

From Waste-Pickers to Urban Recyclers: The *Cartoneros* of Buenos Aires, Argentina

The image of human beings picking through garbage bags on the streets in search of valuable materials is perhaps one of the most powerful ones we have of extreme disparity and urban poverty, and one that is most often associated with poverty in so-called ‘Third World’ countries in the Western imaginary. On the other hand, a well-organized and efficient recycling system is increasingly seen as a sign of wealth, progress and modernity. Perhaps it is in part due to the strength of these associations that the massive appearance of waste-pickers (also known as *cartoneros*) in the urban landscape became the most vivid symbol of social dislocation, pauperization and crisis during the economic collapse of 2001 in Argentina. In some ways, the struggle for reforms in the waste management system in the city of Buenos Aires was perhaps not only a struggle for survival on the part of the *cartoneros* or simply a matter of public hygiene and urban planning, but also a battle for the collective self-image of the country’s place in the global hierarchy.

The design of new waste management systems as part of efforts to assert the modernity of the country is not new. Indeed, the last military dictatorship in Argentina attempted to eradicate the presence of waste-pickers in the city of Buenos Aires by establishing landfilling as the only legal method of waste disposal in the capital city and the surrounding suburbs as part of its program of modernization (Schamber 2008). This legal framework, which remained intact for more than two decades until 2002, privatized garbage collection services and strictly prohibited any third-party recycling in order to ensure the disappearance of waste-picking on the streets to ‘clean-up’ the city.¹ Poverty was not to be eradicated, it seemed, but reminders of its presence in the capital city had to be removed.

By the time waste-picking massively reappeared in the city centre at the end of the 1990s as a survival strategy of last resort in the face of exploding unemployment and economic crisis, recycling had already begun its entry into the vocabulary of the modern. In this context of crisis, the figure of the waste-picker slowly passed from that of the traditional *ciruja*, seen as a delinquent and a vagabond, to that of the *cartonero*, seen as an innocent victim of the economic crisis searching for a ‘decent’ way to survive. Indeed, many commentators note the emergence of the *cartonero* as a new social actor during this period of upheaval and crisis (Paiva 2008). To be sure, there were still many who continued to look upon the *cartoneros* with suspicion and disdain, while the private waste collection companies, who at the time billed the city per tonne of garbage collected, openly called them criminals, claiming that they were thieves of ‘their’ garbage. This notwithstanding, the ties of solidarity that began to be forged between the popular mobilizations, neighbourhood assemblies and the *cartoneros* in 2001 turned public opinion in favour of the latter and placed pressure on the city government to change existing laws around waste management to favour recycling and social inclusion. The issue had become one not only of public hygiene and image, but also one about the creation of decent jobs, social inclusion and survival.

¹ The only exception was for the private companies that had concession of garbage collection services within the city centre, who were permitted to recover *no more* than 10% of the waste collected.

From Social Inclusion to Workers' Rights

The *cartonero* movement has come a long way since the mobilizations of 2001. From fighting for the basic legitimacy of their work as a tool of survival, many organizations are now demanding rights as workers, emphasizing the public and environmental benefits of their service as the first link in the recycling chain and their role as urban recyclers. While the sector is still marked by informality and severe precariousness in very important ways, a significant portion of those who have grouped together into cooperatives within the city centre of Buenos Aires (estimates run from half to two-thirds of those working in the sector) have begun to win concessions from the city to improve their conditions of work and build networks to foment a national movement towards recycling systems that guarantee decent jobs.

Up against the historically strong private waste collection lobby, winning such concessions from the state such as a monthly income subsidy, improved transportation logistics, work clothes, minimal social insurance and health coverage, and in some cases even a childcare centre to prevent children from working on the street has been no small feat. However, the battle over the future of the city's garbage is far from over, and many questions remain. Can the movement manage to keep and to push for a recycling system that stays within the public sector against the advances of large corporations? Can the model be extended to cover everyone working in the sector, and can it be replicated in other municipalities with fewer resources than the capital city? It is likely that this will in part depend on the ability of the *cartonero* movement to mobilize enough support to counter trends towards austerity, given the role of state expenditure in maintaining the program. Similarly, whether or not the movement is capable of innovating and representing a new kind of politics that is more broadly representative rather than become simply another actor to join already existing corporatist structures remains to be seen.

While the movement is in many ways still just beginning and its future uncertain, its successes and challenges in dignifying work that has traditionally been carried out under extremely precarious and exploitative 'free-market' conditions raise many intriguing questions from the perspective of public policy and social movements alike. What ought to be the role of the state in guaranteeing decent work? How can we create jobs that are socially and ecologically responsible and just? Indeed, to think about waste is inevitably also an invitation to reconsider the way in which social (re)production takes place, and the human and ecological costs that are often ignored.

Works Cited

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