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**Review: Recycling Reconsidered: The Present Failure and Future Promise of Environmental Action in the United States**

By Samantha McBride

**Reviewed by Amy E. Harth, MH**

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MacBride, Samantha. *Recycling Reconsidered: The Present Failure and Future Promise of Environmental Action in the United States*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012. 303 pp. ISBN: 9780262016001 US \$27.00 hardcover

MacBride examines the effectiveness of recycling in the United States in achieving its stated goals of environmental preservation. The author accomplishes this by examining what is recycled and how these processes work. In the course of this examination, she identifies several contradictions and notes that what is recycled is not necessarily the most effective choice. For example, cloth recycling is not part of the general consumer consciousness when this would be far more effective both from a cost and environmental standpoint than glass recycling. Additionally, she questions why the focus is on post-consumer recycling rather than addressing the larger issue of industrial waste. The author proposes a new concept to describe the policy development and enactment process: busy-ness. This term highlights the fact that a critical element of recycling is the desire to do something; however, for some actors in the process, acting (or appearing to act) is more important than being effective (p. 6). In raising these issues she identifies specific examples that help provide context and an understanding of how politics, activism, business, transportation, industry and many other elements influence recycling policies and actions in the United States.

The scope of the analysis is broad in that the author addresses the recycling movement in the U.S. as a whole. However, she narrows the scope by providing specific examples that allow the reader to understand the details necessary to grasp the important role of each type of actor in policy determinations and the resulting recycling initiatives. While these examples are useful in this way, many focus on New York and as such their applicability to smaller areas and different political processes is unknown. Nevertheless, these examples highlight how the national agenda regarding recycling has primarily focused on post-consumer waste. As MacBride notes, post-consumer waste accounts for only 33% of municipal solid waste by ignoring the waste generated by industry (p. 9).

The historical detail throughout is comprehensive. MacBride does an excellent job of providing the background necessary to understand how recycling as a whole was initiated as well as offering detailed histories of specific groups and initiatives, such as the Zero Waste movement. This background is useful for those new to the subject, but also critical for understanding MacBride's arguments. In addition, she supports these details with six appendices that provide further numerical data.

The intended audience includes scholars of environmental politics and recycling science as well as business leaders, government policy makers, activists and the eager general reader interested in a scholarly approach to understanding the limitations of current recycling policies and initiatives in the United States. There are potential solutions in MacBride's analysis. Some of these, as she notes, are broad multi-actor initiatives that have been missing from the discussion, such as addressing waste caused by industrial production. Others include a

refocusing of consumer recycling efforts on more environmentally and cost effective methods, such as cloth recycling and composting.

MacBride provides an excellent historical overview of the U.S. recycling efforts, their limitations and the opportunities to improve recycling determinations in the future. This work is of great value to increasing our understanding of the current limitations of recycling efforts and changing policies and perceptions to make recycling more effective in the future.

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