

## The Perils of Plastic Amnesia

**Convenient, flimsy, costly, cynical, manipulative, wasteful, deadly...we'll never forget the plastic bag**

*Homo sapiens*, reasoned Dostoyevsky, is not an accurate description of the human race, because '*sapiens*' means wise or rational. Since it is in our nature to reject happiness and seek chaos we are irrational, and he proposed that we call ourselves the *ungrateful biped*.

But even this damning label does not fully explain humanity's worst invention: the plastic carrier bag. Plastic bags certainly contribute to a degree of environmental chaos, but ask most shoppers and they will maintain that supermarket carriers encourage a sense of order. They will use words such as 'handy', 'practical' and 'hygienic'. Ingratitude alone cannot explain the plastic bag. It is a phenomenon that can only be accounted for by amnesia.

**Forgetfulness is the human characteristic responsible for the consumption of roughly 500 million plastic bags annually, or a million a minute. Only three decades have passed since the flimsy carrier was introduced to the world, but it will be another millenium before the first of these has degraded in its landfill site. Since then, several trillion have been manufactured, used once or twice to actually carry things, and discarded. Only a creature with an extraordinarily dim memory could create such a problem where none existed to start with.**

The invention of the plastic carrier bag was in the first place dependent upon forgetfulness. Unlike most of the most abhorrent inventions, it was not invented to do anything new or better. The carrier bag goes back at least to ancient Egypt, when cotton was first spun. Then they were used for shopping, and nothing has changed in 3,400 years. The modern, plastic version was a solution only for forgetfulness. It was a bag that could be provided cheaply by the vendor for those who had forgotten to bring a bag.

Or, at least, forgotten to bring enough of them. Most retailers are very keen to overcome every obstacle to your spending money in their shops, and go to great lengths to persuade you to buy more than you intended when you left home. In order to fall for their marketing ploys, you may need more bags. You will also need to forget what you really came for, and be open to being persuaded to buy things you don't need and may or may not be able to afford. Of course, whether you forget your own bags or not, you will be paying

for them. The costs are passed on to consumers in the form of high prices - \$4 billion a year's worth of higher prices in America alone. The average UK household spends 470 a year on packaging. If supermarkets could provide cheap trucks to carry more home when your vehicle was too full, you can guarantee that they would. In fact, they do. Internet shopping has provided a way in which supermarkets can carry more to your door than you can fit in your car.

### **Us, being used? Oh, forget it...**

I ordered my shopping online once. I had forgotten to go shopping all week, and needed both to stay in and eat. When it arrived, each item was placed separately in its own plastic bag. Initially, I assumed that some customers were fastidiously hygienic, and might complain if food items came into contact with each other. But upon mature reflection, I realised that this could not be so, since each item was already wrapped in its own packaging. Even a friend of mine with a compulsive obsessive disorder is not averse to a couple of well-wrapped fish in the same bag.

The only possible explanation for all the bags is human forgetfulness: every bag is printed with a reminder of where to shop. One might argue that advertising is a far more cynical excuse of the existence of brands, in which case carrying a store's plastic bag requires a more wilful kind of amnesia: you would have to forget that you are being used as a sandwich-board, proclaiming someone else's gospel on every you walk.

In terms of advertising it is no less effective to carry a Safeway shopping bag than it would be to wear a Safeway T-shirt. Even the generation who are happy to wear clothes that are essentially adverts for their creators have rejected attempts to make them advertise grocers. The casual wearer of a Sainsbury's T-shirt would immediately be understood to be making a subversively ironic statement about advertising, yet in the UK, the casual bearer of a Sainsbury's carrier may be declaring not a brain like a sieve, but a certain superiority to the Joneses.

**Our greatest talent as amnesiacs, though, must be for allowing our memories to slip regarding the environmental consequences. Plastic is an oil-based material. In a world where even George W Bush uses the language of addiction, it is hard to be entirely ignorant of the negative impacts of oil. Prospecting and drilling for it destroys fragile ecosystems. Controlling its supply encourages authoritarianism and war. And using it to make plastic produces chemical pollutants. In the US alone, an estimated 12,000,000 barrels of oil are**

**required to to produce the 100 billion plastic bags used annually.**

**Then there's the litter. An estimated three billion kilograms of plastic bags, wraps and sacks enter the waste stream each year in the US.** Plastic bags have been found not just in your local park's trees and on your favourite beach, but as far north as Spitzbergen (78 degrees North) and as far south as the Falklands (51 degrees South), and according to David Barnes of the British Antarctic Survey, "they'll be washing up in Antarctica within the decade". **A filter-feeding minke whale was washed up in Normandy in 2002 with 800 kilograms of plastic bags and other packaging in its stomach, suggesting far-reaching consequences for other marine life.** The plastics used in bags act as sponges for toxic chemicals, intensifying their effects when fish mistake small fragments for food. A study published in *Science* in May 2004 (vol 304, p. 838) showed a significant rise in plastic fragments in marine sediments over the past 40 years, which even small invertebrates like barnacles are capable of eating. There is no way to know how great the impact of this waste might be.

Even when we remember to put our bags in the bin, they continue to cause problems. They have the half-life of radioactive lead. Often they don't decompose at all because of the lack of oxygen in most landfill sites. The UK plastics industry parrots that only one per cent of landfill is due to plastic bags, but this doesn't account for all the litter, nor for the unknown quantity that is transported to Third World countries, where lax laws allow it to be incinerated.

Nor does it account for recycling. Depending upon whom you ask, the rate at which plastic bags are recycled is anything between 80 per cent (the UK Carrier Bag Consortium) and 0.5 per cent (the BBC). The CBC would count reusing a bag once as a bin-liner as 'recycling'; the less partial BBC would say that recycling should only refer to what happens when it is thrown away. Then, a number of problems make recycling economically unappealing. Ink contamination from those pesky adverts, sorting costs and the low quality of the plastics all make it hard to persuade anyone in their right mind to attempt to make money from the process.

### **Blights on the environment**

On top of all this, in order to find a use for perhaps 537 plastic bags per person every year (the average in Canada), we have to perform the miracle of erasing from our minds one unavoidable fact: plastic bags are duff. They split at the bottom. They snap at the top. They hurt your hands. You can't carry them on a bike. They won't stand on their own. They are the absolute epitome of the phrase 'cheap

and nasty', making a job that was done effortlessly for aeons looks difficult. If they were buildings, they'd be portable toilets. It is beyond human imagination to invent a less impressive bag. They are purported to hold up to 2,500 times their own weight. But frankly, if I was carrying 17.5kg in one, I'd wish my bag was few grams sturdier.

The manufacturers of these blights on the environment complain that they are an 'easy target', in a bizarre attempt to portray the lobby against them as a kind of container bully. But half the reason why plastic bags are an 'easy target' is that they are so utterly useless. Nobody likes them. In one survey, 90 per cent of the people carrying them out of supermarkets said they'd support a tax to get rid of them.

Incidentally, plastics manufacturers also like to portray the debate in terms of whether paper bags are any better. They aren't, and that isn't the debate.

In one sense though, plastic bags are not an easy target. It is very difficult to get worked up about a plastic bag. It is such a naff invention that it's quite hard to care one way or the other. I find myself loath to get into confrontations with vendors over them. When I find, having asked the man at the farmer's market stall to put an item in my bag, not his, that he has first of all put it in a smaller bag 'for protection', I cannot summon up the ire necessary to undo his work. When the internet order arrived in hundreds of separate bags, I did not demand that the delivers unpack it all before they left, making themselves late for the next delivery. It would have seemed such an enormous fuss - and over what? Plastic bags? Furthermore, try asking for an expensive item in a high street store (clothing, for example) to be put in the bag you brought from home. I guarantee that the facial expression with which you are greeted will be memorable. Thus, they can be hard to get rid of.

**Where progress has been made in reducing the environmental impact of plastic bags, it has had to be legislated for. In Ireland, a charge is levied which has resulted in a 95 per cent decrease in their presence in landfill. In Bangladesh you can be jailed for up to 10 years for manufacturing them. In Germany, vendors are required by law to deal with all packaging removed from their products and left by customers. Such laws lend a little gravitas to what might otherwise seem like pettiness.** They also discourage the multimillion-dollar contracts between retail giants and multinational packaging firms that result in such insanities as unwashed but plastic-wrapped cauliflowers, and ready meals with four separate layers of packaging.

So where does this leave us? It would have been great if the plastic bag had never been invented, but, like junk mail, it was. Personally, I'd favour an Irish-style levy, since all it seems to take to overcome our collective amnesia is a gentle (5p) reminder, without treading on our sensitive 'rights'. It is a reminder to do something that solves every problem mentioned above: to bring your own bags.

There is certainly a future for plastic bags - a thousand years of it for the ones already buried - but it would be nice to think that it won't be much more than that. By that time the amnesiac ape will surely have forgotten all about them.

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