

PLASTIC POLICIES, PROLOGUE AND PARABLE:
REFRAMING RECYCLING.

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Environment, Technology, and Society 77 (Fall 1994): 1, 3-4.

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"The definition of the term 'post-consumer' is a potential time bomb waiting to destroy residential plastics recycling initiatives. When we define post-consumer in terms of material that has 'satisfied its intended use', we go nowhere far enough in providing a definition to help enhance post-consumer residential plastics recycling. It is easy for any of us who are actually in plastics recycling to come up with material that will meet some of the new definitions and offer twice the quality at half the price of material that *really* came out of household trash. If we really want to help recycle plastics from used beverage containers and other household plastic containers, we should *refine the definition of 'post-consumer' by adding the words industrial-commercial (PCIC) or residential (PCR)*. If we begin to use the terms PCIC and PCR when it comes to recycling labels, we will better inform those who buy these products about the *actual origina* of the material....It would be absolutely ludicrous to suggest that industrial or commercial high quality scrap should not be recycled, and this is not my intent. However, it would be equally foolish not to recognize the added costs that are necessary in collecting, sorting, and cleaning post-consumer residential plastics waste compared to post-consumer industrial-commercial materials. To merely use an arbitrary and somewhat capricious definition of 'post-consumer' on a label describing content will actually prove to deter recycling." (Forman 1991: 103-104)

"Chances are, if you go to a grocery store to buy some bologna, you will find it packaged in plastic. This is as it should be. The trouble is, when it comes to plastics recycling, you'll likely find much of what you hear packaged in baloney. ...In its haste to atone for the lack of plastics recycling, the plastics industry rushed to embrace...ill-conceived dinosaurs as mixed plastics commingly extruded profiles for much ballyhooed products such as picnic tables, park benches and driveway bumpers -- we're tired of hearing about them.[102]

"There is no phrase that sounds better in concept but has so great a potential for catastrophe as 'closed loop recycling'. Those who use the term believe that recycling doesn't truly take place until that which was once, is again...In reality,

this proves to be an idea with an enormous 'anti-recycling' potential. *The purpose of recycling is to take an item that has served its intended purpose and in some manner add value to it so that it can be returned once again to a useful life.* ...There is no environmental good, or any other use for that matter, in forcing a material to be recycled back into its original form....The long and the short of this whole issue comes down to the following: "*Recycling is the goal.*" We simply need to recycle old containers into useful products, period. (Remember, we live in a free country.)" [103; emphasis mine]

Prologue

Behold the wondrous municipal recycling bin,
Which collects the trash we've been drowning in.
Its alchemy is transforming "trash into cash."
But landfills are groaning,
And officials are moaning:
Their municipal budgets have been turned into hash!

...

A RECYCLED FABLE

Once upon a time in the rich kingdom of Nacirema, the capitol's streets were neat and clean. But local vendors began to sell citizens attractive products in bright new packages, and Nacirema's citizens soon tired of bringing these wrappings and containers home, or to their place of work to be disposed of. They merely dropped such addenda of affluence upon the grounds wherever they ate, drank, or were merry.

The emperor Nodnyl became eye-sore afflicted by these droppings, and consulted wise people in his kingdom. Some said, "behead the droppers of dross!" Others called for a "dropping tax on waste-droppers." Still others called for vendors to be charged a fee for each package, to be repaid only when the empty packages were returned to the manufactories or to the emperor's warehouse. But vendors and manufactory owners cried

"foul," since these transactions would slow their commerce. This would lower the taxes they paid to Nodnyl's treasury, whose power would thus decline.

'Twas Nodnyl's wife Dribydal who came up with the perfect answer to this imperial problem. "My seers have suggested another path," quoth she:

"Neither behead nor tax. Instead fill the streets with *benign buckets*, for every citizen to drop within their scatterings from eating, drinking, and being merry. Then would you, Nodnyl, be less sore of eye, since the new buckets would be pleasing to thine eye, for the droppings would be out of sight."

"Aha," replied Nodnyl, "I am indeed fortunate to have a spouse as wise as thee, Dribydal." And his Council of Emperor's Advisers cheered too, for the vendors and manufactories would be pleased. And so it was, and it was good... for some time at least. Benign buckets were used, or nearly used, wherever three or more Naciremans gathered at work or at play. And each day, benign bucket brigades came to empty them, and the Nacireman streets were clean. Each bucket bore the legend, "*Neighborly* Naciremans Navigate to Benign Buckets," and it was peaceful and pleasing to walk the streets.

So well did the benign buckets work that still more manufactories and vendors began to make and sell products in bright and shiny new "begone-packs" [never to be returned to their source of creation or distribution]. The manufactories of benign buckets were busied night and day, producing new buckets to catch these aspects from affluence. Bankers and tax-collectors cheered too, since the new "begone-manufactories" and their vendors were able to make more products and profits, because they needed fewer Nacireman workers to pick up and return the outmoded "re-usable packets."

However, within the office of the Grand Vizier, doubts began to grow. In each province, some rumblings from Pastural Ministers and their staffs were heard. "Woe begones," they cried, "for the buckets are not benign, it seems. Now armies of serfs are needed to tend the ever-growing benign buckets each day and night. And the transports

bring daily a larger mound of begone-packs, and where are we to put them? Our commons pasture is getting filled up quickly, and the cattle (and natives) are restless, for where will we find new pastures?" And ominously, in distant provinces, where toiled the manufactories of the bright, shiny new begone-packs, serfs and Knights began to wonder at the changes in their Nacireman landscapes. Fish drowned, frogs croaked, and cow-pies turned white as snow. Yet the seers in the manufactories glowed with new economic health. For did they not produce goods in begone-packaging that lasted for months on Nacireman streets and shop shelves without despoilation? *New Living Through Alchemy*, they proclaimed in their Annual Council of Political Economists Report to the Emperor! Moreover, they noted therein that "what's good for the fiefdom is good for the serfs!"

"Fear not," trumpeted the editorials in the *National Nacireman News* (wholly controlled by the Grand Vizier's Office of Public Instruction). "All is well in our country," and "The state will ensure the continuance of our economic wonders," they reassured the populace through the town criers' sound-bites. The new emperor, Nagear, dismissed the provincial fears as due to the "nattering nabobs of non-Naciremanism," proclaiming "You've seen one cow pasture, you've seen them all!" And he ordered all his Governors and Pastural Ministers to erect monuments to Nacireman knowledge by binding up the begone-packs, mounding molehills into mountains of manufactory management. And it was good... for the Governors, at least.

Strange wonders began to occur, though, testing the populace's faith in their state and producers. These mountains began to grow to unprecedented heights, and children were sometimes swallowed up in their depths. When the monsoons came, some of these manufactory mountains slipped, drowning everything in their path. And those living in the foothills began to suffer boils, scourges, and sickening of their stomachs, until they felt like Job being tested. Indeed, soon these mountains of manufactory began to block out the sunlight, reducing the cropping of corn and oats, and making the fish disappear

from the nearby streams. And the people were sore afraid, and petitioned the Grand Vizier to "do something."

In his wisdom, this venerable official gathered together in the Imperial Nacireman Palace the mandarins of manufactories, as well as some "citizens of good will and earnest effort." These mischievous mountains must be contained, they agreed, but how? One timid citizen suggested returning to the packaging of pre-begone packaging, but she was derided as anti-Nacireman and anti-progress, and quickly returned to her foothills. The mandarins called in the alchemists, who scratched their beards, until one said:

"Eureka! We'll turn the begone-packs into benign buckets and benches for beaches and bar-stools for beverage stands! Hence the mountains will not grow larger, and citizens can continue to have the convenience of begone packs to lighten their daily load. And Governors can collect the discarded begone packs and sell them to the artful alchemists."

This wondrous social transformation of "trash into cash" would happen because the mandarins and their manufactories would collect these packs, and turn them into socially-useful goods once more. Citizens cheered, Governors grovelled in glee, Pastoral Ministers praised this wisdom, and the Grand Vizier's vision of the future was once more clear and bright.

Alas, this joyous state soon passed, and boisterous bickering once more bedevilled the kingdom. In each manufactory, anxious accountants chastened their artful alchemists:

"To mash this trash into Nacireman necessities costs too much. We will not mash any trash before its time, unless we obtain cash from the manufactory mash into which we can turn the trash."

Or,

"No buck, no manufactory muck! Only those benign buckets that can generate bountiful bucks from new benign buckets, benches and bar-stools shall we transform alchemically! And the rest? Begone with it!"

Soon, by day, the streets of Nacirema were filled by alchemical trucks, emptying the benign buckets and pleasing the woe-men on the street. Alas, by night, cartloads of "profitless-putrescences" were quietly taken from alchemy centers and from some of the manufactories themselves, to be melded into the manufactory mountains. All too soon, bewildered citizens declaimed,

"How is it that our alchemists daily divert so many begone-packs, and yet our manufactoried mountains still grow and reek?"

This plaintive wail reached from Governors and Pasture Ministers up to the Grand Vizier himself, who promptly placed the problem before his mandarins of manufactories, as well as his Council of Emperor's Advisers. "Ah, 'tis simple what the problem is," they cried:

"Naciremans just don't pay enough for benign buckets, benches and bar-stools for manufactories to turn trash into cash! For each good citizen, let us add a mash-ination tax to their daily purchases of begone-packs. And let us demand of them to purify these begone-packs by steam and soap, to make them more mash-able! And finally, let the Grand Vizier order more benign buckets, benches and bar-stools for the kingdom, to make the manufactories able to turn more mash into more cash. Thus will be problem finally be resolved!"

When the Grand Vizier pronounced in the Imperial Courtyard this profound parable, most citizens cheered. Except, away in a corner, a wizened sociologist was heard to mutter,

"Why beget begone-packs, if the begetting becomes a woe in the begoning?"

Manufactories have made a hash of the plan for mash, and to have us give them the

mash-ination tax turns our mountain of misery into their molehill of money..."

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Forman, Marty

1991 "In my opinion...Plastics recycling: let's cut the bull." Resource Recycling
May: 102-104.