

**THE RECYCLING SHELL GAME:
MULTINATIONAL ECONOMIC ORGANIZATION
VS. LOCAL POLITICAL INEFFECTUALITY**

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May 1992

Working paper WP-92-16, Center for Urban Affairs and Policy Research,
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Paper prepared for the 4th North American Symposium on Society and Resource Management, University of Wisconsin, Madison, May 1992.

ABSTRACT

Absent from current local recycling campaigns are major federal agencies and actions. Resource conservation through recycling thus seems a populist or "grass roots" ecological action. Closer examination of local curbside recycling programs, from a political economic perspective, reveals major market interventions by multinational firms, motivated by economic goals[e.g., the aluminum and other parts of the metals industry].

Recycling, which is labelled as an "environmental" program, is analysed here as a policy that is much more closely tied to capital accumulation processes. Local governments have been induced to initiate curbside recycling and other programs to deal with local NIMBY constituencies who fear and reject landfills and incinerators, in part because of toxic waste contamination episodes and their publicity. Large corporate actors induced cities and suburbs to do recycling to respond to this constituency, while maintaining cheap waste management for manufacturers. Moreover, remanufacturers who purchase municipal curbside waste accumulations do so in order to generate corporate profits. The net result is that municipalities are forced to enter markets to sustain curbside recycling, and they emerge as weaker actors in this system compared to large-scale remanufacturers. Recycling gets sidetracked in this process, and/or cities get much less revenue from recycling than they had planned for. Corporations that do minimal recycling use public relations in "green marketing"; their concerns are profitability and market share, rather than resource conservation. The local community is eventually caught in a tax and legitimacy squeeze, between the high costs of curbside recycling and the low profits from resource recovery, while many private sector firms profit both economically and through their "environmental conscience" and "public service".

LOCAL RECYCLING AND SOCIAL INTERESTS: AN OVERVIEW

Recycling as a recent local response to modern environmental problems has become widely diffused in U.S. cities and suburbs, and increasingly, in other industrial societies (The Economist, 1991; Swanson, 1991a). For some urban analysts, it represents a sociopolitical ideal, in which local government agencies, environmental movement organizations, and large-scale capital owners have negotiated a mutually acceptable "solution" to a major problem of solid waste disposal in landfills in these societies (cf. Moberg, 1991). This paper develops one alternative sociological perspective on these community recycling policies. By analyzing the consequences, from a political-economic interpretation of recycling, of the actual interests of major local actors that support recent increases in curbside recycling programs, I hope to stimulate more systematic research on the *socio-political* implications of such policies (along with concomitant efforts to screen their *ecological* costs and benefits).

This paper is thus an effort to develop an alternative theory of the nature of local government policies about recycling. As with the government's other "environmental" policies, these often reflect the dominance of economic interests in the policymaking process (Lowi, 1979), while the resulting policies are labelled as responses to environmental problem complainants (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). While the paper aims at theory-building, I do draw upon empirical observations, but primarily to illustrate the linkages among concepts. These empirical observations are based on a number of different data sources. Included in these were content analyses of Chicago Tribune articles on recycling over the 1986-1992 period, with a focus on seeing whether there was consensus on the "problem" that recycling policies in the communities of Chicago and Evanston and the state of Illinois were aimed to "solve." I also gathered written materials from local recycling coalitions, and conducted informal interviews with their leaders, as well as local scholars involved with such movements. Public announcements regarding

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recycling issued by state and local agencies, as well as by environmental movement representatives, were also content analyzed, to understand these organizations' definition of "problems" and "solutions." Finally, I supervised a junior tutorial class of seven students who explored (in spring 1991) various social constituencies for recycling in Evanston and at Northwestern University (in Evanston). They evaluated the attitudes and behaviors of these constituents relating to local and university recycling programs. This included interviews with local environmental movement participants, observations of residents' compliance with local recycling programs, discussions with recycling intermediaries in the private sector, and social experiments on recycling "ease" and student compliance. Finally, discussions with environmental sociologists and environmental agencies in other communities were conducted to see whether Illinois was typical in its policies. Responses to my earlier work (Schnaiberg, 1990a,b) on this matter were widely circulated, and comments by various readers about local variants of recycling are incorporated in this paper. Eventually, I hope that this initial empirical exploration and theoretical analyses may help reshape both future social and political research on recycling programs, and our waste treatment policies.

A POLITICAL-ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE ON RESOURCE 'MANAGEMENT'

My basic conceptual-theoretical model here is to offer a political-economic perspective on how post-consumer (and some producer) wastes are dealt with, which is isomorphic with many other "resource management" policy processes. In particular, I seek to trace the roots of both stability and change in sociopolitical conflicts (Mankoff, 1972: 6) around the environmental problems associated with waste disposal. One key political-economic fact that has drawn to my attention to recycling is the historical anomaly that manufacturers of beverage containers, who spent millions of dollars opposing container deposit {"bottle bills"} and other legislation designed to facilitate container reuse over the past two decades, are among the most enthusiastic industrial supporters of recycling of

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plastic and aluminum beverage containers. Ironically, this group of producers had spawned an early "cosmetological" social movement, interested in keeping communities "looking good," in its Keep America Beautiful campaign against litter (Schnaiberg, 1973). This historical juxtaposition alone should suffice to give a sociologist pause in viewing recycling primarily as an expression of the imminent dominance of [environmental] politics over economic markets (Lindblom, 1977).

The model used here assumes that all actors involved in political-economic conflicts around environmental issues have enduring interests in using some parts of ecological systems (Catton & Dunlap, 1989). Further, it can be argued that environmental conflicts are about the scarcity of these ecosystem elements, as experienced by these groups, organizations or social aggregates. They are thus struggles over decisions to allocate or restrict access by such classes or groups to ecosystems. Moreover, these interests are organized within the structure of modern industrial society that I have elsewhere labelled the *treadmill of production* (Schnaiberg, 1980: ch. 5). This treadmill and its associated class structure is reproduced by a shared commitment of virtually all actors in advanced industrial society to some form of economic expansion, in order to meet their material needs. The core logic of the treadmill is that ecosystem elements are converted by capital owners through market exchanges into profits. Capital owners reinvest some of these profits in more productive physical capital, which requires still greater ecosystem access to "efficiently" operate this equipment, (i.e., to generate exchange values and eventually profits by using this equipment in and on ecosystems). This technological change in turn raises the capital-intensification of production. Thus, because a growing share of national production is then required to repay capital owners, expanded ecosystem use is necessary. Production must generate enough surplus to support this outlay to capital owners, to provide enough additional exchange values and social surplus to supply an adequate level of wages to maintain consumer demand, and to generate enough tax revenue to cover social expenditures of the state.

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To understand the origins of conflicts around modern environmental problems such as waste disposal, we need to appreciate how the environmental interests of actors outlined above relate to the physical-biotic organization of ecological systems. The history of expanding industrial production has provided sufficient data to outline a dialectical conflict between social and ecological organization in advanced industrial societies (Schnaiberg, 1980: pp. 423-4.). Dialectical conflicts emerge when social systems have two or more goals which cannot simultaneously be met (e.g., Bunker 1985; Gould 1991a, b; Gould & Weinberg 1991). Essentially, the dialectical tension in relationships between modern societies and their environments emerges from two axioms: (1) most elements of ecological systems cannot meet both exchange-value needs and use-value needs; and (2) the treadmill of production places a primacy on exchange-value uses of ecosystems, downplaying other ecological uses which are a biological and social necessity for all classes. It is this dominant institutional and cultural commitment to expanding the production of commodities that many contemporary social and ecological theorists see as the root of alienation of humans from natural ecological systems (e.g., Schumacher, 1973; Devall, 1980; Evernden, 1985; cf. Hawkins, 1984, Brown & Mikkelsen, 1990).

In the case of recycling policies, they have emerged in a historical context in which the treadmill of production has increasingly become dependent upon discarding most producer and post-consumer wastes. Such actions stimulate demand for new disposable products and also reduce some labor costs of production and distribution by using machine packaging and disposability. Incineration, landfill, and other modes necessary to deal with growing waste volumes have produced growing ecological additions of water and air pollution, as well as taking productive land out of alternative uses. These outcomes in turn have diminished the use-values of local ecosystem resources for local community groups, some of whom have become mobilized in opposition to this process. In this process, local governments become a focal point and mediator of these conflicts, since the local fears and resistances of NIMBY (not in my back yard) protestors are

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channeled toward local governments, which control some portion of land use involving landfills, incinerators, and other alternatives to recycling (Schnaiberg, 1992a). Conversely, of course, the local government is mired in this conflict because the city is pre-eminent as a "growth machine," as Logan and Molotch (1987) and Rudel (1989) have clearly articulated in recent years.

The simplest way of delineating conflict trajectories within the treadmill is to first contrast the major conflicts between capitalist producers and environmentalists, and the role of the local government as a "mediator" of these conflicts. Producers, whether capitalist or socialist (Goldman, 1972; Stretton, 1976; Feshbach & Friendly, 1991), because of their routinized calculation of monetary profits, are highly conscious of their material interests in expanding access to natural resources. They mobilize all forms of control capacity (social, political, and economic assets) to capture their potential exchange-values in markets. Accordingly, they influence local governments, which partly regulate social access to local ecosystems. Part of the treadmill's institutionalized bias is that exchange-value benefits are often specific individual goods (e.g., wages, jobs, social security payments), while environmental use-value benefits are diffused collective goods (e.g., clean air, clean water, nature preserves). Individual workers and their families are thus more attentive to their "interests" in the local treadmill expansion than in local ecosystems, *ceteris paribus* (e.g., Brown & Mikkelsen, 1990).

Environmental movement organizations and participants usually have more diffused and diverse mixtures of use-value interests in ecosystems. These range from biological sustenance (from air, water, and agricultural land) to recreational or aesthetic interests in these systems viewed as natural habitats. This interest in use-value is usually not directly tied into these movements' activity in local economic markets. However, local economic issues such as the levels of municipal taxes for waste or sewage disposal are nonetheless involved in many of these conflicts. Thus, our view of recycling is that local NIMBY community activists and some major national environmental organizations forced local,

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state, and federal agencies to thrust recycling upon reluctant producers. They did so for reasons of protecting their community from the ravages of air and water pollution produced by landfills and incinerators.

They also sought to reduce land-use subsidies to producers, critics have noted (e.g., Szasz, 1990). Recycling was predicted to reduce local waste disposal costs, allowing communities to recapture some exchange-value of this waste. Local governments created innovative programs of curbside recycling of post-consumer wastes, which they anticipated would lower local waste disposal costs as these materials were sold to private sector organizations that would remanufacture new goods from these wastes. Local governments were induced to respond to this mobilization because these NIMBY constituents would withdraw political support for those administrations that failed to adopt these environmental and fiscal policies.

Workers and their labor organizations are more conflicted in this process. They have both exchange-value interests in ecosystem access as workers in production organizations that are subject to environmental protection regulation, and use-value interests as citizens living in ecosystems that are being disorganized by these production organizations (Schnaiberg, 1983a, 1983b, 1986, 1992; Burton, 1986; Buttel, 1986). These groups, who constitute the bulk of the class structure, are thus potential adherents of environmental movement ideologies. But they are always capable of being politically mobilized by capital-owning classes who employ them in labor markets, and who supply them with goods in consumer markets. Thus, paralleling the empirical work of Hawkins (1984) on water pollution enforcement and Brown and Mikkelsen (1990) on toxic waste pollution control, we find that local and regional manufacturers of products that end up creating problems in landfills can not readily be shut down, since local employment and wages would be reduced.

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These conflicts about "doing something" about waste problems were then transferred into conflicts within the political organization of local government. Modern structural theories of the state have moved well beyond the earlier academic consensus around a pluralistic model of mediation (Buttel, 1985). Three major perspectives on the advanced industrial state have emerged in the past twenty years, each of which has some relevance for this paper. Instrumentalist views of the state (Miliband, 1969) conceptualize it as an agent of the interests of the capitalist class. State actors and agencies reflect the domination by activities of the members of the dominant class of capitalist producers. A revision of this perspective by Poulantzas (1973a, b) envisioned the state as a reflection of the entire class structure of advanced industrial societies. This structural concept of the state theorized that the major goal of the state apparatus was to reproduce the capital logic of the society, with a broader and longer-term perspective than that imposed by the immediate interests of any segment or fraction of the capitalist class itself. The most recent reformulation of the state, most widely expressed in the work of Skocpol (1979, 1980) and her students (Evans et al., 1985; Skocpol & Amenta, 1986) offers a more complex and dynamic view of the state. State actors and agencies are conceptualized as having some autonomous interests of their own, and this becomes an additional factor in determining state actions. As well, this concept of a state-logic argues that the state's policies are more volatile than suggested by the earlier conceptualizations. The embeddedness of the state in national and world-systemic contexts produces a historical and comparative variability across time and states because of the opportunities and constraints that this offers to state actors and to various classes and class segments in advanced industrial societies.

In the arena of waste disposal issues (cf. Szasz, 1990), federal state agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency once more confronted "the environmental movement." During the Reagan administration in the 1980s, environmental protection became increasingly decentralized to regional, state, and local enforcement in the area of

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toxic waste control in particular and local waste management in general. Environmental movements' reformist and radical wings (Schnaiberg 1973, 1980: ch.VIII; 1983a,b,c; 1991b, 1992) represented significant challenges to the existing social relations of production, with political demands for greater social equity in the distribution of the benefits and costs of ecological extraction. These demands heightened attentiveness to social use-values of natural resource extraction and ecosystem preservation. Such concerns centered on how individuals and groups actually got to use local ecosystems to generate broad dimensions of the community's social health and welfare (Brown and Mikkelson, 1990; Schnaiberg, 1992a). In the area of recycling policies, however, such serious challenges to the treadmill were less salient than the concern to do something about the "garbage problem" (Bukro, 1991b; Young, 1991; Szasz, 1990; cf. Goering, 1992). This narrowness of concern permitted more influence by dominant capital interests to place market or exchange-value considerations uppermost on our political agenda (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962, 1963, 1973). The central issues in recycling then became profits and wages, in the 1980s context of U.S. producers operating in a world-system with changing competitiveness and shifting capital and natural resource flows (Lipietz, 1987; O'Connor, 1988), and the domestic politics of Reaganism.

A major unpredictability of environmental conflict trajectories within the treadmill is the variability of material interest and the political expression of such interest by those who are largely dependent on wage income. In periods of economic decline or recession (Blumberg, 1980), these segments rely more on expanding transfer payments from the state, and also avidly support expanded industrial activity. The state, in turn, also "earns" its revenues by taxing the surplus generated by the treadmill. Thus in times of economic stress the usual emphasis on exchange values is further heightened. In their individual work roles, for example, even many environmental movement participants (especially those in NIMBY-type movements) have more consciousness and concern about their market or exchange-value interests in ecosystems, which restrains their political activity

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(Brown and Mikkelson, 1990). Likewise, the actions of many worker-citizens who are not committed to environmental movement organizations are determined partly by their interests as workers and as taxpayers, and partly as ecosystem users (O'Connor, 1988; Hawkins, 1984). Especially at the local government level, the concern about "garbage" and "landfills" in the recent decade devolved from broader environmental concerns to narrower concerns about the "landfill crisis." And the "landfill crisis," in turn, was partly a crisis generated by NIMBY-type groups fearing the location of new landfills, or expansion of existing landfills. This was partly a result of the coalescence of local pollution from existing landfills, and the subsequent heightening of communities' consciousness about **toxic** waste pollution. Such increases in local concerns were a result of national publicity about toxic hazards at Love Canal and other sites (Szasz, 1990; Brown and Mikkelson, 1990; Schnaiberg, 1992a); this was either an "epidemic of reports," as conservative politicians saw it, or a "report of an epidemic," as activists (e.g., Brown and Mikkelson, 1990) viewed it.

THE "BIRTH" OF RECYCLING AS A LOCAL RESPONSE TO THE

"LANDFILL CRISIS"

From the standpoint of local governments, the local NIMBY concerns about "landfill hazards" and national environmentalist concerns about "resource conservation" became joined around the concept of recycling. Environmental movements in the mid-1970s, in the face of the "energy crisis," proposed recycling as a way of conserving energy and raw materials, and of preserving local land and water ecosystems from contamination as waste disposal and leaching sites. But recycling, I argue, was transformed in the late 1980s and given a rather different focus. In light of the detailed analysis of the treadmill of production and the corresponding pressures on all levels of government to maintain the "growth machine," it is not surprising that recycling in the U.S. context devolved into a *de*

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facto economic policy, within a legitimated framework of an apparently *de jure* environmental policy (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962, 1963, 1973; Crenson, 1971).

Local governments had to respond to the combined pressures of local NIMBY threats to shut down existing landfills, and their refusal of permits for new landfills. These pressures forced the garbage issue onto the local agenda in part because the Reagan administration had ignored waste management issues, while industrial and municipal solid wastes mounted rapidly in the 1980s under this "benign neglect." Thus existing landfills were "filling up" (e.g., Papajohn, 1987; Tackett, 1987; Stevenson, 1990, 1991a, 1991b; Bukro, 1989), and something needed to be done. Less visible in this public agenda-setting were the back-stage industrial pressures on local and other governments (Lowi, 1979) to maintain low-cost ["cost-effective"] waste disposal, in order not to increase corporate costs in a time of increased world-systemic competitive pressures (Szasz, 1990; Blumberg, 1980).

In this context, recycling-and-remanufacturing of post-consumer wastes (Gutin, 1992) became an attractive policy for local government. I suspect (though I do not yet have systematic time series to show this) that the municipal recycling programs that have emerged in the last five years in many U.S. suburbs and central cities have a genesis that follows some variant of the following scenario. Local opposition to landfills created dilemmas for manufacturers and distributors of a variety of consumer products and their packaging suppliers. Almost any local "solution" would likely increase costs for these economic actors involved with generating consumer goods. For many of the beverage container manufacturers who had collaborated on the Keep America Beautiful, Inc. campaigns of the 1960s and early 1970s (Schnaiberg, 1973), their earlier successes in dealing with **visible litter** by distributing municipal containers widely enough to "keep litter in its place" were one model of successfully dealing with local social complainants (Spector and Kitsuse, 1977). On the other hand, their efforts in the 1970s and 1980s

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against "bottle bills" strongly suggest that a **reusable** [refillable] container approach was deemed too cost-**ineffective** for these beverage container industries.

Landfills, like littering of bottles, cans, and paper, were highly socially visible (Schnaiberg, 1993). Thus industrial leaders borrowed the control of public resistance from the success of the Keep America Beautiful campaign, using the principle of "out of sight, out of mind" (Szasz, 1990). Municipal governments, facing increasing local resistance from newly mobilized NIMBY groups, also had an interest in moving this "problem" out of sight, to maintain local legitimacy. In addition to this intersection of interests should be added the federal government's Resource Conservation and Recovery Act, state agencies charged with enforcing this law, and the environmental movement organizations supporting its extension and strengthening (Weinberg, 1991; Gould and Weinberg, 1991). Garbage, landfills, and "resource conservation" became merged in a dramatically new program of "curbside recycling." Ironically, in many municipalities such as Los Angeles, this was actually a **re**-introduction of much earlier programs of *garbage separation* that local citizens had eventually voted against because of its inconvenience (van Vliet, 1990).

These earlier programs predated most modern environmental movements, and were introduced to reduce waste disposal costs (thereby reducing local taxes for this purpose). For local governments, one of the attractions of curbside recycling was that it was a first stage in moving wastes into more of a market-driven commodity than was the case in landfills or incinerators, where municipalities paid contractors to move wastes "out of sight" in one way or another. The rhetoric of recycling, dominated by the economic ideologies of Reaganism, was that recycling would be "cost-effective" or "profitable" for everyone, a utopian solution to the waste problem. Local governments would **sell** their curbside-collected wastes to **recyclers**, thereby making money instead of spending money on waste **disposal**. Local citizens (including NIMBY participants) would not only have fewer pollution problems as landfills somehow became less prevalent in the local

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ecosystem (though this was not well explored), but they would also be rewarded by lower tax bills for waste disposal. And, all of this would stimulate the treadmill while pleasing environmentalists, as wastes would be recycled instead of dumped into local land and water ecosystems.

LOCAL RECYCLING UTOPIAS VS. THE DYSTOPIAS FROM MULTINATIONAL REMANUFACTURING

Two features made municipal curbside recycling seem realizable as a local solution to the "local landfill problem." The first was that recyclers, many of whom were large manufacturers who processed raw materials, such as major aluminum and paper mills, would make sufficient **profit** through this recycling-remanufacturing (Schnaiberg, 1983a, b,c, 1990a, b, 1991a,b, 1992, 1993; Underwood, 1991; Young 1991; Bukro, 1991a). Why had this program not been introduced earlier, then? My analysis suggests that the previously missing ingredient of the new recycling coalition (Staggenborg, 1989) was municipal **curbside collection**. Curbside recycling essentially **redistributed** post-consumer wastes. By collecting wastes from dispersed households (and some production sites), and concentrating them in some municipal area, municipalities were essentially reducing the costs of primary resource extraction for large-scale recyclers (Bunker, 1985).

Local governments, therefore, had become willing players in new waste **markets**. The wastes collected through curbside programs had become **commodities**, as noted earlier. For local governments, the environmental (use-value) gains from moving wastes away from landfills (and incinerators) were to be matched by negotiating a **municipal profit** (exchange values) from curbside collection. That is, the promise for city government was that either of the following two outcomes of this program would rapidly emerge:

1. The proceeds from sales of recyclable goods would provide a municipal fiscal *surplus*, over and above all the costs of curbside recycling (what we might call the "strong" promise); or

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2. The sales of recyclable goods, coupled with the reduction of waste disposal costs entailed in curbside diversion of disposable wastes, would together reduce the total municipal costs of all their waste treatment activities, compared to the prior waste disposal system (the "weak" promise).

Alas, the strong promise has not materialized in succeeding years. Municipalities have been spending more on curbside recycling than they can recover in sales of recyclable materials (e.g., Gold, 1990; New York Times, 1991). Moreover, although the evidence is not as unambiguous (because of municipal accounting, in part) it appears that the weak promise has also failed to be realized. Why? The simplest analytic answer is that municipalities have moved, in their contemporary recycling policies, away from areas of potential advantage (cf. Logan and Molotch, 1987; Rudel, 1989) where their politics (use-value oriented, in part) can regulate local markets and ecosystem access. Instead, they have become actors in new market systems (primarily exchange-value oriented) for wastes.

This simple explanation for the increasingly painful reality that recycling doesn't "pay for itself" (Belsie, 1991) lies in the complement to municipal curbside recycling, *viz.*, the desire of remanufacturers to extract profits from the remanufacturing process itself. In this new version of the American dream, profitability was once more going to activate this system. But profitability depends on reducing the remanufacturing costs sufficiently below market prices, so as to extract profit (Bukro, 1991a). In this network, municipalities are weak players, and large-scale remanufacturers are powerful market players. Not only do recyclers frequently have market negotiation experience over much of the twentieth century (e.g., Bunker, 1985; Szasz 1990), but they have at least oligopolistic (if not near-monopolistic) control over the remanufacturing process. That is, there are many municipalities eager to start curbside recycling, and only a few large-scale recyclers willing to bid on most of the collected waste materials.

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The reasons for this situation are historical, relating to the substitution of energy and chemicals for raw materials and human labor in the production process (Schnaiberg, 1980: chs. 3,4). As Eastwood (1992) has recently noted, whereas Jewish peddlers in Chicago once collected with a horse and wagon the waste products from bedding manufacturers (as well as post-consumer "junk"), their recycling business collapsed when synthetic fibers replaced natural ones. Presumably, the costs of cleaning and sorting synthetic fibers were less than the manufacture of "virgin" polyesters and the like, so that manufacturers bought such virgin materials from chemical multinational corporations rather than from small-scale local recycling-reprocessors. This was a profit-driven calculus, after all. And the local recyclers had little market power to compete with large-scale fiber manufacturers.

From the onset of this increasing tempo of the treadmill of production (Schnaiberg, 1980: ch. 4), this process has been repeated many times. In recent years, for example, the sports-shoe industry has moved away from rubber and leather components to synthetics, and in the process has made expensive (and profitable) "athletic shoes" unrepairable, thus displacing many shoe repair workers throughout our cities. During the period from the 1920s that Eastwood (1992: 28) writes of, there were smaller scale recyclers who remained in business by finding specific market niches. These included auto junk yards, scrap metal dealers, flea market agents, and the like (Schnaiberg, 1991). But these were deviant activities of *scavenging*, which was often labor-intensive (though sometimes also capital-intensive, in order to process heavy materials such as auto bodies for the steel industry). Some environmental activists, in the interests of **resource recovery** (e.g., Kalven, 1991) continued and expanded such activities, through labor-intensive, often countercultural and semivolunteer efforts. But they too had to operate within the remanufacturers' market systems, in order to sell most of what they collected (Stevenson, 1992).

The net result of this historical process is that in the later 1980s, when "recycling" was to be the new panacea for municipal solid waste treatment, municipalities confronted

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much tougher bargainers in the private sector than they had anticipated. While municipalities had a complex mixture of use-value (legitimacy) and exchange-value (citizens' tax reductions and new corporate tax revenues), the remanufacturers were primarily concerned with the "bottom line" of profitability. Remanufacturing of aluminum, glass, steel, or paper involves capital outlays that are beyond the capacity of smaller scale firms, because of economies of scale (Belsie, 1991; Gold, 1991). Although corporations were also under fire in the attack on landfills and waste disposal threats, they were often able to use advertising and public relations in their "green marketing" (Young, 1991; Bukro, 1991b; Stevenson, 1990; Holusha, 1991; Belsie, 1991) imagery to citizen-consumers to divert these attacks, rather than quickly investing scarce capital into recycling facilities (Stevenson, 1990; Bukro, 1991; Holusha, 1991).

What did this disparity between the economic power of municipalities vs. remanufacturers entail, in practice? At one extreme (Belsie, 1991) is the newsprint "glut": municipalities continued to collect discarded newsprint, even though recycling intermediaries could not find buyers. Frequently, cities simply dumped this "glut" in landfills (where paper already constitutes nearly 80% of volume!) The use-value of newsprint is high, but the exchange value is low. Paradoxically, this process has reduced waste-paper prices so much that the United States is currently shipping this paper to South Korea. This relieves Korean politicians from having to approve the cutting of some forests symbolically planted after the Korean War [personal communication, Tong-Whan Park, Political Science department, Northwestern University] to sustain their industrial expansion. The newspaper "glut" is a pure market definition: there's too much supply of "recycled" newsprint, and too little demand. Or, the potential demand doesn't seem high enough yet to encourage paper corporations to invest in new recycling mills (Belsie, 1991).

Thus, citizens deposit their newsprint into municipal containers, where it is whisked "out of sight" by municipal trucks, which then "illegimately" dump their newsprint in

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landfills because of "market conditions." At the other extreme, corporations engage in "green marketing" in which they advertise often-exaggerated claims about the "recycled" [i.e., remanufactured] content of their products. This has led to actions by attorneys-general of a number of states to enforce new regulations about what "recycled content" actually means, in terms of the minimum content of the product constituted by recycled materials (Holusha, 1991). In this way, the corporations increase their market power by holding down demand for recycled goods, thereby decreasing the value of municipally collected waste materials.

In addition to these extremes, where the actual recycling-remanufacturing process **does** occur, major remanufacturers simply use their market power to enhance profits, in part by reducing the costs of their "raw materials," municipally collected curbside wastes. The prices they pay are dictated by their production and market situation, not by the environmental or political legitimacy or use-value considerations that led to curbside recycling. As a result of this, recent critics have suggested (e.g., New York Times, 1991) that some big cities stop curbside recycling, because it's "too costly":

"Recycling is obviously a laudable goal. It conserves materials at little cost to the environment. But until recycling generates its own revenues, the increased expenses

of collection, like rising landfill costs, will have to be paid by cutting other city programs. [The Sanitation Commissioner] is right to go slowly."

Other cities, such as Chicago, have tried to reduce their costs of curbside recycling by integrating this in a single "blue bag" to be collected along with regular garbage (Moberg, 1991). Still others like Evanston, Illinois, try to control more of the remanufacturing process by setting up municipal facilities to do more processing, thereby hoping to make more profits on the process (West & Balu, 1991). This is exactly the

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response of many third-world primary product producers (Bunker, 1985), who have tried to move farther into the processing arena, with mixed success.

Moreover, this domestic contradiction between municipality curbside recycling and private sector has been made more complex with changing world-system conditions. The market for recycled aluminum is becoming attenuated by the policies of the U.S.S.R. and its successor states. These states have become so desperate for foreign exchange that they have been dumping metals on world markets at "bargain basement rates," thereby depressing prices for both virgin and recycled metals (Arndt, 1992). Thus, the future of our "resource management" is increasingly moving away from political control over markets (Lindblom, 1977) towards the control of local (and national) politics by major market actors, which is a more typical treadmill scenario.

ARE THERE LESSONS FROM RECYCLING-REMANUFACTURING?

These recent outcomes of "recycling policy" strongly suggest how much recycling has been transformed from its ideological origins in the environmental movement. Essentially, the editorial above reflects the dominance of exchange values, and the concomitant decline of earlier use-value arguments such as those of environmental movements (cf. Bukro, 1991a). Markets once more are elevated and dominate political decisions about waste processes (Lindblom, 1976; Young, 1991; Swanson, 1991b). From this position, only those elements of communities' solid waste that generate profits should be recycled: The rest should be disposed of in other "more economic" ways. If landfills are too politically risky, then perhaps incineration or shipment abroad should be tried instead.

Instead of simply siding with one side or another of this argument, this political dilemma offers sociological analysts a political pause during which we might reexamine how the remanufacturing-recycling policies arose. As I noted earlier, expanding landfills has become less politically and economically attractive to local governments and

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industries (including waste management firms) because of local political resistance, usually in the form of the not-in-my-back-yard (NIMBY) social movements (Szasz 1990). Yet these diffused social reactions were never systematically integrated into a regional or national "program" by either environmental or other social movement organizations. Nor did these elites mobilize to get the federal government or its environmental agencies to do a critical policy review of recycling, which might have added some counteracting pressures in the EPA and other federal agencies (Skocpol and Amenta, 1986) to offset some of the dominant economic interests of the Reagan period. Instead, economic elites have pressured local and regional state agencies and political actors to "do something" to relieve the "waste crisis" (Schnaiberg 1990a).

Not surprisingly, therefore, we have emerged with local *exchange*-value solutions to local *use*-value protests. As a result, the future expansion of community recycling programs is more uncertain. On the one hand, recessions may increase local willingness to accept new landfills (Goering, 1992) because of a desire for new tax revenues and employment. Environmental movement organizations may thus have failed to *sustain resistance* to the coordinated efforts of state agencies and capital interests to promote capital accumulation. They have at least acquiesced in the dismissal of many social justice and environmental protection objectives, some of which were at least crudely articulated by local NIMBY protests (Bullard, 1990; Schnaiberg 1991c; Brown and Mikkelson, 1990; cf. Szasz, 1990). Environmental movements often are naive about the fields of political force around local decision-makers, arising from dominant economic interests (Logan and Molotch, 1987; Rudel, 1989). This naivete often cedes this local political conflict to capital accumulation interests (Skocpol & Amenta, 1986). In contrast, environmental groups might have established some coalitions with local NIMBY groups and other local, regional and national social welfare movements could have mobilized locally to monitor, evaluate, and critique proposals for alternative waste policies in a

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coordinated and sustained fashion (Schnaiberg 1991c; cf Staggenborg 1989; Bullard, 1990; Logan & Molotch, 1987; Schnaiberg, 1992b).

Rather than episodically and separately offering pot shots against some policies and programs, a coordinated socio-environmental coalition might have exerted a sustained division of labor to partly offset the ongoing political influence in communities that arises from dominant capital accumulation interests. As with the NIMBY groups, the increasing universality of resistance would pressure local government elected officials and agencies to reassess their relative attentiveness to use-value groups, rather than to exchange-value institutions (O'Connor 1973; Skocpol & Amenta, 1986). With such sustained resistance, some socially progressive and more ecological goals of recycling, including reuse (Schnaiberg, 1991c), could have been used to temper current capital-intensity of remanufacturing programs. The United States might have emerged into the 1990s reusing both valuable aluminum cans and discarded paper, regardless of the market prices of each. Instead, the "analysis" has often been degraded into a debate about "paper or plastic?" in local supermarkets, with paper "winning" 48% to 37%. Ironically, even at this mundane level, environmentalists have failed to follow through with a social reuse alternative of "neither." This option of reusable containers is being utilized by fewer than 2% of national respondents in a recent survey sponsored by *the American Paper Institute* [Chicago Tribune, 1992], not the federal government or national environmental movement organizations.

By employing underutilized local labor pools, moreover, "uneconomic" waste could have been turned into "socially usable," reused or remanufactured goods (van Vliet 1989: 32-33; West & Balu 1991; Kalven, 1991; Swanson, 1992). By failing to organize such coordinated and sustained resistance to overriding of these other social goals, the movements lent social legitimacy to current recycling programs and capital accumulation (Gutin, 1992), without achieving any broader social-environmental objectives. Our task as sociological analysts of resource management is not to be third-rate analysts of material

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flows, but to do a better job with regard to the social distributions associated with alternative social and political solutions to waste management as a social resource policy.

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