better.

Nina Bohlmann: To find out more, I talked to Tobias Quast.

Tobias Quast: *[German]* Mein Name ist Tobias Quast, ich bin beim BUND: Bund für Naturschutz Deutschland beim Berliner Landeverband.

Nina Bohlmann: He works with the German Federation for Environment and Nature Conservation. The German acronym is BUND. It's one of the biggest environmental non-profit organizations in the country. But as you can hear, this interview was in German, so I'll give you the rundown. First off, I asked what the official recycling rate is in Berlin, because I couldn't really find any clear-cut numbers online. But...

[Tobias chuckles]

Nina Bohlmann: ...he didn't just come out with a straight answer. After asking again, he told me that the numbers that are paraded around don't actually mean that much. This is for two reasons: first, the amount of recycled materials is measured after pick up – before any of the further sorting and processing. So, the actual recycling rate or what comes out at the end as a reusable resource is actually a bit lower. The other factor is that our everyday understanding of what recycling is, is not the same as the government's definition, at least when it comes to the yellow bin, the one for plastic. So, when I – and I assume everyone else – think of recycling, I think: I recycle my plastic yogurt container, it gets melted down and turned into a new yogurt container. But in reality, at least in Germany, this is not the case. Due to hygienic standards, this isn't really feasible with the current technology in Germany. And, even more predominantly, Germany actually relies on this recycled plastic for something else: energy. Quast told me that only 20 to 30 percent of the recycled plastic actually gets reused. Everything else is burned in incinerators and literally powers the country. Ever since the "Kohle Ausstieg" or the decision to stop using coal, Germany had to get its energy from somewhere else. And wind energy wasn't cutting it.

Apparently, the German State thinks that our plastic waste just appears out of thin air, because, at least on paper, this counts as a renewable energy. But the reality is that burning recyclables doesn't just concern the now lost material – in this case plastic – but it also has to do with all of the energy that went into producing the product in the first place. The energy needed to extract the oil from the ground, transport it to the refinery and then to a processing facility where it is turned into plastic before being shipped to the manufacturer. And according to Quast, the energy generated through burning that plastic yogurt container doesn't even get close to the amount of energy that was needed to create it in the first place. But apart from the problems that Germany faces on a systematic level, Berlin actually isn't that good at separating trash in comparison to the rest of the nation. According to Quast, this is due to...

Tobias Quast: *[German]* Großstädtische Anonymität.

Nina Bohlmann: Big city anonymity. In the smaller German towns, things work a bit differently. Dr. Heidi Schreiber-Pan, who now lives in Baltimore but grew up in Germany, told me about what this was like for her growing up.

Dr. Schreiber-Pan: You get a trash can, that's pretty small and they pick it up once a week or every two weeks, and if you create more trash than fits into that trash can, you have to pay a fine. So, in order for you not to pay a fine, you have to be pretty intentional about recycling. So, what would happen is you would recycle the paper and the glass and all that, and then once a week we would drive it all up to – gosh, I don't even know the English word for that – but it was like a recycling station. And then we would drive up there on Saturday and it was a family thing. I just threw the papers in here and my sister threw the glass in there and then we'd drive back home. The only thing that gets picked up right at your door, you know, curbside pickup was only trash.

Nina Bohlmann: But in Berlin, most people live in apartment buildings, and the trash is taken out centrally. So, no one checks to see if you put your trash in the right bin, and there are no direct fines for producing too much waste. There are a couple initiatives that want to invest in new technology to track who throws out what, but that means more money. The BSR, Berliner Stadt Reinigung, which is the city's central waste management company, focuses mostly on burning trash, since the incinerators belong to them. They also get money directly from these non-recyclable's bins, so they would not really profit at all if trash separation were to be optimized.

That being said, however, the recycling rate, even when accounting for definition particularities is a lot higher in Berlin than it is in Baltimore. So, would going back to a dual stream system help? Dr. Schreiber-Pan doesn't think so.

Dr. Schreiber-Pan: To be honest with you, I don't think that would work well in the US, because people are not really brought up to see recycling as something that we do to help the community or for the planet. I think to make it work in the US, it has to be convenient. Because people are super busy here, everyone's got these crazy schedules. They're busy, they're not gonna take time on a Saturday to go and as a community recycle their recycling stuff. I just don't think that would work here. I mean we are the land of the drive thrus- everything drive thru, the bank, the McDonalds, the laundry - you know, so people like convenience here and we have to make recycling convenient so that people will actually do it.

Nina Bohlmann: To find out more about recycling in the US, I spoke with Dr. Neil Seldman.

Dr. Seldman: My name is Neil Seldman, I am a co-founder of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance.

Nina Bohlmann: He told me that the problem with recycling here has two aspects. On the one hand, we have the problem that no one wants our trash.

Dr. Seldman: The impact of China's decision not to accept single stream materials from the United States is because the materials are contaminated both with garbage (non-recyclable things) and also the plastic and paper have been contaminated by glass shards that are developed during the collecting and processing of all recyclables together. As of the end of 2017, the Chinese started refusing these loads. I believe for two reasons. One, they wanted clean material for their machines to improve their own environment, and secondly, the cost of labor in China has been rising. And that means that China no longer wanted to spend money cleaning up Americans' recycled materials. So, there was this cut off - it was announced well ahead of time - American processors tried to delay, ultimately China would not change its position and now Americans have to clean up their act. I'd say, it's going from sloppy recycling to clean stream recycling, are the terms that we often use.

Nina Bohlmann: To get away from this "sloppy recycling," the technology in the MRFS - or Materials Recovery Facilities - would have to be improved. While some critics advocate for the return to dual stream recycling, the ILSR isn't so quick to give up on Single Stream systems.

Dr. Seldman: We believe that Single Stream recycling can work. We point to Boulder, Colorado and twin cities, Minneapolis and St. Paul, where you have single stream systems that are about two to three hundred tons each, and they are working quite well.

It's the nine hundred and thousand ton per day single-stream processing plants that are focused on pushing through material as opposed to getting high quality material. The key to Boulder and the Twin Cities' success is that those processing companies are owned by grassroots recycling companies, companies that are dedicated to good recycling for both economic and environmental reasons. Whereas the large MRFS, the nine hundred to a thousand ton per day MRFS, are owned by waste management companies, who make 60 to 70 percent profit when they put garbage in their landfills, and make at most seven percent when they get involved with recycling. As a result of that, Wall Street always warns these companies that if they want their stock prices to stay high, they have to limit recycling, because recycling is cutting into their markets. We feel that recycling has to be separated from garbage companies because garbage companies don't care. And recycling can be a major component of a sustainable city, region, and country. But it has to be taken seriously, and we feel that the large waste management companies have self-interest and not public interest at heart.

Nina Bohlmann: So here too, those waste management companies have no interest in better recycling technology. So, recycling in Germany is not all what it's cracked up to be, at least not in Berlin – and at least not under my understanding of what recycling should be. And that recycling is a problem in Baltimore and in the United States as a whole is not really contested. So, what now? The issues surrounding recycling are, in part, a lot more systematic than I had imagined, which makes me feel a bit powerless. But in talking to so many different people, one message kept coming back: we have to live the three r's in the correct order. Rebecca, who we heard from earlier, made a really good point about this as well.

Rebecca Sparks: I think, a lot of times, recycling can lead to complacency. So, because people feel like “Oh, I'm recycling it”, they feel fine using five paper cups in a day or buying things that just come in these disposable containers that we are just so used to. I think that a lot more can be done higher up. So, like on an individual level, yeah, recycling is great, everyone should do it, we should keep doing it. But I don't think, the responsibility for something like waste should always fall on the individual consumer. I think that that is an attitude that has been perpetuated, especially recently with like the “no straws” kind of movement, which is great – that people are using less straws, but it kind of shifts the focus away from those who are creating these products and sending them out into the world and shames the individual consumer for using what's around them. And I think, we need to put a lot more focus on the higher up level and stop producing as much plastic in the first place, because I mean you have reduce, reuse, recycle. Recycle is the third one on that list, we should start with reduce.

Nina Bohlmann: So, whether our policies and regulations change or public awareness increases so much that we as consumers are able to shift the market – one thing is for sure: we as world citizens have to be the catalysts of change. We can use our voices both in the voting booth and even more importantly in what, and how much we consume. From Berlin, this in Nina Bohlmann for the Big Pond.

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