



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



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 11 October 2010

Received in revised form 24 April 2013

Available online 28 May 2013

### Keywords:

Neoliberal urban governance  
Urban waste management  
Informal economy  
Cartoneros  
Urban recuperators  
Buenos Aires

## 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 governance is 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 governance, 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 governance 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>.

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