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At the Top of the Heap

Does America suffer from a trash addiction? Has it transformed itself into "China's trash compactor"?

By [MARC LEVINSON](#)

A few years ago, when I was advising investors on environmental policy, I tried to interest publishers in a book on the subject. Their reactions could not have been more negative. As one unenthusiastic editor explained to me, the only way to sell a book on the environment is to get readers alarmed. I have a hunch that Edward Humes's publisher told him the same thing. At least, that would be a charitable explanation for "Garbology."

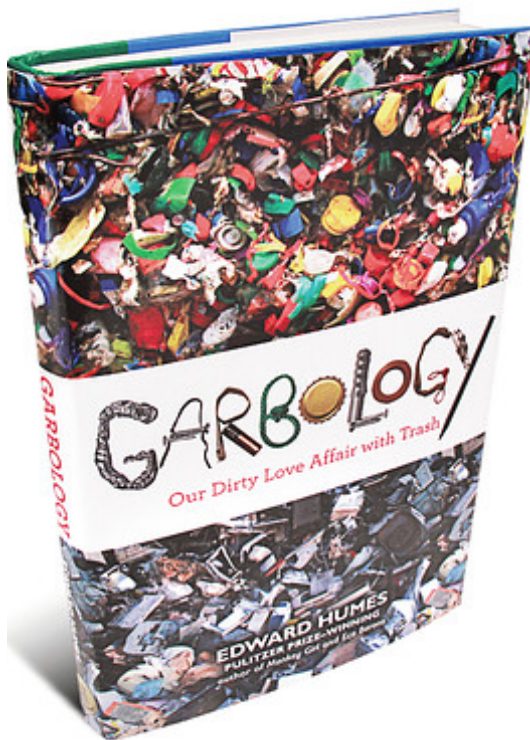
Mr. Humes, who won a Pulitzer Prize at the Orange County Register in 1989 and has written a dozen books since, sets out to free us from the illness he bluntly labels "our trash addiction." We have "barely put a dent in our collective garbage mountain," he tells us, "and what we have accomplished—moderately increased recycling compared [with] decades past—is more about rearranging the deck chairs than changing the course of a ship headed for disaster."

If you like ominous mixed metaphors, you may enjoy "Garbology." Mr. Humes does introduce us to some interesting characters, from Mike Speiser, who drives an enormous trash-crunching machine at the Puente Hills landfill in Los Angeles, to Mary Crowley, a self-educated environmental scientist who sails the Pacific mapping the course of floating trash. And the author certainly exhibits passion for his cause. Unfortunately, anecdote and passion are of little help in thinking about how to deal effectively and efficiently with waste.

America's trash problem, Mr. Humes contends, is far worse than official figures indicate. The Environmental Protection Agency reports that the average American generates 4.43 pounds of waste each day. Mr. Humes blasts the EPA's methodology and offers numbers from BioCycle magazine and Columbia University's Earth Engineering Center, which estimate a far higher figure, seven pounds per person per day.

The higher figure may well be accurate. But Mr. Humes omits a relevant point: Both studies find that our production of solid waste per person has been falling modestly. This should be no surprise. Some of the big waste streams are drying up. Newspaper circulation has plummeted. Phone books are obsolete. Americans haven't stopped throwing a lot of trash away, but we don't face a crisis spinning out of control.

The misrepresentation of trash trends isn't the book's only factual problem. "One out of every six big trucks in the U.S. is a



Garbology

By Edward Humes
(Avery, 277 pages, \$27)

garbage truck," Mr. Humes tells us. According to R.L. Polk & Co., which tracks such things, roughly 3.5 million Class 8 trucks—the big kind—were registered for highway use in 2011. If Mr. Humes is right, nearly 600,000 garbage trucks are pounding America's roads. This strikes me as implausible, but I can find no credible data on the subject. For this claim, as for many others, Mr. Humes offers no sources.

Citing the large U.S. exports of wastepaper and scrap metal to China, Mr. Humes writes: "America, a country that once built things for the rest of the world, has transformed itself into China's trash compactor." The line sounds clever, but its implication—that having fewer factories means more trash—is bizarre. And other observations—like "Waste, it seems, is becoming one of our greatest contributions to the global economy"—undermine any claim the book has on being taken seriously.

This sort of pseudo-environmentalism is dangerous, because it can lead to terrible public policies. Near my home in New Jersey, for example, hysteria over an increasing volume of waste and a purported shortage of landfill space brought us a "resource recovery facility," opened in 1990. Even after selling electricity generated by burning trash, the plant proved so expensive that the state legislature had to force towns to use it. Twenty-two years later, despite a public subsidy of \$1.5 million a year, turning trash into electricity still costs more than

burying the garbage in one of the state's overburdened—but still operating—landfills.

Mr. Humes likes waste-to-energy plants. Why, he asks, can't America be like Denmark, where 29 small plants produce electricity and co-generate heat for entire neighborhoods. Undoubtedly, there are places in the U.S. where that arrangement would be viable. But Mr. Humes doesn't mention that America has different cost factors, notably landfill space that is much cheaper than it would be in Denmark. What may work well overseas isn't necessarily a sensible way to handle trash here.

Our abundance of trash has less to do with moral failure than with market failure. Big businesses typically pay for their waste by weight, and many have responded to rising costs with serious efforts to reduce the amount they throw away. Most households and small businesses, by contrast, pay for disposal by the year, not by the pound; if we place the contents of our attics at curbside we don't pay more, and if we recycle diligently we don't pay less.

Could market forces be shaped to induce the rest of us to generate less trash? What policies might change the incentives facing apartment dwellers who toss garbage down a chute and barbershop owners who dump their hair sweepings into street receptacles?

These are questions worth exploring. But Mr. Humes prefers to cast his lot with those for whom environmentalism means self-denial. "You can choose to save more and spend less, which automatically means you will waste less," he writes. Taking his advice may make you feel good, but it won't do much to save the planet.

Mr. Levinson's most recent book is "The Great A&P and the Struggle for Small Business in America."

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