

# REFRAMING AGENCY IN THE FACE OF GLOBAL CHALLENGES

## THE PROBLEM OF PLASTIC WASTE

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*This article is a discussion of the issue of agency in an age defined by common challenges that manifest themselves both locally and globally. In particular, the author argues for a dispersed, non-linear understanding of individual agency as it relates to the global crisis of plastic waste as a way of examining and assessing strategies of change.*

*Keywords: waste crisis, plastic waste, agency, miasma, circular economy, plastic-free stores, Slovenia*

*Avtorica obravnava vprašanje tvornosti v času skupnih izzivov, ki se kažejo na lokalni in globalni ravni. Posebej razpravlja o razpršeni, nelinearno pojmovani individualni tvornosti, ko gre za globalno krizo plastičnih odpadkov, kot načinu obravnave in spodbujanja strategij sprememb.*

*Ključne besede: kriza z odpadki, plastični odpadki, tvornosti, miazma, krožno gospodarstvo, trgovine brez embalaže, Slovenija*

### INTRODUCTION

This ethnographic essay is a discussion of the issue of agency in a global age, one defined by common challenges that manifest themselves both locally and globally. In particular, it focuses on agency as it relates to the global crisis of waste – particularly plastic waste, which has become representative of the issues linked to waste's (over)production and ubiquity. The immediacy of this problem has spurred activity and efforts on numerous fronts in recent decades – from civil initiatives, government policies, national and transnational campaigns as well as academic/scientific inquiry. A better understanding of how to conceptualize agency in relation to the production and management of waste is linked to encouraging increased awareness and as well as change –at the level of individuals as well as groups (Polajnar Horvat 2015).

The issue of the growing amount of waste, as well as its (mis)management and consequent effects on the world we live in, is just one of the features of the anthropocene - an age during which the world is being shaped ever more strongly by human action, and, unfortunately, in potentially irreversible ways (Davis 2015). The striking images that are ever more prevalent in mass and social media – plastic waste islands in the Pacific, animals choking in plastic, landscapes covered in plastic – are meant to elicit a reaction and possibly incite change, be it in terms of perspective or action. The fact that all this plastic do not degrade but instead simply break down into ever smaller pieces, infiltrating every aspect of our daily lives, our bodies, and even the food chain only emphasizes the need for significant change.

The following examination of the issue of agency is based on existing academic discussions linked to waste as well as an analysis of the depiction of plastic waste and waste-related issues in Slovenia in conjunction with the case study of a relatively new package-free store in Ljubljana, Slovenia's capital city.

## WASTE-RELATED CONCEPTS AND MYTHS

Two popular concepts that structure discussions and policies in relation to waste are strongly contested among specialists, analysts, and activists: the role of individuals or consumers in effecting change and the circular economy as a model for change. The first concerns the possibilities and limits of what consumers can do as individuals in effecting change by adapting their daily habits. Cultural theorist Gay Hawkins, a specialist in discard studies and author of *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish*, which focuses on everyday ethics linked to waste, stated in an interview:

*When you are working in this area, you are working at the interface between interesting conceptual intellectual work and applied engaged research that's tackling a global crisis. So you get often asked "what can I do?" or "how should we tackle the waste crisis?" **I think that's the biggest myth in discussions around waste. That changes in consumer practices will make a difference.** I understand the ethical impulse for that, in terms of living an ethical life and that being a way of direct and immediate engagement with the micro politics of how you live. But the real issues are so much bigger than consumers. They are, as discard studies has pointed out, about industrial waste, about the structural imperative to create waste in all economies. Those issues are just not talked about enough (Hawkins et al. 2019).*

Hawkins argues that increasing awareness as well as supporting and inciting people's desires to be more ethical in their waste practices have been placed at the forefront of discussions – albeit at the expense of issues such as industrial waste and the waste production engrained in all economic practice. In her opinion, this focus in both intellectual inquiry and practice has resulted in a lack of proper emphasis on more urgent issues, which, if addressed, may be more effective for inducing change. Such an argument begs the question as to the effectiveness and limits of individual agency in the face of the waste crisis, or, more precisely, the position and definition of consumer (and/or individual) agency in a complex, broad-based issue in which consumers play a small yet definitive role.

While Hawkins raises an important point, individuals have – almost as a rule – been the intended audience for discussions and images disseminated in the public sphere – with raising awareness often being the motivation. One can probably make an analogous argument in the case of academic inquiry. The earliest research in this vein focused on the social

dimensions of waste and the processes involved in its production and management. These analyses provide insights into the creation and maintenance of waste as an unquestioned social category (Douglas 1966), considered to fall outside the realm of everyday life or “thrown away” (i.e., Strasser 1999; Gardner and Stern 2002; Hawkins 2005; Royle 2006; Humes 2013; Nagle 2013).

Yet, certain arguments also speak in favor of Hawkins’ argument concerning the myth of consumer practices as the engine of change and the need to incorporate other issues into discussions concerning agency and action, including existing statistics concerning the ratio between municipal and industrial waste in developed countries. In the cases of the United States, where these statistics have been researched more in-depth, the ratio is 3% to 97% (EPA 1999; Royle 2006; Leonard 2010; MacBride 2011), the vast majority of it being industrial waste. While there is considerable debate as to what falls under which category and what practices are or are not left out of statistical calculations, the ratio in large part seems to hold (Liboiron 2016). Many have argued that such information brings home the significance of scale in reference to waste that should serve as a guide for analysis as well as action. Approximately one-third of municipal waste (or 1% of all waste) comprises food scraps and organic waste such as yard trimmings, and most of the remainder (two-thirds of all municipal waste or 2% of all waste) comprises so-called “disposables” (i.e., paper, plastics, aluminum, textiles, and packaging), which are at the forefront of numerous debates linked to consumer action – particularly plastics. Given the prevalence of plastic waste as a disposable as well as a site of potential consumer action, these statistics question the issues of consumer action and agency as viewed within the larger context of all produced waste - even if one takes into account the potential variation in the ratio between industrial and municipal waste across countries.<sup>1</sup>

The second myth is linked to the circular economy, a concept that is strongly linked to waste production and is prevalent in public policies, academic research and everyday conversations associated with sustainable waste production and management. For example, the EU’s strategy for plastics published in 2018 outlines a number of measures to address increasing plastic waste and hinges on steps meant to shift plastic production and consumption toward circularity.<sup>2</sup>

The circular economy as a concept has numerous roots stemming back to the second half of the 20th century, when it became an increasingly popular concept among those wishing to both reduce environmental impact and maximize resource efficiency. Numerous definitions exist for the circular economy, with most centered on redirecting a normally

<sup>1</sup> According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 1,025,000 tons of municipal waste was generated in 2018, representing 12% of all total waste and an increase of 4% from the previous year. The inordinately high percentage of municipal waste may be due to numerous factors – from particularities in the categorizations of waste to culturally specific waste practices. 59% of all waste included construction and demolition waste (<https://www.stat.si/StatWeb/en/Home/Contact>).

<sup>2</sup> European Commission. 2018. A European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy. <https://ec.europa.eu/environment/circular-economy/pdf/plastics-strategy-brochure.pdf> (last accessed 19.01.2020).

linear flow of economic production to achieve the aims mentioned above ((Moreau et al. 2017; Winans et al. 2017)). In what is often termed a linear economy, a trajectory linking economic production, consumption and disposal portrays an open-ended life cycle for products that involves considerable use of energy and materials, all of which is used once and then set aside or thrown away, incorporated into existing waste streams. A circular economic model strives to shift from one-directional linearity to circularity, which implies redirecting the trajectory of production by, for example, facilitating the use of existing materials to fashion new products (recycling) or developing new uses for existing products (re-use). Ideally, the linear model is meant to fold back onto itself, becoming circular, which would result in diminished use of energy and materials in processes of production, consumption and disposal (see Figure 1).

The notion of the circular economy has inspired both enthusiasm and critique, almost in equal measure. While one would find it difficult to argue that aspiring to a more circular economy is not a step in the right direction, the bulk of the critique centers on questioning the feasibility of circularity. Johnathan Cullen, for example, is among those who argue against the possibility of an entirely circular economy (or CE):

A CE future is one in which waste no longer exists, one where material loops are closed, and where products are recycled indefinitely—an economy which perpetually gyrates without any input of depletable resources. For real materials and processes this is, in any practical sense, impossible. Every loop around the circle creates dissipation and entropy, due to losses in quantity (physical material losses, by-products) and quality (mixing, downgrading). New materials and energy must be injected into any circular material loop, to overcome these dissipative losses (Cullen 2017).

Cullen equates the belief in a completely circular economy energy with the belief in a perpetual motion machine – for which the US Patent Office decided not to accept any applications in 1911 on the grounds that the machines were “opposed to well-known physical laws” (Cullen 2017). Another critique circular economy concerns how the concept is used to define the waste crisis to an issue of technology: that the proper technological solution that will enable a truly circular economy will solve the waste crisis. Geographer and discard studies specialist Catherine Phillips points out that the problem with this sort of understanding of the circular economy lies in in how reductive it can be:

*One of the myths ... I've definitely encountered in my work is the sense that technical solutions will fix it all, which relates to the idea that circular economies will fix it all. For the most part, it's this technical, instrumental thinking that decides what the waste problem is. ... (However), even though you're doing circular recovery, you're not actually dealing with some of the ethical, economic, or political causes of waste issues in ways that are useful to people (Hawkins et al. 2019).*

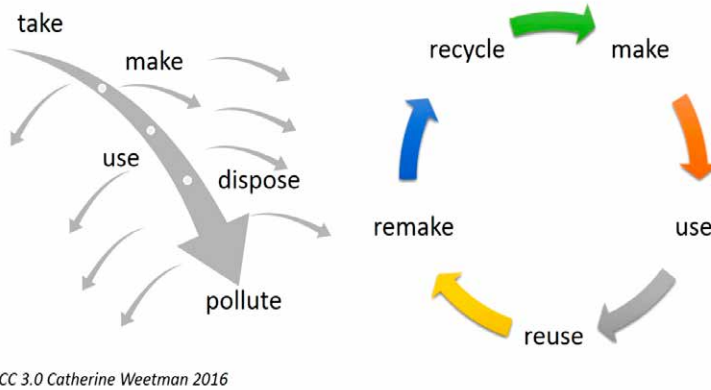


Figure 1: Linear and circular economies (Catherine Weetman, CC 3.0, 2016).

The critiques laid at the feet of the concept of circular economy<sup>3</sup> and the role of individuals and consumer practices have something in common: in branding them as myths critics express their disagreement with the way these ideas – which focus on one aspect of the waste crisis – are made to stand for the whole. This results in an overly narrow understanding of the breadth of the waste crisis and, consequently, the sort of measures needed to effectively engender change.

For example, an emphasis on consumer behavior implies not addressing an even broader issue – the behavior of industries that produce the vast majority of waste and to a great extent define the context in which consumers operate. In the case of the circular economy, the focus on techniques implies not addressing a number of other causes of waste – ethical, political, social and economic. In effect, the labelling of both as myths seem to point to their limits – particularly to these concepts' lack of a systemic approach to the waste problem – as well as to the need to reframe of these discussions and inquiries so as to identify and link the relevant actors and issues involved in production processes and waste streams.

## THE DISPERSAL OF CAUSALITY AND AGENCY

So where does this leave the question of individual behavior and, consequently, the issue of individual agency? Where do individuals fit into a restructured referential framework for inquiries into the waste problem? It is not surprising that individuals and consumers are often identified as the producers of waste – particularly of plastic disposable waste – be they plastic bottles, plastic cups, plastic straws, plastic bags, and plastic packaging of

<sup>3</sup> See Valenzuela and Böhm 2017 as well as De Decker 2018 for additional critical analyses of the circular economy concept.

all shapes and sizes. Numerous analysts have argued that the distinctive feature of these items is that they meant to be used once and then thrown away (Hawkins 2013, yet more broadly, Vance 1963, Bulow 1986, Dowling 2001). However, these disposable objects are “decoupled” from the materials, energy and practices used to produce them (Tisserant et al. 2017), leaving individuals as consumers as only persons visibly linked to them – as the ones who with their actions concretely transform an item from disposable product into waste. This is yet another result of a linear mode of thinking concerning the life span of trash – particularly disposables.

Linearity permeates our thinking in numerous, sometimes even unexpected ways. One of the areas which is relevant to this topic is that of causality. Our understandings of causality – and, consequently, agency – are understood primarily in linear terms - the relationships between causes and effects are considered to be linear, even if it concerns a situation with numerous, mutually constituting variables.

Inspired by the work of Max Liboiron on plastics and plasticizers (2013b), I began to realize that linearity may not be the most effective and accurate framework for thinking about causality and agency in the face of the complex challenges linked to plastic waste. Plasticizers are chemicals that are added to plastics to enhance their properties in diverse ways (i.e., versatility, flexibility, durability). Yet plasticizers are not chemically bound to plastic’s polymers, and can thus separate from them relatively easily. Thus, the ubiquity of plastics in daily life (not only in the form of plastic packaging and waste) also manifests itself in the amount and range of plasticizers that leak from them plastics on a broad scale and can accumulate in our bodies. The particular challenge linked to plasticizers – which has been the topic of debate for numerous years concerns the ways that plasticizers affect the body – concerns plasticizers’ innate structure. Unlike micro-plastics, which are ingested and remain in the body, plasticizers are configured like hormones, which allow them to participate – and disrupt – the bodies’ endocrine system. The presence and operation of certain plasticizers in the body – the most well-known being bisphenol A (BPA) and di-(2-ethylhexyl) phthalate (DEHP) – has been correlated with a number of health problems – including infertility, recurrent miscarriages, early-onset puberty as well as obesity, diabetes, reduced brain development, cancer and neurological disorders (Halden 2010).<sup>4</sup>

Liboiron argued that the concept of miasmas “as an influence model of harm” (2013: 134) would be useful for imagining and thinking about the problem of plastic pollution

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<sup>4</sup> Questions concerning plasticizers in humans are not as recent a topic of research, debate, or policy as are microplastics. Halden provides a comprehensive view of the debates and research linked to the impacts of plasticizers presented in more than 120 peer-reviewed publications, which stem back to the 1970s and 1980s (Halden 2010). While there are still parties that dispute the argument that the presence of plasticizers in human bodies poses a health risk, the existing evidence has spurred the registration and regulation of all chemicals (including plasticizers) and goods made with chemical in the EU before their use with the REACH program (Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals), which entered into force in 2007. For more on REACH legislation, see: [https://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/chemicals/legislation\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/chemicals/legislation_en).

in its numerous manifestations. Miasma was the predominant scientific model for understanding disease in the 19th century. At that time, illnesses were considered to result from an imbalance in the body due to miasmas, or “bad air,” the development of which was inextricably linked to changes in the environment in which a person lived. A miasma-based model of disease differed strongly from the germ theory of disease that prevails today. The germ theory centers on the premise that illnesses are the result of pathogens (bacteria, viruses, etc.), and a cure for any given illness centers on the proper identification, isolation and treatment of the pathogen. In the context of a miasma-based theory of disease, illnesses were considered to be due to an imbalance resulting from any number of changes, changes that could cause miasmas. Thus, when doctors would diagnose a patient’s sickness, they did not seek to find a single cause for their ailment but instead needed to take numerous, potentially relevant factors into account (Latour 1988), any number or combination of which could have contributed to their getting sick. These factors included personal histories, weather, architecture, diet, star alignment, plumbing, and even employment conditions (Latour 1988). As Liboiron explains:

It is not that the hygienists and miasmaists failed to locate and correlate causes for specific diseases; rather, it was the nature of miasma to be multi-directional, variegated and indiscriminating, and to work in concert with other mechanisms of illness. Experts thus had to account for an ill-defined, radically irreducible phenomenon. In short, illness and its causes were systemic rather than discrete, holistic rather than piecemeal. The logic of influence and layers of causality explained how individuals could resist certain diseases, why overworked and exhausted people became ill more often and with more dire results, and why one member of a household could resist disease or recover from disease while the rest fell ill or died (Liboiron 2013b: 136).

Liboiron turns to the concept of miasma and what he terms the influence model of illness in order to think about the role of plastics – and plasticizers – in daily life and in human bodies. He remarks that the operation of plasticizers does not conform to a model of singular causality and, given the range of plastics and plasticizers always already present in bodies, it is extremely difficult to single out or isolate any single such chemical as a factor or agent. Furthermore, even if it were possible to do so, the effects of any single plasticizer can only be understood while it is in the body as opposed to in a petri dish, as plasticizers and other chemicals present in the body interact with and influence each other – something that cannot be replicated outside the body.

Liboiron posits that this model can serve as a useful analytical tool for imagining and addressing the dispersed nature of causality in relation to plasticizers as well as plastic waste of diverse kinds. I argue that the concept of miasmas and the concomitant dispersed notion of causality may also serve to reframe the way that we think of agency in relation to the waste crisis and plastic waste – which has been defined primarily in linear terms.

Trying to address or engage the problem of plastic waste in all its dimensions through the lens of a linear understanding of agency is no longer effective. Plastic waste is already present and has already accumulated world wide at an unprecedented rate; it is mobile, and its continued and increasing production as well as displacement is due to countless factors and practices, whose impacts cannot be isolated within the broader context of plastic waste globally speaking. Just as the onset of the present state of affairs can be better understood with the aid of a dispersed model of causality, so too can a dispersed understanding of agency serve as a framework for discussing the possibility of change and how individuals can contribute or participate in change.

Within such a framework, an examination of the agency of individuals should not thus involve isolation but instead should strive to better understand the broader context, forces and processes in which particular individuals or groups of individuals are embedded. This involves identifying the factors, features, and actions that hinder or help individuals in their efforts to change their daily practices and by analyzing the different roles that they play in the existing processes linked to waste. Such an approach serves as the analytical framework for the following case study of Rifuzl, one of Ljubljana's first plastic-free grocery stores, which opened in late 2018.

### THE CASE OF A PLASTIC-FREE STORE

The year 2019 brought with it a significant change in plastic bag policies in Slovenia. Legislation banning free plastic shopping bags (with the exception of plastic bags available for unpackaged fruits, vegetables and deli products) went into effect on the first working day of the year (Prijetelj Videmšek and Tavčar 2019). From that day forward you could not get plastic shopping bags for free in any shops in Slovenia. Some shops – particularly in the case of clothing stores – switched to paper bags (free or not), while many grocery shops offered plastic shopping bags for sale at the register, together with an assortment of reusable bags – or even cardboard boxes.

This legislation banning free plastic disposable bag was in part a result of changes set in motion at the level of the EU, which published a strategy for plastic waste in early 2018. This document, *Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy*, spells out the EU's views on the plastic waste and the sorts of measures that it prescribes to promote a transition to a more circular model economy for plastic production and waste management (European Commission 2018). This document outlines the strategy's structure and identifies a number of actors in the plastic value chain that needed to be addressed – from plastics producers and designers, brands and retailers, to recyclers.<sup>5</sup> The ban on free plastic bags was one such top-down measure meant to help curb plastic waste.

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<sup>5</sup> The main objectives of this strategy include: improving the economics and quality of plastics recycling; curbing plastic waste and littering; establishing a regulatory framework for plastics and degradable properties; supporting viable markets for recycled plastics and boosting demand for them; driving



The introduction of such measures in Slovenia – which complied with steps taken at a higher level – also coincided with the opening of Slovenia’s first plastic-free store, in the capital city of Ljubljana. There have been certain places in Ljubljana and elsewhere in Slovenia where one could purchase certain products without packaging: you could buy fruits and vegetables at open-air markets, including certain foods that could be bought in bulk. Many stores – from supermarkets to health food stores – have for many years had bulk food sections (grains, nuts, dried fruit), including smaller stores and establishments that offer the possibility of buying wine you fill into your own bottles.<sup>6</sup> In recent years, however, the possibilities for persons who wished to make their purchases without disposable packaging have been increasing. Vending machines selling fresh milk that you can pour into your own bottles have been available throughout Slovenia for at least a decade (Siol.net 2009). There are a growing number of large vending machines at which you can purchase certain items without packaging, including cleaning products, oils, juices and even shampoos. In addition, there are specialty stores that offer some items package-free (such as beauty and grooming products) or in reusable packaging.

However, Rifuzl is the first store in Slovenia dedicated to offering all its products without plastic packaging. What follows is a study of the case of Rifuzl based on an interview and conversations with one of the owners, conversations with customers, as well as an analysis of Rifuzl’s image as it is disseminated at public events and in various media – particularly online and via social media. The story of Rifuzl is that of two persons – Manca Behrič and Primož Cigler – who in trying to live in accordance with zero-waste principles launched the kind of store they themselves needed.

As they recount in the store’s presentation video, the idea for a plastic-free store was inspired by vacations abroad, where they first came across landscapes littered with plastic waste – plastic bottles, straws, candy and ice cream wrappers. These experiences spurred them to make changes in their lives to decrease the amount of plastic packages as much as possible and adopt a zero-waste lifestyle.<sup>7</sup>

In their efforts to make a change, they faced a challenge: all the strategies that they were incorporating into their lives were piecemeal, resulting in their spending a great deal of time and energy finding and purchasing different items. However, the alternative was returning to conventional stores, in which virtually everything was packaged in plastic. Their experiences coincided with the stories of numerous persons that I spoke with who were trying to change their habits related feeling overwhelmed in conventional

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innovation and investment towards circulatory solutions; and harnessing global action (European Commission 2018).

<sup>6</sup> The concept of free shopping bags was not always the norm in Slovenia but was introduced by stores and sellers. During the mid-1990s it was standard practice to either have your own plastic (or other kind of) bag when going shopping or to buy them at the register.

<sup>7</sup> The introductory video is accessible on the store’s website. See: <https://rifuzl.si/objave/predstavitveni-video-za-rifuzl-prvo-trgovino-brez-plasticne-embalaze-v-sloveniji/>.

supermarkets, where relatively few items could be purchased without plastic packaging, but having trouble coming up with an acceptable alternative: *...you feel conflicted, asking yourself if you are going to really try to live like this and give up a lot of things or are you going to have to make a compromise?*

The solution that they came up with was to open a store that would have as many package-free products as possible in one place in an attempt to provide a service for those who wished to live more in accordance with zero-waste principles. They decided to test the waters with an introductory video that they posted on Facebook in September 2018, announcing their intent to open a store. The feedback was positive enough that they continued with their plans, opening their store on 24 December 2018.<sup>8</sup> They organized an open house in 13 September 2019 to celebrate the one-year anniversary of their launching the idea for their store, and the store continues to flourish, expanding on their initial products and services in diverse ways. The majority of the products they offer are food – including nuts, dried fruit, seeds, grains, legumes, pasta, granola, muesli, dairy products, spices, teas, beverages, honey, marmalades, spreads, breads, and seasonal fruit and vegetables. They also offer home/cleaning products, cosmetics/grooming products, and a range of re-usable items – from reusable straws, to reusable beeswax wrapping paper, as well as glass and metal storage containers. Nothing is sold in disposable – i.e., plastic – packaging; some come in glass or paper/cardboard packaging, and much of the glass packaging can be returned to the store and back to the suppliers. Most of the products can be bought in bulk – meaning that the customers bring their own containers/packaging.

There are certain features of the store's concept and practice that can be considered as decisive to its continued success. The first concerns how Manca and Primož stock their store. At first, the basic product list was based on what they themselves used in their own kitchen and had managed to get package-free and on what they had observed was being sold in other package-free stores they had visited in Europe. Yet from the beginning, they had adopted a very constructive relationship with their customers, encouraging feedback, suggestions, and requests for products. Customers thus played a significant role in extending the range of products to be stocked in the store: *... we also listen to our customers. Every time someone makes a request we write it down, and if we receive 10 requests for a particular item, we begin to look for ways to stock it.* One such request was for cheese, which proved to be a challenge but which has been recently introduced as a new product.

Rifuzl's relationship with its suppliers is also an important factor. I had presumed that finding suppliers willing to offer their products package-free or in reusable packaging would be a challenge in Slovenia, where disposable packaging is the norm. However, this was not the case. Manca and Primož visited potential suppliers for their initial stock and had a basic list by the time they launched the store's introductory video.

<sup>8</sup> The story behind Rifuzl is also available on the store's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/rifuzl/rifuzl-prva-trgovina-brez-plastične-embalaže-v-sloveniji/292349171558256/>.

*After the video, suppliers started calling. They thought that the store was opening immediately, but we had to tell them to wait and explained that we would be choosing suppliers in December...When we opened we would have a potential supplier come almost every day, they wanted to simply leave their products at the store. So finding suppliers was not a problem; it was a challenge to find someone reliable: someone who could provide a steady supply and who really understood the store's concept.*

Being able to choose among suppliers meant that they were able to maintain an important feature of the store's philosophy: stocking products primarily from local producers. They found that they were able to find local producers who either were already selling products in non-plastic packaging or were willing try deliver certain products without plastic packaging (for example, returnable glass containers). In certain cases, Manca and Primož successfully convinced certain more conventional companies to provide them with package-free versions of their regular products. The biggest coup in this regard has been with the Slovene paper company Paloma, who is one of the main companies in Slovenia manufacturing paper products: toilet paper, napkins, and paper tissues. Numerous customers had expressed their wishes to buy toilet paper without plastic packaging. While Manca and Primož had the option of ordering toilet paper without plastic packaging from abroad, tried their luck with Paloma. They succeeded in having Paloma supply them with toilet paper in cardboard boxes, (Cigler 2019), and it has become one of the store's most sought after products.

*Paloma's subsidiary company, Paloma PIS, prepares the toilet paper for us. Paloma has an automated packing system, but Paloma PIS deals with repackaging, among other things. In the beginning, Paloma PIS was repackaging redundant or excess toilet rolls into boxes for us. However, after 3 or 4 deliveries, they decided to divert a production line for us, and the toilet rolls go into large containers and transported to Paloma PIS, where they were packaged into boxes... They are very satisfied, we have a really good relationship, and they have 4 or 5 other stores that are also ordering toilet paper in boxes.*

The success of the toilet paper has also spurred Paloma to provide paper tissues in boxes, without any plastic, as can be seen in Figure 2, in packaging that is explicitly made for Rifuzl, another sign of the positive business relationship between both enterprises.

## DISCUSSION

I believe that the success of Rifuzl is linked to numerous factors – some are market related, others less so. Given that Rifuzl was the first of its kind in Slovenia (another package free store – Zelena japka – was recently opened in the city Maribor), one could argue that it was filling a niche in the market by providing something different: a store when one could



Figure 2: Rifuzl's open house on 13 September 2019 (Ljubljana. Photo: T. Bajuk Senčar).



Figure 3: Purchases made in Rifuzl, including Paloma paper tissues (Ljubljana, 01.02.2020. Photo: T. Bajuk Senčar).

bring one's own containers or buy a range of products free of plastic-packaging. Rifuzl is located within walking distance of at least three conventional grocery stores, but that does not seem to affect its business. Its owners depict an image of their store as offering its potential customers a measure of convenience in that they can find a range of products there that they would previously have had to purchase in numerous places.

This case study is not intended as an uncritical analysis of a particular project, nor is it meant as an advocacy of a market-based solution to the waste crisis. Instead, it is meant to serve as the basis of a broader discussion concerning the role and individuals as consumers, which also involves reframing practices that are normally considered solely in economic terms. Successfully filling a niche is not simply the result of developing an idea and providing something new, but also due to offering something that customers need and/or are willing to pay for. A niche is thus created not only by sellers but also by customers, who consider a specific good or service to be relevant or desirable enough that they are willing to pay for it. Furthermore, producers and suppliers also participate in the creation and maintenance of a niche by adapting their products to such a degree so as to benefit from the created demand. Linking the store to a range of diverse actors makes it possible to reframe the store as a project within a web of the relationships that the operation of such a store creates, maintains, and potentially expands.

The story of Rifuzl, recounted and disseminated across different media, is strongly grounded in the experience of individuals – including owners Manca and Primož. Their experience, as well as the experience of others that have been mentioned here, demonstrate some of the obstacles they face affect the extent to which they can exercise their agency as individuals. These hurdles are not insurmountable, but they may affect other dimensions of their lives and thus require broad-based changes as well as the recalibrations of priorities and criteria according to which they define their everyday practices (Bajuk Senčar 2017a, 2017b).

One may wonder why the case study of a package-free store serves as a discussion of individual agency – is one to surmise that the issues concerning individual agency are linked to changes in options made available to individuals as consumers? This is far from the case, as such a view would reduce the role of individuals to that of consumers. While it is true that the production/waste stream hinges on individuals as consumers (for whom are goods and services produced after all?), individuals are normally accorded very little agency in strategies of change. In the public sphere, they are the target audience for media awareness campaigns as well as recycling strategies and top-down political measures, but they are not accorded any significant level of initiative. Even in circular economy strategies, individuals are not explicitly identified or addressed as a key group – which may possibly be a result of the priority placed on the introduction of alternative forms of production and waste management, and thus on industrial actors in the plastics industry as opposed to individuals. Even in the EU's *Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy*, consumers and household members are discussed as the targets of specific measures and as the source of political support for new strategies (EU Commission 2018).

However, as Gay Hawkins and others point out, focusing primarily on consumers and their changes is not necessarily the most effective focus for change if one is working within a model of linear causality and agency that often structure such queries. Industries have not been held accountable for their role in production, and waste streams and effective strategies to reduce waste must include production processes and industrial actors. At the same time, given the breadth and complexity of the plastic waste problem – whose roots stem far beyond (and before) the moment of disposal – it is not useful to isolate or exclude any single set or group of actors, as effective strategies transcend the operation of any one group at any particular phase or the waste production stream process. Instead, I posit that it is useful to apply the notion of accumulation – which Liboiron employs to associate the formation of plastic problem with miasma-based causation models of illness – to envision and develop strategies of change.

## CONCLUSION

Rifuzl can serve as a case study for identifying and examining the sorts of relationships and practices that can be associated with a dispersed understanding of agency on the part of individuals. However, in this case, in assessing its role concerning individual agency, it should operate as one of the centers in a web of relationships and factors that together comprise the miasma-like environment in which individuals (and other actors – groups, institutions, companies, industries, governments, economic organizations, NGOs, etc.) operate. Rifuzl serves as an analytical stepping-stone to mapping out a particular miasma-like environment at a particular moment in time. In this context, a number of factors – including global waste reduction initiatives and movements, EU directives, national government measures, existing NGO initiatives, grassroots groups and forums, emergent company practices, existing waste management systems, and changing market strategies – inform, structure, limit, and/or facilitate the exercise of individual agency. This is not so much to be understood as a manifestation of infrastructure or habitus but more as an environments from which individuals can draw on in a range of creative, and possibly unexpected, ways in specific contexts.

Mapping out the environment of individuals in any given case can also help one imagine what sorts of measures and practices help them transcend the limits of the more passive role of consumer navigating established infrastructures of consumption and waste management. Following the mantra of the 5 Rs – Reduce, Reuse, Repair, Refuse and Recycle – individual consumers in Slovenia can adopt numerous changes to their daily life that can help them diminish the amount of waste they produce. However, reducing plastic packaging necessarily involves making changes in consumption practices, ideally finding alternative to conventional practice that mostly involve purchases packaged in plastic – a phenomenon on which individuals as consumers have little influence and only two options: acceptance or refusal. Refusal involves the consequent development of strategies as individuals who

become involved in alternative practices – primarily as consumers. The concept of a store such as Rifuzl and the niche it creates/fills involves the formulation and maintenance of alternative forms of economic practice at levels of production, sale, consumption and (re)use as well as a particular variation on the conventional conceptions of comfort and convenience that fuel consumption practices. In addition, it is based on shifts in relationships between producers, sellers, and consumers as well as an expansion of the role of individuals beyond that of consumers to influence certain aspects of the store in accordance to their priorities and/or wishes. This expansion in turn aids the store's owners to dialogue with producers and distributors to form and/or suggest changes with the support of their customers.

Analyzing and assessing the operation of such ventures in terms of a dispersed understanding of agency can aid in identifying problems and possibilities in particular cultural contexts. While they address only one dimension or level of a uneven and complex challenge of global dimensions, such an approach can offer insights for the development of effective strategies for change.

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## PREOBLIKOVANJE TVORNOSTI V LUČI GLOBALNIH IZZIVOV: PROBLEM PLASTIČNIH ODPADKOV

*Avtorica obravnava vprašanje tvornosti v času skupnih izzivov, ki se kažejo na lokalnih in globalnih ravneh. Osredinja se na vprašanje tvornosti v povezavi z globalno krizo odpadkov, pri čemer izpostavi plastične odpadke, ki pričajo o številnih problemih z odpadki ter opozarjajo na njihovo čezmerno produkcijo in vseprisotnost. V zadnjih desetletjih opazimo večje zanimanje za ta problem, in sicer v obliki civilnih iniciativ, vladnih politik oz. strategij, nacionalnih in transnacionalnih programov in tudi znanstvenih raziskav. Boljši pristop k razumevanju tvornosti pri ustvarjanju odpadkov ter njihovemu upravljanju oz. zmanjševanju je povezan s povečanjem ozaveščenosti in s spodbujanjem sprememb, tako na ravni posameznikov kakor tudi organiziranih skupin.*

*V prizadevanju, da bi na novo obravnavali krizo, povezano z odpadki, se avtorica članka obrne k razpravam o plastiki in onesnaževanju z njo. Še posebej se opre na koncept miazme kot jo uporablja Max Liboiron. S tem konceptom predstavi model razpršene vzročnosti ter ga uporabi za boljše razumevanje onesnaženja s plastiko. Članek skuša tako na novo analizirati tvornosti posameznikov; namesto linearnega pojmovanja aktivnosti in praks se bolj fokusira na razpršeno tvornost. Nelinearno, razpršeno pojmovanje tvornosti je temelj etnografske analize prve slovenske trgovine brez embalaže. Preučitev delovanja te trgovine kakor tudi drugih podobnih iniciativ lahko pripomore k natančnejši opredelitvi problemov in priložnosti za spremembe v različnih družbeno-kulturnih kontekstih.*

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