

Waste Pickers: Forging a New Conceptualization of “The Public” in Waste Management

Lucía Fernández

1. What are the concepts and theories that can help us understand waste picking as part of urban systems?

In recent decades, capital has been looking at waste management as a new, emerging, high-yielding global market. Waste management has become a multimillion-dollar industry. The complexity of managing an increasing amount of waste represents an opportunity for profit-making and a very tempting market source for new profitable businesses. When the World Bank published its report “What a Waste” (2012), their estimations of increasing waste production sidestep excellent news in terms of capital accumulation through privatization of waste management. And here is what really matters for the technologically-oriented solutions: not waste itself, but the process and strategies used to avoid it, refuse it, treat it, creating new urban scenes, producing sophisticated work in the surfaces (Harpet, 1997). That is why the technological aspects of waste management and treatment unfolded for centuries from modern and hygienic paradigms (Harpet; Barles, 2004; Abussafy, 2013).

The *city* itself has become, for many Marxist urban theorists, a potential commodity, almost exclusively in service of the interests of capital accumulation. In the case of waste-pickers, the city is not neo-liberalized only by privatizing waste, but also by removing it from the most disadvantaged, thus creating a fight for its appropriation (Samson 2009; 2014). Following David Harvey’s (2004) concept, it is not just by accumulation of capital, but by dispossession of it to others. With regard to solid waste and the complexities associated to its management in the global south, the same type of material is subject to various kinds of appropriations and managements both formal or informal.

We argue that powerful groups, institutions, and elites, through dispossession of waste, also have more influence and can put in danger the *socioeconomic metabolic systems* (Martinez Alier, 2007; Demaria, 2017; Veronesi, 2013) long established by waste-pickers. This refers to the processes of appropriation, transformation, and disposal of materials and energy of a society that must happen in order for that society to maintain and evolve (Scheidel and Sorman, 2012). What follows this concept, and according to a dialectical vision, is the understanding of *urban metabolism* as a mutually constructive conception of the relations between nature and urban society, where nature is metabolically transmuted through urban space according to its historical processes (Kaika & Swyngedouw, 2000). Therefore, in exercising power over ecological and social flows, human beings are active players in the evolution of the city.

2. In which ways (if any) is “the right to the city” an important framework for analyzing waste pickers’ struggles?

We will argue that waste management systems are constituted by *apparatus*¹, which seeks to normalize the behaviour of the population in relation to their waste, to reconfigure the urban space and its citizen bonds, and to reorganize the network of economic relations that unequally links private companies and waste-pickers. The apparatus always has a concrete, strategic function and is always located in a power relation (Foucault, 1977). When technological systems are globalized, we are globalizing a series of *apparatus* with the ability and power to normalize planetary behaviours (Pierron, 1997). Understanding the primary waste disposal device as

¹ “*Apparatus*” (*dispositif* in French) is literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings (Agamben, 2009).

apparatus helps us understand the existing intersection between waste management and global capital as well as its implications for *governamentality* (Foucault, 1978). In this sense, waste containers are, for instance, the first bridge between the private and public sphere, becoming the physical element that intersects waste-pickers, other citizens, and the state.

If we consider inhabiting the city as the capacity of being able to appropriate its space, the urban space could be a product of social and political construction. The *right to the city* as a Lefebvrian concept² was born to challenge capitalist order, to seek a radical restructuring of social, political, and economic relationships in the city (Lefebvre, 1969; Purcell, 2002). The *right to the city* is not just having the right to be part of the city, but to have the right to demand a new one (Harvey 2008b; 2013), to produce a reconfiguration of the systems of power that inform the city's dictation of the production and reconfiguration of the space (Navarro, 2014). The *right to the city* could unify different struggles not only around a fashion slogan but a "slogan of work and a political ideal" (Harvey, 2008a). If excluding groups, classes, and individuals from "urbanity" is also to exclude them from civilization and society (Lefebvre, 1968), claiming the *right to the city* for waste-pickers is a legitimate reaction to the existing discriminatory and segregative urban organization as a result of waste privatization. We could argue that the *right to the city* then becomes the right to centrality, to use and appropriate public space, to not be excluded from the urban form.

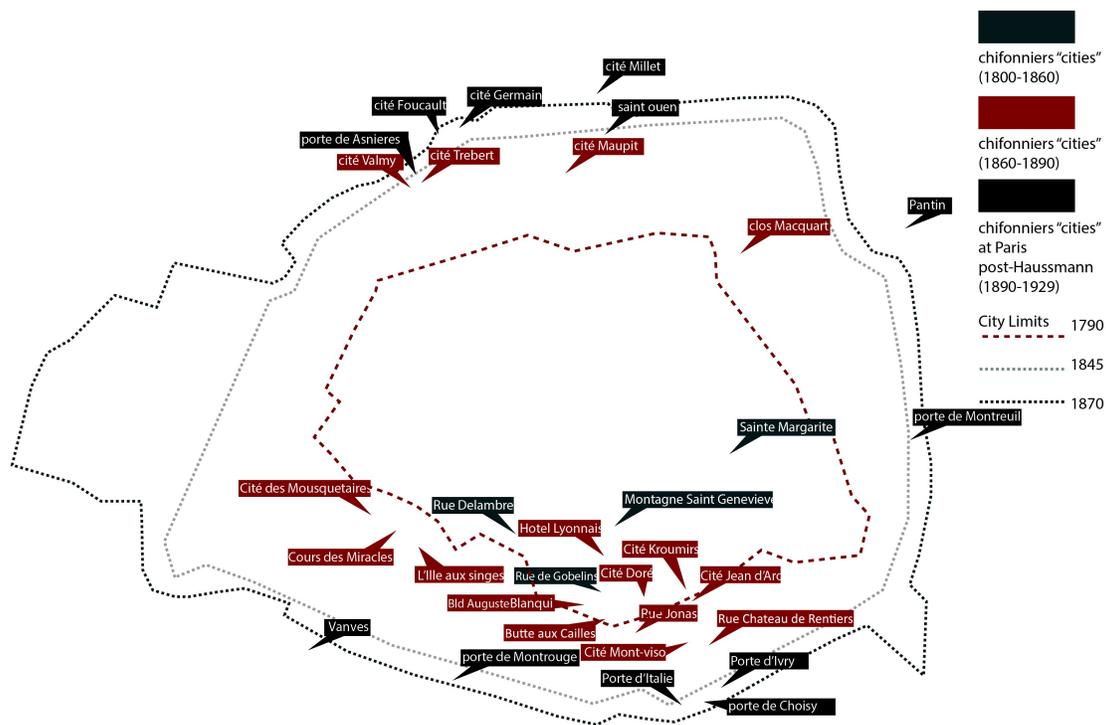
3. How can we localize the right to the city's framework?

The public sphere is the site where struggles are decided by other means than war. Alexander Kluge

In order to elucidate the conflicts around waste and how they operate in the urban space, in particular the public space, it seems of great relevance to analyze a triad of regulation, privatization, and dispossession *apparatus* which has undermined waste-pickers as urban poor and their access to the center of their cities. For Negt's and Kluge's (1993) approach, the reconstruction of different conceptions of space belonging to disparate socio-economic spheres in the city will allow us to visualize their conflicts for the use and the appropriation of urban space, and in particular, control over the city center.

In the origins of the *modern* city, Paris in the mid and late XIX century appears as the greatest paradigm. In just a few decades, the city shifted towards capital speculation (Harvey, 2006) which had direct impact in the origins of downtown displacements, resulting in the deposit of the poor population in the city's periphery/outskirts. The process of transformation in Paris demonstrates the impacts on the waste-pickers (*chiffonniers*) at their working space, as we will see in the following example. Thousands of *chiffonniers*, whose livelihoods were made collecting and recycling almost all the waste produce in the city, were not only refused access to waste by several new and modern *apparatus* but foremost suffered from territorial displacements as we can see in the cartographies above (Fernandez, 2010). The very first waste container, which carried the name of the mayor, (Poubelle) was established in 1870 to normalize both the *space* in which domestic waste must be put in, as well as *time*. It could only be outside in public space right before the passage of the waste truck. As the years passed and the city kept growing, the *chiffonniers* were losing their *right to the city*, manifested in their confinement to the periphery and inability to access and enjoy Paris intramuros. From an ecological perspective, this came with a dramatic change in the city's urban metabolism as new *apparatus* within modern waste management systems were no longer in charge of recycling (as the *chiffonniers* used to promote). Waste disposal was centralized into a series of new incinerators.

² Since Henri Lefebvre (the precursor of the *right to the city* concept), the idea of space itself has evolved, encompassing much more than just concrete space. For Lefebvre, urban space was neither neutral nor homogeneous, but an object and instrument of confrontation and conflict, and at the same time a means of production and a means of control, therefore of domination and power, where various interests converge, leading to clashes over their appropriation and use.



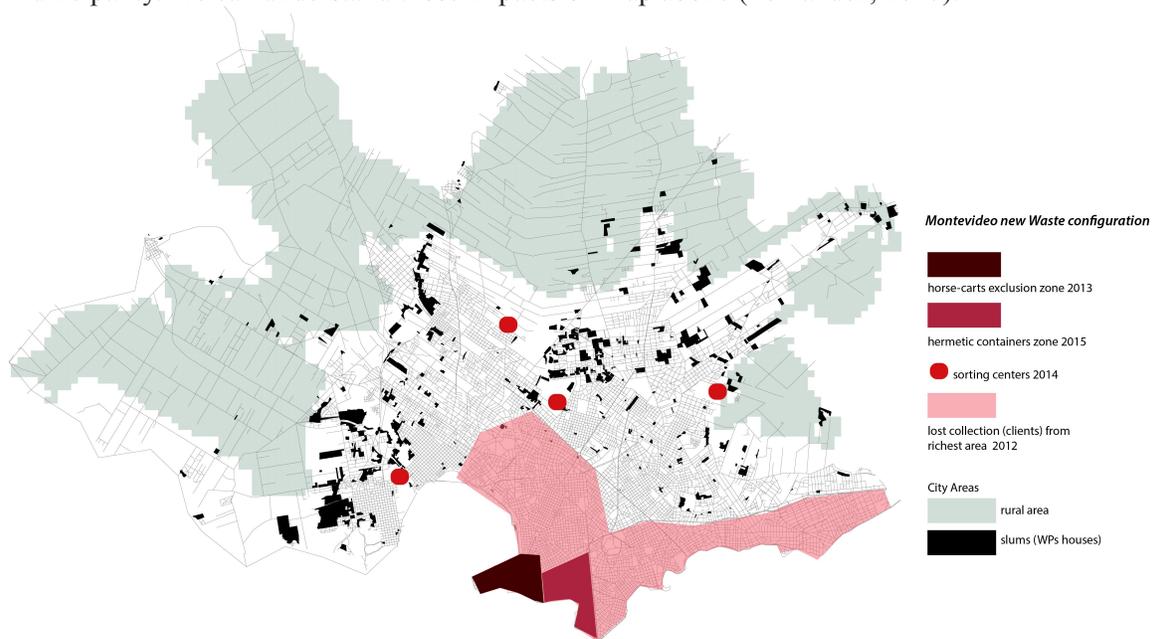
In my hometown of Montevideo, a city where thousands³ of waste-pickers (*clasificadores*) have, historically, recycled everything that they could access⁴, we can see through spatial analysis how capitalism, disguised in public policies, reproduces exclusionary practices within the city. Since 2003, where new waste containers appear in public space (as they were before in Barcelona or Rome), many waste-pickers are no longer able to visit downtown areas for recovery purposes. Particularly in the past five years, the practice of limiting access to the richest areas of the city and to the waste that is produced there, was intensified through the new system of "hermetic containers" (2015) as well as the reconfiguration of the old downtown as an exclusionary zone forbidding the access of horse carts (2013). In addition, waste produced by large generators, which comprises mostly rich recyclable materials, has become the exclusive domain of private companies or individuals driving motorized vehicles (2012). This implies, among others, the rupture of a system of social relations that used to link waste-pickers with more than three thousand "clients" (Gonzalez & Berrenechea, 2003) in the city through a solidarity system that used to offers its waste "for free". The new formal enterprises doing the same work now need to get paid for the collection provided, therefore the final disposal of waste collected is beginning to generate a significant decrease of recycling rates as they pour the recyclable materials into the sanitary landfill.⁵ Therefore, the urban metabolism of the city is again affected by undermining access to recyclables for those historically in charge of transforming it. This new set of policies, in addition to being insufficient from the point of view of the labour inclusion of waste-pickers,⁶ implies a profound transformation in the way in which it configures the access of these workers to

³ From 3,500 waste-pickers during stable or positive economic scenarios, to more than 10,000 as a result of the economic crisis suffered in 2003.

⁴ Similar to numbers in Brazil, it has been proved that almost 90% of what is recycled in the city was thanks to waste-pickers at the bottom of the pyramid (2006 study by the national government).

⁵ There is very little economic rentability for them to spend time and resources on sorting waste, as most of the value generation came from the high rates charged for collection.

the urban space and therefore to their city, confining them to transiting the urban periphery where they can devote themselves to sorting and selling materials at the new sorting centers built by the municipality. We can understand those impacts on map above (Fernandez, 2017).



3. What are the obligations and demands the R2C entails and what are the main challenges to realize it?

According to Lefebvre, the right to the city involves two main rights for the urban inhabitants: the right of participation and the right of appropriation. The latter implies the right of inhabitants to physically access, occupy, and use urban space. They not only occupy previously produced space, but also have the right to produce other types of urban space so they can meet the needs of the inhabitants. For the latter, the Brazilian urbanist Edésio Fernandes (2003) poses as key to make a paradigm shift in the conception of urban law. It should be constituted from the concept of the common good, to understand that individual property must be subordinated by the social and environmental interests essential to achieve full cities, where the right to the city constitutes a fundamental social right (Fernandes, 2003).

The main challenge for us would be to expand the notion of common goods to include waste (Cave 2012, 2015; Zapata & Campos, 2015; O'Hare, forthcoming). Then we can critically understand the relations between those who produce waste (citizens) or improve it at various scales (waste-pickers/recyclers) and those who appropriate it for their accumulation benefit (e.g. private collection companies). The concept of *commons* should then be framed not as an object but as what is produced collectively (Federici 2012; Heller, 2012), over which control or management is not delegated to an outside social body but is exercised directly by those who produce it. The strength of the *commons* understood in that sense lies in the fact that its production allows us to think about the possibility of generating something new, to create new forms of reproduction, organization, and regulation of collective life and public governance.⁷

⁶ From the thousands who have lost their income (the approximate number is under investigation), only 128 waste-pickers are formalized and working in four new places, which are located, as we can see in the map, far from downtown, near their homes.

⁷ It is a matter of progressing in the definition of the common not as something given, but something that must be constantly produced by a real community of people capable of proposing shared ends and achieving them through cooperative action "We must also recognize that any movement of production from the ordinary to the interior of capitalist society always carries with it an action (implicit or explicit) of re-appropriation of social life" (Federici, 2012).

To territorialize these *commons*, to think of them from the urban space perspective, will imply the production of the same from the networks of actors and its bonds related to waste. The recognition of the work and the contributions of the waste pickers in the city must be affirmed through a new type of community that manages their urban resources in a sustainable way. Therefore, its right to weave ties of citizenship through its relationship with waste as a pretext to linking with other inhabitants is fundamental for living in a healthy, democratic, and inclusive city for all its inhabitants. Following the *right to the city* concept and a new understanding of the urban space, these principles and practice of communal ownership will help us frame a potentially radically different city waste governance. Those new management modalities will interrogate other configurations of the public, that challenge the notion of the centralized state towards one that is capable of managing a complex and decentralized *communalism* (Bookchin, 2006), where waste is produced, managed and controlled by the community.

“It is about creating places of new possibilities” (Harvey, 2013) and this will only be achieved from a substantial change in the conception of the urban as well as the commons. In addressing the urban roots of the May 1968 movement in Paris, Lefebvre argued that capital has left the walls of the factory and the city has become “the social factory.” Hardt and Negri argued that “the metropolis is to the multitude what the factory was to the working class.” For us, working with informal workers, most of them territorially and organizationally dispersed, it is crucial to understand that while “workers’” struggles are aimed at improving working conditions, mobilizations against dispossession are aimed at claiming and recovering common goods as a condition that makes life possible in the great social factory that is the city (Castro-Costa & Martí-Costa, 2016). We will briefly highlight some of these possibilities.

Samson (2015) argues that by mobilizing collectively to demand formal incorporation into municipal waste management systems, waste pickers are expanding both the public sector and the public sphere, transforming relations between the state, formal economy, informal economy, and residents, and contributing to the forging of a more inclusive, participatory, and democratic state. In Samson’s article (which gives the title to this session), the formal integration of waste pickers into the municipal waste management system in Belo Horizonte fundamentally transformed and democratized both the system itself and the way that the state relates to waste pickers and residents (Dias and Cidrin, 2008). The state has recognized that the new conceptualization of waste and waste management requires a new way of governing provision of the service. In Pune, India, we find the only reference associated with the struggle for public space, framed in a non-reformist vision of the *right to the city* within the topic of waste, came from a recent article by Chikarmane (2016): *Public space, public waste and right to the city*. She investigates the over 20-year history of Pune's waste pickers' struggle to become public services providers, to achieve recognition for their work and to assert their status as workers. Thus, they would build another model for their city where waste pickers are paid directly by residents and, most importantly, transforms the nature of the public service by forging new, respectful social relations between workers who provide services and residents who benefit from them (Samson, 2015).

The recent global platform for the *right to the city* (GPR2C) claims, for all inhabitants, present and future, permanent and temporary, the right to use, occupy, produce, govern, and enjoy fair, inclusive, sustainable, and secure cities, towns, and settlements — understood as common goods. Within this frame, we propose a new political perspective that involves restoring the sense of the city with the hope of a territorialized citizen mobilization that claims waste as a common good, and which seeks a decentralized *communalism* system that could make this possible.