



# From “cartoneros” to “recolectores urbanos”. The changing rhetoric and urban waste management policies in neoliberal Buenos Aires <sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the existent literature on neoliberal urban governance examining the process-based character of this formation. I maintain that neoliberal governance is a fluid and evolving formation which is continuously being constructed and reconstructed beneath a rhetorical veneer of inevitable emergence and permanence. In this context, this work examines the interconnections between neoliberal urban ascendancy, changing rhetoric and urban waste management policies, and waste pickers (*cartoneros*), in a case study setting, Buenos Aires. Since 2002, the neoliberal urban governance in Buenos Aires (its institutions, programs and policies) has mobilized different rhetoric and policies to negotiate the waste pickers' “disturbing” and “dirty” presence in the streets. In that process, the waste pickers, originally marginalized and stigmatized by the neoliberal discourse, have been regulated and disciplined into legal and “well behaved” workers. I would argue that, regulating this activity does not entail giving the waste pickers an opportunity to become central actors in the future of urban waste management in the city. Rather, it is compatible with the logic of the local neoliberal urban projects, focused on disciplining the city's physical and social landscape as new opportunities for growth and development continue to emerge.

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## 1. Introduction

Scholarly work in urban political economy has widely suggested that neoliberal urban governance is too complex and variegated to be considered a singular, monolithic formation, or that its implementation is so locally contingent that we cannot plausibly speak of one placeless, ideal-type of neoliberal governance (Brenner et al., 2010; Keil, 2002; Leitner et al., 2007a; McLeod, 2002; Mitchell, 2001; Peck and Tickell, 2007; Wilson and Wouters, 2003; Wilson, 2004, 2007). This group of scholars has argued that neoliberal urban governance is constituted in the richness of distinctive localities. In other words, the economic structure, political culture and history of a place determine to a large extent the specific forms that neoliberal urban governance takes “on the ground” (Mitchell, 2001; Keil, 2002; McLeod, 2002; Wilson, 2004, 2007). In addition, these studies contend, neoliberal urban governances are understood to evolve in relation to the kinds of contestation they confront (Leitner et al., 2007b). Very often, acts of contestation necessitate strategic governance responses crafted to the specificities of the contestation being confronted.

Specifically, neoliberal urban governances, driven by the goal to resuscitate the city as a site for capital accumulation and competitiveness, often negotiate cultural norms, identity configurations (for example, around ‘race’, ethnicity, and religion), existing elements of the built environment (e.g. public housing), and varying degrees of resistance and political mobilization that altogether shape the differential trajectories and outcomes of redevelopment projects. In short, these governances must remain adept to such varying local conditions to be able to implement redevelopment projects successfully.

This work examines the neoliberal governance in Buenos Aires drawing on Leitner's idea (2007) that this formation evolves and responds to the kinds of contestation it often confronts. Since its inception in 1996, Buenos Aires' neoliberal urban governance has met with significant social dilemmas: On the one hand, the government and the people of Buenos Aires have confronted dramatic increases in poverty, deprivation, and segregation since the 1990s with the onset of a neoliberal epoch (Ciccolella and Mignaqui, 2002; Cerrutti and Grimson, 2005; Peck, 2010). On the other, up-scaled and gentrified neighborhoods now flourish, particularly the traditional working-class neighborhoods of La Boca and San Telmo (see Herzer, 2008; Di Virgilio et al., 2008). In this context, I present a case of rhetorical and political strategies from Buenos Aires that illustrates the way neoliberal urban governance (i.e. institutions, programs and procedures) negotiates its fluctuating

<sup>☆</sup> The title was drawn from the work “De cartoneros a recolectores urbanos” (Reynals, 2003) cited in this manuscript.  
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dilemmas. I draw on the case of the *cartoneros*<sup>1</sup> (waste pickers) to examine the rhetoric and policies offered by neoliberal urban governance in Buenos Aires in response to a prevailing discourse about the *cartoneros*' "disturbing" presence.

The *cartoneros*, briefly stated, operate as just-in-time, mobile workers that publicly scavenge the domestic trash in the streets to collect recyclable materials (cardboard, copper, and glass are the most common ones) and sell them to middlepersons and firms that work with recyclable materials or later resell them. Waste pickers are continually exposed to health hazards, police harassment and price control of recyclable materials by middlepeople and firms. Despite the movement toward legalizing this type of activity in late 2002, Buenos Aires neoliberal urban governance, I argue, has successfully kept them off the streets without giving them a safer and proper role within the urban waste management system in Buenos Aires.

As I chronicle, neoliberal urban governance rhetoric and policies applied to recycling waste management, has shifted from stigmatizing the classified waste collection performed by the *cartoneros* to disciplining them and their work. The idea of disciplining and normalizing spaces, identities, and social forms refers to how neoliberal urban governance now commodifies the spaces for investment as well as sculpts human identities, a sense of prevailing social processes, and perceptions of urban ills and urban possibilities, to make them more acceptable to human sensibilities and engender a more business-oriented landscape (Wilson and Wouters, 2003).

I define neoliberal urban governance as constituted by more or less coherently formed ensembles of institutions (builders, developers, financial institutions, the local state) that unify around a common vision of city redevelopment and push to make this a reality. Such institutions work collectively to create planning agendas, bolster such plans through the usage of discursive formations, and implement redevelopment projects through tools and policies. I use the term neoliberal urban governance to identify the physical and social transformation of urban space in my case study city. I identify this as a central subset of neoliberal governance – it is its central manifestation in the realm of land and property restructuring.

Finally, underwriting this study is a cultural economy perspective. Doing cultural economy means acting on the assumption that economics do not merely operate in a cultural vacuum, but are performed and enacted through stocks of knowledge and discourses, which infuse it with form, coherence, and legitimacy (Wilson, 2004). In this study, a cultural economy perspective is key to critically examining the system of meanings and common understandings within discourses that neoliberal urban institutions deploy to build normalcy, legitimacy and justify their operations (cf. Weber, 2002; Wilson and Wouters, 2003). For example, before spaces, people and identities can be accepted as objects for restructuring they must be symbolically coded (e.g. lionized or stigmatized) through the use of common understandings, which demarcate them as villains, victims, salvationists, and ominous forces. Culture, in this sense, needs to be critically interrogated as mobilized, used, and put in the service of neoliberal urban governance. Culture is therefore internalized within the way governance actors, think, feel and act. In this sense, neoliberal urban governance work to cultivate some identities and spaces (e.g. "entrepreneurs"; "upscaled downtowns"), and eliminate others (e.g. "welfare families"; "dilapidated communities"). As I show

next, the changing rhetoric and policies applied to the *cartoneros* represent an adroit neoliberal governmental maneuver to discipline and organize the waste pickers' activity to engender a more middle class aesthetic landscape attractive for capital investment.

The narratives I present in this study are derived from document analysis given the large number and variety of newspaper articles, blogs, documents and studies published over the last 10 years to investigate the lives of *cartoneros*, and their relationship with the local government and its evolving character. These documents were assembled, coded, and analyzed to determine the changing policies and rhetoric of neoliberal urban governance in relation to the *cartoneros*' activity, and the public perceptions of urban ills and human sensibilities. Sources for document analysis include newspaper articles from Buenos Aires' major dailies, from 2000 to the present: *Clarín*, *La Nación*, *Página 12*, as well as local reports, websites, legislative documents, and scholarly work. I also conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with developers and residents to examine the evolving perception of *cartoneros*.

In what follows, I first briefly review the neoliberal urban governance trajectory in Buenos Aires, focusing on its ascendant redevelopment projects and dilemmas. Then, following a brief section on waste management literature and the emergence of the *cartoneros*, I chronicle the changing rhetoric and policies toward this new urban actor. After decades of neglect, these actors became publicly visible and imposed remarkable challenges-yet significant monetary savings as I comment later – to neoliberal urban governance goals and agendas. My objective is to recognize the complexity of these governance, the deft abilities of actors to read evolving city conditions, and these same actors' adroit capacity to respond to changing project specificities.

## 2. The ascendancy of Buenos Aires' neoliberal urban governance

Buenos Aires' neoliberal urban governance became sanctioned with the city's new autonomous political status in 1996.<sup>2</sup> Once the city was granted political autonomy with its own constitution, own budget, and with democratically elected executive and legislative powers, it established normative regulations and institutions to advance redevelopment projects. With the deregulation of the real-estate market in 1996 and favorable real-estate market prices compared to others in Latin America and abroad, this governance was primed to push and build an affluent, real-estate profitable city that would also be livable for its citizens.

To this end, the neoliberal urban agenda has strived to promote Buenos Aires as a "culturally-driven and socially integrated city" (Herzer, 2008).<sup>3</sup> This meant expanding aesthetic and cultural consumption policies and upgrading areas of the city considered "relegated" and "disinvested" (Crot, 2006) that would ultimately attract middle-class and foreign real-estate capital investment and socially integrate communities (La Nación, February 27, 2000). A former government official summarized this thematic:

*"...we believe that culture contributes to the social and economic development and this cannot be delayed. [In addition], the local government aspires to balance the north of the city with the more*

<sup>2</sup> Before 1996, the city's urban planning and development were guided by a national law, and its mayor was handpicked by the national executive. But since it became autonomous in 1996, as declared in its new constitution, citizens in Buenos Aires elect its own executive and legislative government in charge of designing new normative and planning strategies for the city (e.g., a new Urban Zoning and Planning Code that regulates the use of the land and zoning).

<sup>3</sup> Aside from the different political orientations, successive elected administrations, namely De La Rúa, Olivera, Ibarra, Ibarra, Telerman, Macri (first term), and currently Macri (second term) have worked with prominent realtors, builders and financial institutions to make this a reality. De La Rúa, former Federal Senator, became the first elected mayor of Buenos Aires following elections on June 30, 1996. He resigned in 1999 to become President of Argentina and was forced to resign in December 2001.

<sup>1</sup> The term *cartoneros*, comes from the word in Spanish "cartón" (cardboard), one of the materials they collect and recycle. I use the term waste pickers instead of waste collectors. The main difference lies in that the waste collected by 'waste collectors' is destined for landfills or final destinations, not to be recycled. See: <http://wiego.org/informal-economy/waste-pickers-networks>.

*deteriorated areas [of the south]. . . We want to diminish the structural unevenness of the city” (in Arenes, 2000).*

In 1998, two neighborhoods, La Boca and San Telmo became the first areas targeted for redevelopment and restructuring, considering their attractive urban attributes: proximity to the downtown area, available housing stock, relative low housing prices compared to other high-demand neighborhoods (Palermo, Barrio Norte, Caballito), and a considerable proportion of the population were renters (average of 35% in each neighborhood).

In Buenos Aires, this formation has relied on the following institutions to advance redevelopment: city government officials, prominent local real-estate capital, prominent local developers, builders and financial institutions, and especially professional corporations, public–private civic corporations, and academic institutions. Although as auxiliary players, the Argentine Chamber of Construction and the media, have been actively shaping planning agendas (*La Nación*, January 27, 2004). This coalition has systematically deployed public resources: physical infrastructure, zoning incentives, public land, and tax incentives to help create demand for the real-estate community to accommodate more affluent populations’ investment (see Herzer, 2008).

In short, in the course of 15 years, physical and cultural initiatives were advanced across the city, but predominantly in La Boca and San Telmo neighborhoods including: renewal of riverfront and highways infrastructure; restoration of promenades, buildings, facades, art galleries, and historical buildings; expansion of commercial and residential corridors with hotels, hostels, antiquaries, retail stores, and restaurants; and cultural and historical preservation initiatives. Equally important has been the clearing out of land and buildings for potential restructuring. People evicted from abandoned buildings have notably increased since 2003 (e.g. the eviction of the orphanage center, popularly known as PADELAI in 2003) and became pronounced in 2008 coinciding with the new business-oriented local administration under Macri (elected in 2007). A total of 253 evictions were registered in 2008 for the entire city, affecting 1700 families (Pizzi, 2008).<sup>4</sup>

But while physical transformation and cultural policies and programs were flourishing (except when the economic crisis of 2001 hit Argentina hard until mid-2002), they generated impacts that escalated over the years. By 2002, the city’s neoliberal urban governance had created an increasingly class-segregated city with 25% of the population registered as unemployed (Instituto de Estadísticas y Censos 2002-INDEC). This high level of unemployment was fueled by the economic effects of the 2001 crisis (Cerrutti and Grimson, 2005). Additionally, during the same year, an unprecedented 20% of the population (600,000 inhabitants) experienced deficient housing conditions in the city. Within these numbers, 100,000 people were living in abandoned buildings (INDEC, 2002). Despite the steep unemployment and deficient housing conditions and availability, redevelopment actions continued to proceed aggressively ahead to pave the way for the more affluent consumers and increase local governments’ revenues (see real-estate boom in 2003, in Herzer (2008)).

<sup>4</sup> Two policies were executed to facilitate the process of eviction and displacement of population. In 2008, a local law that used to prohibit evictions and displacements for occupying abandoned public buildings was repealed. This law was reinforced by transferring the crimes for occupying abandoned buildings from the federal judicial branch to the local one, which was apparently done to more rapidly to execute the evictions (*Clarín*, January 19, 2009). Due to these modifications, the evictions marched steadily and faster than 5 years ago (*Clarín*, January 18, 2009). Since the usurpation crimes got transferred to the local justice, the cases are resolved faster than when the cases were in the federal justice. To the City General Prosecution, out of 210 cases that entered in June 9th – when the transfer happened – 75% were resolved in a month and only 25% took more time (*Clarín*, September 13, 2008). The trials now last less than 30 days.

Yet, as neoliberal urban governance unfolded in Buenos Aires, it faced another ascendant social dilemma. The *cartoneros* (waste pickers) presence exploded in 2002 followed by the national economic crisis. Until early 2000 their work was considered illegal (see next section footnote) and they had been historically marginalized (formerly called “*cirujas*”, a derogatory term that refers to the people who scavenge garbage). In late 2002, neoliberal urban institutions legalized their work and cleverly re-envisioned this subject as functionally useful in a strategic way. In this sense, the normalizing of the *cartoneros* became a critical issue to be confronted by neoliberal urban governance. Two main events are related to this progressive shift that will be expanded in later sections: the socially noticeable emergence of the *cartoneros*, and an ascendant neoliberal rhetoric pushing to cultivate a more aesthetically and culturally lively city to fit the needs of a growing middle class aesthetic in terms of the urban landscape.

### 3. Non-regulated recycling, economic crisis and cartoneros

Non-regulated recycling has become a critical issue in the global South. The recycling of materials, as part of urban waste management systems, still lacks proper treatment and regulations in developing countries (Medina, 2005a). Scholarly work in anthropology, sociology, and urban planning has examined the life styles and survival strategies of the waste pickers, their self-organization, advocated for urban sustainable policies and better working conditions for them, and examined the relationship between waste pickers, local government and cooperative organizations (Crivellari et al., 2008; Gutberlet, 2008; Mirafab, 2004; Medina, 2005b; Paiva, 2008; Reynals, 2003; Schamber, 2009; Tufro and Sanjurjo, 2006; WIEGO, 2005). This literature sheds light on the importance of waste pickers as a non-recognized fundamental workforce in building a ‘sustainable city’, and the need to build better relationships between NGOs, cooperative organizations and local government in order to refine public policy oriented in this matter. Yet, these studies remain focused on providing public-policy and technical recommendations without examining the evolving nature of *cartoneros* and other more structural questions related to economic, political, and cultural forces that propagate these workers’ marginality and vulnerability.

Another body of literature has explored various themes in the geographies of waste including: waste infrastructures (Gallini, 2012); the conditions for discarding and disposing material (Gregson et al., 2007a, 2007b); global flows of waste (Sibilia, 2012); gender and local practices of waste (Corrigan, 2012); and disposal as a key component of practices of consumption (Gregson et al., 2005; Hetherington, 2004). Similarly, recent studies in geography have engaged with the role of waste as a fundamental category for organizing social space, and examine the connection between waste and marginalization of waste pickers (Whitson, 2011).

Yet, this scholarly work has not examined the recycling policy articulated with current and evolving neoliberal urban governance’s goals and agendas, i.e. the drive to discipline and control cultural forms, identities and physical spaces to make them acceptable, attractive and even sellable to capital investment. I argue that the waste workers’ activity posits both great challenges and material benefits to current neoliberal urban governance in Latin America and across developing countries. In other words, these governance deal with the increasing presence of new social actors amidst its goals to keep cities economically and aesthetically healthy in order to attract capital investment and be competitive (Harvey, 2006). At the same time, local governments are saving incredible expenses without contracting waste management companies to do the same work already performed by the *cartoneros* (WIEGO, 2005; Schamber, 2009).



Fig. 1. Work. Source: <http://www.pensamientopenal.com.ar/contra.php>.

Of particular concern in this study is Buenos Aires' neoliberal urban institutions that since 2002 began to change the waste management laws, and in particular to regulate the *cartoneros'* activity. I examine these initiatives within an ascendant neoliberal urban push to make Buenos Aires 'economically and aesthetically vibrant'.

Yet, the *cartoneros* are not new inhabitants in the landscape of Buenos Aires. Until the early 2000s, they were shadow figures in the city's streets, seen with handmade canvas carts or wooden carts that they or their horses pulled (see Paiva, 2008; Schamber, 2009 for a detailed description of this urban actor's daily trajectories). Until then they were called "cirujas" by the middle-class *porteños* (locals of Buenos Aires) who sporadically saw them in the city downtown and wealthy neighborhoods (Fig. 1).<sup>5</sup>

But from late 2001, the size of the *cartoneros* population exploded in the city of Buenos Aires and the metropolitan area as the national economic and institutional crisis<sup>6</sup> forced millions of people out of work. During the early months of 2002 the national economy plummeted. Rock (2002) reported that the Argentine gross domestic product (GDP) sank by 16.3% during this period, while manufacturing output plunged 20%. In 2002 about 44% of the country was living below the poverty line, and 17% in extreme poverty, with unemployment fueling this (The Gazette, 2004). Twenty percent were unemployed, while an additional 23% were underemployed.

<sup>5</sup> During the military dictatorship the local government and government officials from the Province of Buenos Aires reformed the city's waste management (see Schamber, 2009) which prohibited the incineration of waste and established that waste be buried in sanitary landfills. These laws also created the public-private state company State Society of the Coordination of the Metropolitan Ecological Area (Coordinación Ecológica Área Metropolitana Sociedad del Estado – CEAMSE), in charge of transporting the waste collected by private companies (contracted individually by the cities), interring this waste, and managing the sanitary landfills for the City of Buenos Aires and the surrounding metropolitan area. CEAMSE was to be paid by the ton for the amount of waste it interred and the cities were required by law to use its services (Prignano, 1998). As a result of this, the law prohibited any type of waste collection outside of that done by those companies contracted by the city. This included the *cartoneros'* informal waste collection. Successive local and national government administrations maintained this system of waste with very little modifications until the early 2000s. The laws that kept the waste management in status quo were enacted in 1977 and 1978: Provincial Law 9.111 and City Ordinance 33.581. With the end of the military dictatorship in 1983 there was a gradual public appearance of *cartoneros* on the landscape of Buenos Aires (Koebs, 2005). Yet, this gradual emergence was never compared to the one experienced in 2002 as a result of the national economic crisis.

<sup>6</sup> The national economic crisis or commonly referred to "the 2001 Argentine crisis" constituted an economic and political-institutional crisis experienced in Argentina in December 2001, as a result of increasing levels of unemployment, fiscal deficit, thousand of millions of dollars going offshore, and political governmental instability.

Thousands of factories were shuttered across Buenos Aires and the metropolitan area to force 10,000 into the *cartoneros'* class. In early 2002, they expanded to about 25,000 and over 40,000 later that year (Clarín, August 31, 2002). The growth in the number of *cartoneros* was one of the many ways the Argentines coped with the economic downturn. With nearly 50% of the country's population living below the poverty line, and the cash economy coming to an abrupt halt, alternatives to make ends meet included, the emergence of factories abandoned by owners and recovered by workers,<sup>7</sup> barter strategies, people setting up communal kitchens, and cultivating community organic farms (see Klein, 2007; North, 2007; Svampa, 2003).

In addition, the lack of policies and laws to regulate recycling activities left the waste pickers to organize and regulate themselves and develop survival strategies. In other words, to make a living collecting, sorting, recycling, and selling the valuable materials thrown away by others. In the context of the currency devaluation in 2001, local industries could no longer afford to import raw materials and finished products (Paiva, 2008). Because of this circumstance local firms started buying recyclable materials collected by the *cartoneros*. As a result, within a year, cardboard itself rose in value from 4 *centavos* (cents) per kilogram before the currency devaluation, to 50 *centavos* per kilogram in 2002 (Paiva, 2008: 95). In addition, the amount sold from six major recycling companies in Buenos Aires into formal industry increased 90% during the same period (CEDEM, 2002). Thus, by mid-2002 the *cartoneros* were seen as an "army of scavengers" in the relatively affluent neighborhoods and downtown Buenos Aires<sup>8</sup> where high levels of consumption and waste were registered.

#### 4. *Cartoneros*: "disturbing", "dirty", "invaders"

Each night the *cartoneros* sort through some of the city's 5000 daily tons of waste, picking out the paper, cardboard, metal, and glass in an effort to support themselves and their family. It is estimated that 70% of the *cartoneros* lived in the suburbs of Buenos Aires in 2006 (DGPRU, 2007) and every day they walked pulling out handmade carts or drove worn-out trucks towards downtown and wealthy neighborhoods in Buenos Aires to look for recyclables.<sup>9</sup>

Waste pickers' profits depend on the price the local firms, middlepeople and/or corporate mills establish for the materials. As the Director of the *Ente Regulador de Servicios Públicos* expressed, "While each *cartonero* receives [1,200] per month, each recycling firm makes about [72,000] pesos. This is part of a model of economic concentration that continues to operate" (in Clarín, August 31, 2002; the numbers included in parenthesis were updated since this quote dates from 2002). In sum, the *cartonero* receives, on average, 57 *centavos* per kg of cardboard, 1.20 per kg of paper and 1.10 per kg of plastic. Aluminum cans are valued at 3.50 and glass at 24 *centavos* per kg (La Nación, November 29, 2009). Altogether, according to the Buenos Aires Department of Environment, they recycle about 11% of the total city waste and under very unhealthy and risky conditions (La Nación, November 29, 2009).

But as this activity grew through the 2000s, it became a critical issue of concern to neoliberal urban institutions. Although progressive media, non-profit organizations and *cartoneros'* supporters

<sup>7</sup> See the movie "The Take" where groups of workers had taken over their former places of employment, occupying former factories, printshops, and hotels.

<sup>8</sup> Following Whitson (2011), I refer to the CBD and high-income residential areas in Palermo, Recoleta, San Nicolas, Puerto Madero, and Montserrat.

<sup>9</sup> When the White train was running (from 2002 to 2007) – it used to go from industrial rustbelts to the capital's wealthier districts to transport them and their recyclables – the *cartoneros* could transport 1310 carts on the train collecting about 104.5 tons of recyclables.

claimed that this population was struggling to survive daily and that it was a product of the economic recession that the local government had to assist (Koebs, 2005), neoliberal urban institutions (city officials, real-estate actors, developers and mainstream media) offered caricaturing renditions of the *cartoneros* as “disturbing”, “dirty”, “invaders” of the central city, a label that serves simultaneously as descriptor and stereotype.

At the core of this rendering of a problematic *cartoneros*' population were four processes. First, the *cartoneros* were seen as fringe workers that dabble in the world of refuse and trash. Here, picking through and classifying garbage in the streets is seen as unsettling to the social order, everyday tourism, and the conduct of business in Buenos Aires. In this sense, not only was waste found “out of place” (Cresswell, 1996) in the wealthy neighborhoods of Buenos Aires but those associated with waste – the *cartoneros* – were also “invading” the space of the central city, rather than staying in the province of Buenos Aires or at home.

A wealth of editorials denounced the “disturbing” and “dirty” presence of the *cartoneros*:

*“the cartoneros rip open thousands of trash bags each night, and this has created an unbearable level of filth”* (in *La Nación* December 3, 2002).

*“cartoneros have forsaken all care of the cleanliness of the city and have turned the city into a trashcan”* (in *La Nación*, October 17, 2002).

*“Plans, ideas, for a city that is suffering the worst moments of history, that is obliged to host hundred, thousands of cartoneros who make the city poor and dirty. A city that needs to squeeze their reserves so that 1,177,000 unemployed people of all the metropolitan area and more than thousands of indigents can at least eat once a day, which costs a lot of money”* (*La Nación*, August 27, 2002).

*“Nearly 30,000 cartoneros invade the city's neon-laced streets every night pushing handmade canvas carts, overturning garbage cans, strewing trash along the streets and collecting materials that they sell to recycling centers – each on average earning 10 to 15 pesos, about the cost of a large pizza”* (*Christian Science Monitor*, January 25, 2006).

Second, the *cartoneros* are perhaps the most visible sign of devestation facilitated by Argentina's worst-ever economic crisis that reached its peak in 2002. Very often, references to the trash on the street, filthy streets and *cartoneros*' presence, slid into conversations about the economic crisis and the state of the country as a whole. As one reporter put it: *“It was as if poverty had jumped out of the shanty towns and was rubbing shoulders like never before with the middle class”* (*Página12*, February 2, 2007).

Third, the *cartonero*'s phenomenon invoked fear and anxiety among many. Working at night, and usually in silence, the residents of Buenos Aires feared for their security as this “army of scavengers”, this ghostly and animal-like brood (Desjarlais, 1997) grew in direct proportion to the deepening of Argentina's economic plight (see Paiva, 2008: 101). The following quotes eloquently summarize this point:

*“Insecurity, darkness, high level of marginality, [...] cartoneros, squatters, prostitution, drugs, and low incomes are the critical points that the city should address”* (Editorial, *La Nación*, 30 July, 2003).

*“Cartoneros exacerbate the fears of the porteños and tourists...they are like animals rummaging the garbage ... I saw some of them stealing...”* (Interview to local resident, June 20, 2005).

Regarding this aspect, until after law 922 (which I discuss later) was passed, the *cartoneros* were permanently subjected to surveillance by the police force and ultimately harassed. Below are some excerpts where one *cartonero* refers to their vulnerability in the face of the police force: *“If we don't organize, we will all be pulled off the street,”* said Alberto Simini a former *cartonero* representing 800–1200 individuals working in the Belgrano neighborhood (*Washington Post*, April 6, 2003).

In the process, these stereotypes became widely accepted and understood as core truth and became a critical issue of concern for neoliberal urban institutions and citizenry as a whole. At the same time, as I discuss next, another force was emerging: the drive to upgrade formerly disinvested areas in the southern area of Buenos Aires. The more pronounced visibility and ascendant fear and anxieties, along with a push to upgrade disinvested areas in mid-2003, prompted neoliberal urban institutions to craft rhetoric and envision policies to normalize the *cartoneros*' visibility and organize their activity away from the street-scape and public visibility.

## 5. Envisioning a new place for the cartoneros?

Once the national economy slowly recovered in 2003, neoliberal urban institutions renovated their plans to upgrade formerly disinvested areas with the goal to make the city ‘culturally’ and ‘aesthetically vibrant’ and ‘socially integrated’. These plans included the restoration of facades, reparation of sidewalks, new infrastructure, and creation of historical heritage programs that started in 1998 as described earlier. In addition, the injection of revenues due to the significant influx of international tourism (a 45.2% increase in international tourism was registered in relation to 2002, according to the Department of Tourism in 2003) facilitated this process of intense urban renewal (Herzer, 2008).

In the midst of more favorable economic and financial conditions, along with the tourist revenues mentioned above, neoliberal urban institutions in Buenos Aires worked through the systems of meanings, anxieties and fears of the citizenry and envisioned policies to organize the *cartoneros*' activity, away from its public visibility while maintaining its goal of boosting a culturally-integrated city.

In this environment, in late 2002 the first mixed waste collection law, popularly known as the “*Cartoneros Law*”, (Law 922),<sup>10</sup> was passed in the city of Buenos Aires. This law enabled the creation of a mixed waste collection system that had two components: the ‘wet’ (non-recyclable) items were to be managed by private companies and divided into three zones (DGPRU, 2007), and the ‘dry’ (recyclable) focused on the selective collection of recycling materials were to be managed by the *cartoneros*. But more importantly, Law 922 enabled a new policy, which legalized the *cartoneros*' work. Prior to this law they were without any legal protection (see footnote, Section 3). This law also created the “*Dirección General de Políticas de Reciclado Urbano*” (Office of Urban Recycling Policy, or DGPRU) to manage the *cartoneros*' activities along with a *cartoneros* registry “*Registro Unico Obligatorio de Recuperadores Urbanos*” (Unique Permanent Urban Recyclable Collectors Registry). Its main objective was, once the *cartoneros* were registered, to provide them with identification cards, work clothes, gloves, and vaccines (Law 922). This registry also institutionalized their activity by switching their social identity of “*cartoneros*” to an official one, “*recuperadores urbanos*” (urban recuperators), more compatible with neoliberal principles of self-responsibility, self-sufficiency and industriousness, to be discussed shortly.

<sup>10</sup> This was the last version, with the different amendments included.

Although never fully implemented, in late 2005 the local legislature passed another law, commonly named the “Zero Waste Law” (Law 1854/05)<sup>11</sup> which provided guidelines to restructure the waste management system and mandated recycling at many levels (see Paiva, 2008). It also announced the creation of six “*centros verdes*” (resource recovery centers that were only meant to be used by cooperatives of *cartoneros* that began to organize in the mid 1990s in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires) where the recyclables could be separated and processed in these centers instead of on the street. These *centros verdes* were located in specific locations, away from the downtown wealthy city, and with considerable symbolic distance by local reckoning. Following Whitson (2011), this law was meant to give the waste pickers an opportunity to become fundamental actors in the future of urban waste management in the city. Yet, although it never operated in full and experienced many inconsistencies, this policy became a key element to progressively instill discipline and sanitize the *cartoneros*’ work and progressively push them off from the streets, as I examine below.

The *centros verdes* facilities were meant and designed for the *cartoneros* cooperatives to sort, store and process the materials away from the streets before selling them to recycling companies, middlepeople or local firms. However, contrary to their expectations, these facilities were not accessible to the majority of the *cartoneros* cooperatives<sup>12</sup> due to: (a) formal registration requirements, (b) the location of the centers, and (c) the requirement for special clothing. For a start, in order for the *cartoneros* to have access to these recovery centers, each individual (18 or older) had to register in the official Unique Permanent Urban Recyclable Collectors Registry, mentioned above. Since a great proportion of them lacked the skills to fill out paperwork, declaration of finances, and so forth (Reynals, 2003) they were indirectly excluded from registering. In addition, most of these facilities were located far away from the *cartoneros*’ recycling circuit (see Paiva, 2008; Schamber, 2009 for further details about this circuit) and few cooperatives could afford to buy trucks to transport the materials, thereby limiting access to the centers. Additionally, the *cartoneros* who could get through the rigors of institutional registration were mandated to use colorful work clothes and carry identification cards in order for citizens and police officers to identify them in the street as legal workers (Fig. 2). In the end, the cost and implication of the registry along with the inaccessibility of the recovery centers became deterrents to many of the *cartoneros* cooperatives as noted by one *cartonera*: “They [government officials] pretend to be generating a job that we already created and have been working on by ourselves as source of labor. This [policy] doesn’t work for me” (see cartonerosdoc.com website, last accessed, December 2010).

By 2007, only two of the projected six resource recovery centers became fully operational. Currently there are still only two green centers operating in Barracas neighborhood and the other in between Lugones Avenue and General Paz highway (buenosaires.gov.ar, last accessed February 2012). Nevertheless, it should be noted that some cooperatives like “El Ceibo” operating in Palermo neighborhood, have signed up to a covenant with the local government in 2002 whereby the cooperative daily collected recyclables of 53 tracts in the Palermo neighborhood in ex-



Fig. 2. New uniform and carts. Source: [http://www.elbarriopueyrredon.com.ar/principal/tapa\\_1024.shtml](http://www.elbarriopueyrredon.com.ar/principal/tapa_1024.shtml).

change for a warehouse provided by the local government (Paiva, 2008).

Finally, the local government established a new term for *cartoneros*, the “recuperadores urbanos” (urban recuperators) that coupled with the new uniforms and IDs, aimed to institutionalize and legitimize its activity (see Tufro and Sanjurjo, 2006). In addition, this new term runs contrary to the *cartoneros* descriptor, which to many, signifies a disturbing street scavenger collecting rubbish and rummaging through bins in high income residential areas, and a dependent citizen on neighbors charity or welfare. Drawing on Foucault’s concept of governmentality (1991) I argue that this new name also helps constitute a new identity: a dignified worker and self-sufficient citizen, who responds to the neoliberal principles of self-responsibility and self-industriousness. In this context, neoliberalism can be understood as a form of governmentality (Foucault, 1991) whereby the ways in which relations among and between peoples and things might be imagined, assembled, and translated, to effect political management at a distance (Larner, 2000). Both the economy and the state are involved in the construction of something essential to a society: autonomous, responsabilized ‘neo-liberal subjects’ (Rose, 1996). Neoliberal governmentality then, through privatization and personalization, aims at transforming recipients of welfare and social insurance into entrepreneurial subjects, who should be disciplined to become responsible for themselves. According to Ward and England (2007), such a project of transformation may be based either on a social work model of helping, training, and empowering, or on a police model of governing every aspect of life.

In short, regardless of the ineffective attempt to ease the strenuous daily work performed by the *cartoneros*, these policies envisioned a new “disciplined” *cartoneros*. As discussed earlier, these policies included formal registration, new clothing, a new name, and a new place for their activity (*centros verdes*) without any substantial recognition for their arduous work (for example, in the form of contracts to provide waste management services to the city and secured social services like medicare). These policies also strived to organize the concentration of the “disturbing” *cartoneros* away from the streets. Ultimately, the purpose of these initiatives was to make them controlled, clean, and well behaved citizens, while the local government could keep a marginal worker pool who could efficiently recycle, and save considerable expenses. Notably, the government avoided contracting a private waste

<sup>11</sup> Following models of “zero waste” legislation in Western Australia and San Francisco, this law requires that “the quantity of waste sent to the landfills be reduced by 50% in 2012, and 75% in 2017 in comparison with 2004 levels” (Whitson, 2011: 1409).

<sup>12</sup> According to Paiva (2008) about 13 cooperatives started to recycle in the mid 1990s, but became consolidated in the early 2000s, namely: El Ceibo, Reconquista, El Orejano, Renaser, Nuevos Rumbos, Alicia Moreau de Justo, Reciclado Sur, Villa Malaver, Caminito, Orgullo Cartonero, CARPAMET, Cooperativa del Oeste, Sur. With the exception of El Ceibo that operates in the wealthy neighborhood of Palermo, the rest of the cooperatives develop their activities across the Metropolitan City of Buenos Aires.



Fig. 3. Containers. Photograph taken by the author.

management provider to do and transport the recycling, which it is estimated saves the local government 2.5 million pesos per day (Quiroga, 2011). As the following reporter expressed:

*“The government, (...) has recognized the economic and environmental benefits of informal recycling- huge savings on garbage collection and a 25 percent reduction of the city’s solid waste going to landfills”* (Christian Science Monitor, January 25, 2006).

Other waste management policies later refined and updated the Zero Waste Law but focused mostly on the role of waste rather than on improving the working conditions of the waste pickers (see Whitson, 2011 for a detailed discussion on the role of waste and its consequences in reinforcing the *cartoneros*’ marginality). In April 2007, in accordance with the Zero Waste Law, Telerman, at that time Mayor of Buenos Aires, instituted a system of “differentiated containerization” (Fig. 3). Under this system, over 10,000 waste receptacles with separate containers for “wet” and “dry” items were placed on corners in residential areas to collect domestic waste. Waste collection companies were then required to institute differential collection and processing of this separated material. Accompanying this policy and continuing with the drive to discipline their work, neoliberal urban institutions offered a strategic and “hygienic” rhetoric. This differentiated containerization was, according to the city Mayor, an attempt to:

*“diminish the impact of the activity of the cartoneros in the public streets, which are more and more disorderly all the time, in order to improve the quality of the environment and allow the neighbors to enjoy the spaces that belong to everyone”* (La Nación, March 2, 2007).

In this context, the program of double containerization envisioned a solution to the supposedly disorder that waste was creating on the streets. Yet, in addition to creating a new place for waste, this system also strived to push the *cartoneros* away from the streets, in line with continuous efforts to upgrade urban landscapes for more affluent consumers. Notably, while the city argued that their initiative to remove the *cartoneros* from the city streets was based on urban hygiene concerns, the *cartoneros* counteracted this argument stating that:

*“we cannot tolerate that the city says that the environmental problems of the city are due to some cartonero tearing open bags of trash, when we recuperate and recycle 15% of the 5,000 tons of waste generated by the city daily”* (Clarín, January 19, 2007).

## 6. Contestation, changing rhetoric, ongoing negotiations

In early 2008, under the new local administration of Mauricio Macri who won the Mayoral elections in 2007, an eviction renewed concerns about the waste collectors’ visibility in the streets. In February 22, 2008, a group of the *cartoneros* was violently attacked, evicted, and two of them were imprisoned by the federal police (Clarín, February 24, 2008). To the city government, the eviction was ordered to prevent these workers from living in hazardous sections of the city (at that time a group of *cartoneros* was occupying areas at the margins of a railway station in one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Buenos Aires, Belgrano). The next day, the eviction was repudiated by mainstream local media, non-profit organizations, and by local officials, as the following quote illustrates:

*“Nothing could be resolved with bulldozers. Macri [the city Mayor] has to find a solution so the cartoneros can work”* (speech pronounced by a local representative of the Legislative Chamber of Buenos Aires in Clarín, February 23, 2008).

Even after the situation quieted down, the once “disturbing” and “invading” presence of the *cartoneros* became a contested terrain for neoliberal urban institutions to strategically elaborate new rhetoric. It contorted to re-envision *cartoneros* as more humane and a structural outcome of the national economic crisis. Passages like the following were now frequently deployed in the media:

*“Cartoneros are part of a history that cannot be neglected. They were born, or perhaps multiplied, under the depth of the devaluation crisis, and [they] settled in on the streets as a symptom of misery and hunger... Their carts [the cartoneros’ carts] annoy some, but they [the carts] are a means to bring food to their homes. You cannot get rid of them without honest and useful solutions”* (Clarín, July 12, 2010).

*“These are good, decent people who are doing this to survive the crisis... We understand the work that the cartoneros are doing, so we want to help them... These people were hard hit by the crisis, left out in poverty... new [local] policies should improve the work they’re doing”* (Interview with local resident, 20 December 2009).

Despite this impromptu humane rhetoric, the new recycling policies continued focusing on pushing the *cartoneros* out of the streets, in line with a continuous redevelopment policy to clear out land for potential restructuring. In fact, in 2008, Mauricio Macri’s administration was accused by the media for increasing the number of displacements and housing evictions without proper legal procedures, in the context of a decreasing stock of affordable housing (see Section 2). For many, the alternative more “humane” portrayal of *cartoneros*, despite its progressive acceptance, has failed precisely because of these lingering conceptions of *cartoneros* as “disturbing”, “dirty”, and “invasive” as discussed earlier.

As one local developer recounted: “There are, you know... too many people scavenging through the garbage in this city... Buenos Aires needs to be cleaner (interview December 20, 2009). An editorial commentary reinforced this theme: “ (...) they [the cartoneros] make the street dirty, obstruct the traffic and appropriate the public space” (in La Nación, June 2, 2009).

Currently, ongoing negotiations and rhetorical maneuvers surrounding the place of *cartoneros* in the city of Buenos Aires suggest that, fundamentally, neoliberal urban governance continues disciplining the city’s social and physical landscape to cultivate a more aesthetically and culturally lively city that fits the needs of a middle class aesthetic landscape while keeping

intact a marginal worker pool with minimal local government expense, namely: identification cards, work clothes, gloves and two *centros verdes*. Finally, the path to regulate the *cartoneros* was not necessarily an anticipated and determined policy, rather it meant that neoliberal urban governance continues to craft meanings and ideologies, help normalize them, and sculpt the likes of human sensibilities, as new opportunities for growth and development keep arising.

## 7. Concluding remarks

This study has revealed two critical points that contribute to the study of neoliberal urban governance. First, contemporary neoliberal urban governance in Buenos Aires is fluid and adaptive. The changing rhetoric and policies implemented towards the *cartoneros* illustrate the complexity of this governance, the deft abilities to read evolving city conditions, and the responsive capacity to changing project specificities, in other words, shifting political agendas and new opportunities for growth and development. As chronicled, neoliberal urban rhetoric and policies shifted from marginalizing the *cartoneros* to disciplining and regulating them in pursuit of stimulating a more middle class aesthetic urban landscape and drastically reduce governmental expense in this matter. To this end, neoliberal urban governance in Buenos Aires opted to sanitize them, organize their work space, and reinforce self-industriousness to this group of workers through the following initiatives: (a) introducing resource recovery centers (*centros verdes*) avoiding the concentration and visibility of the *cartoneros* in the streets; (b) institutionalizing them through a registering process, and providing them with IDs and clothing for identification purposes; and (c) providing them with a new name: “*recuperadores urbanos*”.

Second, this study examines waste collection management practices and actors in direct relationship with current and evolving neoliberal urban governance's goals and agendas. These governance deal with the increasing presence of new social actors and practices amidst its goals to keep cities economically and aesthetically ‘healthy’ in order to attract capital investment and be competitive. Until now scholarly work in sociology, anthropology and urban planning, have remained focused on providing public-policy and technical recommendations without examining the evolving nature of *cartoneros* and economic, political, and cultural forces that propagate these workers' marginality and vulnerability.

Ultimately, Law 922 and the Zero Waste Law, along with the later refinements, became critical manifestations of how this governance operates in Buenos Aires. At issue, is the lack of social benefits to the waste pickers in the form of secured social care and contracts to provide waste management services (WIEGO, 2005), along with their social recognition as a fundamental workforce in urban waste management (there have been minimum advances towards contributing to the improvements of their social and economic life).

Finally, there are other possible readings on the neoliberal disciplining of the *cartoneros* that focus on a humane alternative to the *cartoneros* (see Paiva, 2008; Whitson, 2011). Yet, I suggest that to regulate this activity is compatible with the logic of the local neoliberal urban projects, focused on disciplining the city's physical and social landscape as new opportunities for growth and development continue to emerge. Never fully articulating these motives and driving factors, this form of governance continues to potently apply rhetoric to advance a multi-faceted political-economic agenda. At this moment, tens of thousands in Buenos Aires are suffering from the consequences of the effects of this regime. Its contradictions are apparent, but at this juncture they remain controlled and contained.

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