

Parizeau, K. (2015). "Re-representing the city: Waste and public space in Buenos Aires, Argentina in the late 2000s," *Environment and Planning A*, 47(2), pp. 284-299. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1068/a130094p>

Abstract

This paper investigates a moment of shift in urban neoliberal governance strategies under the purview of a new municipal Chief of Government of Buenos Aires at the end of the 2000s: the introduction of a regime of public space that has had implications for the waste management sector (and particularly informal recyclers or *cartoneros*). I document government attempts to re-represent the city as a modern, hygienic centre that is receptive to investment and tourism, drawing on discursive framings of public space that seek to redefine legitimate users and uses of the city. Such framings are exclusionary of *cartoneros* and other marginalized urbanites. As with most forms of actually existing neoliberalism, this regime is contradictory and unstable, both containing and provoking challenges to its coherence. This case study of “actually existing neoliberalism” in Buenos Aires encourages analytical focus on moments of shift and renewal in urban processes of neoliberalization. In this case, the shift marked by the introduction of the regime of public space reveals the priorities and agendas of urban elites as championed by municipal governments, makes visible the paradoxes and contradictions inherent to neoliberal urbanisms, and also exposes openings for resistance, opposition, and renegotiation of urban neoliberal agendas (including protest, discursive re-framings of the city and its uses, and the forging of indeterminate alliances).

Key words

Neoliberal urbanisms, public space, Buenos Aires, Argentina, informal recycling, waste management

1) Introduction

In 2008, the municipal government of Buenos Aires, Argentina estimated that approximately 5,000 informal recyclers (*cartoneros*) worked in the city (Gutman, 2008a). Informal recyclers search through curbside trash to find recyclable and reusable materials for resale. The highest density of *cartoneros* can be found in commercial areas of the city and in higher-income residential neighbourhoods. Commonly collected materials include cardboard, paper, metals, plastics, glass, and e-waste. *Cartoneros* may also collect household goods, clothes, food, and construction materials for reuse. *Cartoneros* often work 5-6 nights per week opening trash bags and collecting materials that have been set aside for them by conscientious residents and “clients” (usually shopkeepers and doormen who save recyclable materials for a particular *cartonero* who is known to them). Most *cartoneros* live outside of the city boundaries in less affluent parts of the Greater Buenos Aires region¹, and commute into the city to work. Those who do live in the city tend to live in low-income communities. The experience of *cartoneros* is therefore one of urban inequality: informal recyclers make their living from the rich contents of others’ waste, and although they provide a public service of waste diversion, they are not well remunerated and tend to live in less affluent areas of the city.

Informal recycling is important work in Buenos Aires: it provides materials for domestic and international manufacturing processes, it reduces the amount of waste sent for final disposal by approximately 11% (Pardo et al, 2007), and it has allowed individuals to create their own livelihoods in times of financial strain, and notably in the years following the Argentine economic crisis of 2001-2. The financial crisis was precipitated by the implementation of various neoliberal economic strategies and political interventions from the mid-1970s onward (Gallo et al, 2006;

¹ The Autonomous City of Buenos Aires is a federal district located within (but jurisdictionally separated from) the province of Buenos Aires.

Ranis, 2004; Schamis, 2002). This worst financial crisis in Argentine history revealed the failure of neoliberal macro-economic models to both the leadership and the citizenry, although these strategies had already left their mark on the socio-political landscape of the country. The crisis precipitated a time of great social upheaval that destabilized large segments of the population. Middle-class and low-income groups alike experienced unemployment and the increasing informalization of their work (Whitson, 2007). Large-scale protests proliferated in Buenos Aires (such as *cacerolazos* – pot-banging protests largely organized by middle-class actors, *piquetes* – roadblocks organized by the unemployed, and *escraches* – graffiti protests), and *clubes de trueque* (barter clubs) became important alternative sites for exchanging goods and services for those who had been economically disenfranchised by the crisis (Villalón, 2007). Overall, this was a time of insecurity and instability, and informal recycling became an important economic coping mechanism for many who had been impacted by the crisis. This work was initially tolerated and eventually legalized in recognition of the dire financial need that led to its prominence. However, public sympathy for *cartoneros* waned during the years of economic recovery in the mid-2000s, and perceptions of informal recycling work shifted, as described by a local newspaper article: “This is a legal job, but is carried out in a way that affects the care of public space at many points in the city. Because of this a policy is needed to relocate these activities and recover the places currently occupied” (Clarín staff, 2008a).

This paper investigates neoliberal urbanism as a driving force of inequality in Buenos Aires, as observed through a study of informal recycling practice. This is public work that is carried out on the city streets; it is emblematic of poverty and social exclusion, and is stigmatized for its association with waste. For these reasons, the governance of informal recycling practice has long been connected to discourses of modernity, economic progress, and the legitimate uses of public

space (Sternberg, 2013; Tufro and Sanjurjo 2011; Whitson 2011). The following analysis details how the election of a new Chief of Government in 2007 (Mauricio Macri – a businessperson renowned for his hard right politics) represented a moment of renewal of the urban neoliberal agenda, with a shift in focus to the disciplining of public space through the particular targeting of informal recycling work.

The field research for this study was carried out between 2007 and 2011. I made three trips to Buenos Aires over this time, and conducted an on-going series of key informant interviews with government workers, local academics, *cartonero* cooperatives, NGOs, and community organizers. With the assistance of four local research assistants, I conducted a survey of *cartoneros* (n = 397) in 2007, and two sets of follow-up interviews with these workers in 2007 (n = 30) and 2011 (n = 17). All direct *cartonero* quotes below resulted from the 2007 interviews, although the 2011 interviews have also informed the following analysis. I also conducted an analysis of newspaper articles referencing informal recycling in Argentina's two leading newspapers (*Clarín* and *La Nación*) over the duration of the fieldwork.

Following is an introduction to the analytical framework for this research based in the concept of actually existing neoliberalisms. Subsequent is a description of the case study of Buenos Aires, with particular attention to the neoliberalization of both the waste management system and public spaces in the city. I then describe a recent moment of shift and renewal in Buenos Aires' urban neoliberalization: the rollout of a regime of public space under then newly-elected Chief of Government Mauricio Macri in 2007-8. I give three examples of the ways that this regime precipitated resistance to, and renegotiations of, local urban neoliberalisms, and end with a discussion of the analytical observations enabled by a focus on creatively-destructive moments of shift in place-based neoliberal urbanisms.

2) Analytical framework: Actually existing neoliberalisms

Brenner et al (2009) implicate the rise of global capitalism and neoliberal policy interventions as major forces in the transformation of urban environments, the uneven production of space, and increased experiences of urban exclusion. Neoliberal urbanism is a collection of creatively-destructive practices that serve to justify the retrenchment and privatization of state services, while also re-focusing global economic competitiveness to the city scale (although neoliberal urbanism in effect remains a multi-scalar phenomenon). Peck et al (2009) purport that the goal of neoliberal urban policy is “to mobilize city space as an arena for both market-oriented economic growth and for elite consumption practices, while at the same time securing order and control amongst marginalized populations.” (p.58). Theodore et al (2011) emphasize that urban neoliberal practices are contextually embedded in local institutions and practices, and so the actually existing forms of neoliberal urbanism vary from place to place. These processes articulate locally with economic, social, cultural, political, and environmental realities. Cities can also be important sites of resistance to neoliberal urbanism, and so neoliberalization does not usually roll out evenly over urban environments (Peck et al, 2009).

Despite the increasing prevalence of neoliberal urban policies and practices, such approaches are neither monolithic nor stable. Neoliberal urbanisms are churning, dynamic, and unstable processes (Peck et al, 2009); they do not represent a cohesive ideological project, but rather a set of opportunistic strategies championed by urban elites and corporate interests. Peck et al (2013) position neoliberalizing cities in “an always mutating and unevenly developed landscape of regulatory reform, experimentation, circulation, failure, (re)consolidation and crisis” (p.1093). Moments of renewal and reinvention of neoliberal urbanisms can provide insight to the churning negotiations of interests and priorities that come to form urban agendas. In particular, I argue that

academic attention to these creative-destructive moments can reveal shifts between different tenors of neoliberal rhetoric and approaches to neoliberal urbanism, expose tensions and paradoxes inherent to place-based neoliberal urbanisms, and enable an analysis of the openings for resistance to, and renegotiations of, local neoliberal agendas.

The shift in urban neoliberalization described in the following analysis is discursive at its core, and is centred on a strategy of re-representing the city (Brenner and Theodore, 2002) as a modern orderly space conducive to investment and tourism. Jessop (2002) argues that neoliberalism depends on new discourses and representations of the world in order to “establish the legitimacy of the market economy, the disciplinary state, and enterprise culture” (p.467). Because the emergent discourse in Buenos Aires is centred on a redefinition of public space and its uses, an important discursive response expressed by *cartoneros* and their supporters similarly engages with definitions of legitimate users and uses of space. The work of scholars investigating rights to the city is instructive in interpreting these expressions of legitimacy in the urban sphere. The right to the city, described by Lefebvre (1968) as the right to participate in the production of space, is “like a cry and a demand... a transformed and renewed right to urban life” (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 158). Writings on rights to the city tend to focus on the double movement of claims of belonging to urban spaces and active participation in place-making. The invocation of rights to the city is a call for the transformation of current structures of urban democratic citizenship (Purcell, 2002). These rights pertain to claims to the resources that the urban environment provides (such as housing, food, health services, education, work, transportation, and in this case, waste), as well as claims to inhabit and be present in the spaces of the city (regardless of whether one is a formal resident of the city). Expressions of rights to the city, protests, and other attempts of marginalized urbanites to be incorporated in municipal decision-making can be understood as a kind of

“insurgent citizenship:” a means for disenfranchised urbanites to demonstrate the hypocrisy of neoliberalism, and to hold city officials accountable for their civic responsibilities to all city inhabitants (Miraftab and Wills, 2005; see Holston, 1995 for the genesis of this concept). The very presence of marginalized and disenfranchised urbanites in the neoliberal city can be understood as an act of defiance and interruption.

However, not all disruptions or renegotiations of neoliberal urban agendas are ultimately subversive or interrupting. In an analysis of the complexity of neoliberalism and its inherent contradictions, Mansfield (2007) draws attention to the ways that interventions can prove to be “neoliberalism, social justice, both, or neither,” all in the same moment (p.479). For example, actors who insert themselves into municipal decision-making processes in order to effect change may find their interests incorporated into (or co-opted by) broader neoliberal agendas. Such ambiguity highlights the necessity for place-based analyses of actually existing neoliberalism that detail the context of the neoliberalization of the urban sphere, as well as the interests of the actors involved in these processes. Thus, this analysis proceeds by detailing the place-specific evolution of neoliberal urbanism in Buenos Aires, Argentina in order to reveal some of its forms, effects, detractors, and inherent contradictions.

3) Urban neoliberalizations of waste and space in Buenos Aires, Argentina

a) Neoliberalization of the waste management system in Buenos Aires

In 1977, an ecological coordinating body (CEAMSE) ushered in a host of ordinances meant to create a modern waste management system in Buenos Aires, including regulations mandating the final disposal of all waste in sanitary landfills, prohibiting public dumping of wastes, and banning informal collection of materials from the waste stream (Schamber and Suárez, 2007). Garbage could only be entrusted to official waste management actors, thereby creating the legal

enclosure of waste and any resources it might contain. This moment of enclosing the waste stream and institutionalizing waste management practices had many effects, including improved urban hygiene, increased bureaucratic involvement in municipal environmental service provision, and the creation of a new font of capitalist profit through the waste concessionaire system. Waste contracts were organized on a tonnage basis in order to provide concessionaires with an economic incentive for effective and comprehensive waste collection services: the more waste a concessionaire collected, the more they would be paid by the city. The first waste collection contract went to tender in 1979, and the winning company was MANLIBA (an enterprise led by Mauricio Macri's father; Sánchez, 2009). As early as 1991, 99% of the city had waste collection services, 70% of which were provided by two waste concessionaire companies, with the remainder provided by the municipal government. Some clandestine informal waste recovery work continued in the city streets during this time, although this extra-legal work was quite precarious (Schamber and Suárez, 2007). Tufro and Sanjurjo (2011) detail the negative portrayal of *carotneros* in local media in the early 2000s, focusing on the discursive framing of these unwelcome urbanites as invading and dirtying public spaces, interrupting the lives of middle class residents, and the functioning of the city and its services.

A number of factors led to the eventual legalization of informal recycling in 2002, including government recognition of the economic necessity of this work in the post-crisis environment, increasing public support for these informal workers in a time of widespread economic hardship, and an increased organizational capacity among *cartoneros* (Koehs, 2007). In these post-crisis days, the municipal government of Chief of Government Ibarra worked to regulate informal recycling through the creation of a new identity for *cartoneros*: that of the “urban recuperator,” who – according to definitions set down in municipal law – is an important social

actor who provides environmental benefit to the city (Sternberg 2013, Tufro and Sanjurjo, 2011). Legalization represented a municipal attempt to positively frame the work of *cartoneros* and to provide them with resources (including infrastructural support for some cooperatives' recycling activities).

Despite this institutional support, Chronopoulos (2006) notes that the mass entry of thousands of *cartoneros* into Buenos Aires' city streets after the crisis continued to cause debates about uses and definitions of public space. *Cartoneros* could now legally access material resources in the waste stream, although they were encouraged to register themselves with the local government in an attempt to provide some legitimacy to their work (and arguably to create knowable, disciplinable subjects). In a sense, legalization recreated an accessible commons from curbside waste. This reversal of the previous enclosure threatened the commodity status of waste that private concessionaires had come to profit from. If anyone could take from the waste stream (and *cartoneros* were taking in large measure), the private waste management companies would lose tonnage and thus earn less money through their government contracts.

These companies therefore successfully lobbied for an overhaul of the contract system. In 2005, a "clean zone" system of payment was introduced, whereby companies were paid for successfully servicing a city area, rather than paid directly for the amount of waste they collected. Under this new system, waste was construed as a "negative good" (Thompson, 1998) implying economic and social value in its removal or its absence (which is essentially the provision of a service), rather than an exchange of money for the transfer of a priced commodity. The change to a "clean zone" system involved the financial renegotiation of concessionaires' waste collection contracts, and hefty increases in the amounts of money paid to waste concessionaires (Anguita, 2007). In 2008, the private collection system run by concessionaires in five zones of the

city cost 60% more per block than the collection services run by the municipality in the sixth zone (Gutman, 2008a). A series of renegotiations between the concessionaires and the municipality after the initial awarding of “clean zone” contracts led to an annual bill of \$700 million pesos (\$233 million USD) for private waste collection services in 2008, and further increased to \$1,000 million pesos (\$333 million USD) in 2009 (Sánchez, 2009). *Cartoneros*’ earnings (with a median value of \$7.78 USD per day) were paltry when compared to these ballooning payments made to the city’s waste concessionaires.

Although changes to the waste management system in post-crisis Buenos Aires were ostensibly made to benefit informal recyclers and improve their ability to provide for themselves, it appears that the renegotiation of concessionaire contracts that accompanied these changes created greater social inequality by further entrenching private profit for public service provision in the city. In this instance, actually existing neoliberalism paradoxically provided a commons of publicly available recyclable materials while simultaneously ensconcing the private accumulation of profit via government contracts.

b) Re-representing the city: neoliberalization of public space in Buenos Aires

The neoliberalization of public space in Buenos Aires is not a new phenomenon. From the 1980s to the early 2000s, neoliberal economic strategies and urban development policies led to increasing urban inequality in Buenos Aires: a rise in privatized spaces of luxury consumption (e.g. shopping malls and upscale private transit lines), an increase in gated communities, and the retrenchment of public access to parks, beaches, and historical sites (Auyero, 2000; Centner, 2007; Guano 2002). Saraví’s (2004) study of the fragmentation of social spaces in urban Buenos Aires observes that the city streets have become one of the only accessible urban spaces for the poor and

for youth, especially as middle- and upper-class city residents have retreated from the public sphere into malls, gated communities and private schools. The effect of this increasing social and physical segmentation in Buenos Aires (also described by Pérez, 2002; Prévôt Schapira, 2001; and Torres, 2001) is a type of fragmented urbanism that is becoming more common in Argentina and across Latin America more broadly (Borsdorf and Hidalgo, 2009; Janoschka, 2002), and that relegates the civic life of low-income residents to a limited area of city streets and public spaces. Many of these strategies and interventions can be described as enclosures of public space that limit the extent of the city that marginalized urbanites are able to access.

The specific context of Buenos Aires' historical and social landscapes has greatly influenced the ways that these urban neoliberal strategies have been deployed by different actors in the urban sphere. For example, Centner (2009) highlights the ways that sustainability planning discourses were mobilized to facilitate neoliberal urban development in the redevelopment of two Buenos Aires' neighbourhoods. Centner (2012) also details how the legacy of Argentine neoliberalism includes fractured forms of belonging in different neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires, effectively leading to microcitizenships that differentially define individuals' relationships with public spaces, urban services, local government, and fellow residents of the city. Strain (2010) and Guano (2003) have observed that middle-class white protectionism has also influenced the rhetoric and practice of urban redevelopment in Buenos Aires, and at times these racialized identities are mobilized to resist neoliberal urban change.

The election of Chief of Government Mauricio Macri in 2007 signaled the introduction of new form of exclusive urban neoliberalism to the Buenos Aires context: a regime of public space that sought to position the city as a modern global centre by way of redefining the legitimate uses and users of its public spaces. This shift has had implications for the lives and work of *cartoneros*,

and has changed their relationship with spaces of the city. Before his ultimate election, Macri had previously campaigned unsuccessfully for the top municipal position on a platform of removing the *cartoneros* from Buenos Aires. His stance was articulated by a local newspaper:

According to the businessman Mauricio Macri... the City of Buenos Aires is inundated with thousands of criminals who “steal from the trash” that people put out on the sidewalk. “We are going to take them off the streets,” promised the candidate, in reference to the *cartoneros*... He also threatened to “put in prison” those who do not submit to his policy of “urban hygiene.” (Página 12 staff, 2002)

It is likely that Macri’s familial connection to waste concessionaire companies influenced his above-stated antipathy for *cartoneros* during the years before the “clean zone” system of waste management contracts. While Macri’s official position vis-à-vis the city’s *cartoneros* was much less strident during his subsequent successful election campaign (possibly due to poor voter response to his earlier statements), his political statements and actions upon election continued to frame *cartoneros* as unhygienic, as drains on the public good, and as illegitimate figures in the public sphere.

Macri’s new agenda for public space was articulated by the conservative newspaper La Nación near the beginning of his administration:

...one of the promises he [Macri] made on assuming [the role of Chief of Government]: he committed himself to taking care of public space and ordering the chaos in the streets. (Cronenbold, 2008)

The municipal Ministry of Environment and Public Space was provided with \$1660 million pesos (approximately \$533 million USD) for “recovery” and maintenance work in the public sphere upon Macri’s election (Cornejo, 2007). These funds were mostly directed toward repairs of

city sidewalks, repaving of large avenues, tree pruning, the creation and repair of green spaces and city parks, and the regeneration of high profile city spaces that had been “degraded.” The stated intention of the reclamation works was as follows:

The [urban] reclamation works are sustainable over time and modernize the city, preserving its architectural heritage. The objective of this program is that areas of intervention become accessible places where neighbours want to be to enjoy their use. (Ministry of Environment and Public Space, 2009)

The redevelopment of the city was therefore meant to invite legitimate users (“neighbours,” in this case) to occupy modernized, yet historically distinctive, areas of the city. The concentration of these investments in high-profile, affluent, and heavily-touristed areas suggests additional motives for the redevelopment of the public sphere: the attraction of tourists, catering to the residential concerns of affluent voters, and the facilitation of the entry of global capital into the spaces of the city.

Macri’s neoliberal regime of public space also sought to redefine the legitimate uses and users of public spaces. In February 2008, a corps of “plaza guardians” (*guardianes de plaza*) was created with some of the following responsibilities: “Guide neighbours to make good use of and enjoy the greenery... Educate about the basic rules of coexistence in public space...Order an immediate halt to prohibited activities and take notes of contraventions” (Ministry of Environment and Public Space, 2009). The message inherent in this program is that residents need to be guided on the proper uses of public space, surveilled to ensure their compliance, and disciplined when their actions do not align with *macrismo*’s definition of the legitimate uses of public space.

Macri’s government has closely associated *cartoneros* with disorder in public spaces. For example, a newspaper investigation of the ruinous state of public plazas reports that the

Subsecretary of Public Space “admitted that the presence of *cartoneros* and people who live in plazas affects the state of green spaces” (Clarín staff, 2008b). When understood as markers of economic hardship and chaos in the urban environment, *cartoneros* could be seen as a threat to the image of Buenos Aires as a thriving, modern city. Shortly after Macri’s ascension, the municipal government removed *cartonero* settlements from the spaces below underpasses (Clarín staff, 2008c; Clarín staff, 2008d) and alongside train tracks (Clarín staff, 2008e; Debesa, 2009). However, *cartoneros* were not the only ones affected by the municipal reclamation of space and its meanings. In 2008 alone, the following groups were targeted by the Ministry of Environment and Public Space with either fines, removal, or threats: street vendors (Cronenbold, 2008), dog walkers (La Nación staff, 2008a), fair vendors (La Nación staff, 2008b) transvestite sex workers (La Nación staff, 2008c), sidewalk café operators (La Nación staff, 2008d), billboard posters (Tomino, 2008), and residents of a downtown shantytown who tried to bring construction materials into their neighbourhood in order to fortify or intensify their building stock (Di Nicola, 2008). The above actors and activities that were newly surveilled and increasingly policed under Macri’s government shared with informal recycling a common place in the contested margins of the city’s public spaces. Similarly, Lederman (2013) chronicles the high-profile eviction of a group of urban poor squatters (many of whom were precarious immigrants) from Indoamericano Park under Macri’s administration in 2010. Through discursive debates about legitimate urban citizenship and incidents of violence perpetrated by both police and residents, the city government (and their police force) came to be perceived as the “protector of the local middle classes and their claim to a normative public space” (p.21). Sternberg’s (2013) analysis chronicles the active cultivation of a neoliberal cultural aesthetic in Buenos Aires vis-à-vis *cartoneros*, revealing that the disciplining

and ordering of their bodies and work has benefitted neoliberal urban interests by presenting a “healthy” city to world, while still maintaining a pool of low-paid recycling labour.

In sum, during the early years of his administration, Macri introduced public space revitalization projects, the increased surveillance and enforcement of particular activities in public spaces, and the re-branding of legitimate uses and users of public spaces. These actions accord closely with some of the strategies described in Brenner and Theodore’s (2002) catalogue of “mechanisms of neoliberal localization,” including transformations of the built environment and urban form, the re-regulation of urban civil society, and re-representing the city (p.371-2). While previous moments in the neoliberalization of Buenos Aires’ public spaces were focused on the enclosure of certain spaces and resources, the discursive focus of Macri’s regime of public space has enabled the rhetorical exclusion of particular users and uses of public space.

Similar approaches to neoliberal “urban hygiene” have been witnessed elsewhere in the Global South, including the removal of informal workers and other marginalized figures from public spaces (Banerjee-Guha, 2009; Didier et al, 2012; Mitchell, 2008; Swanson, 2007; Walker, 2013), the formal and informal policing of the users and uses of public city spaces (Banerjee-Guha, 2009; Berney, 2013; Samara, 2010), and the facilitation of private investment and elite consumption behaviours in public spaces through municipal interventions (Didier et al, 2012; Walker, 2013). While these similarities are instructive in understanding processes of urban neoliberalism, the place-based particularities of such processes provide important insights to the ever-evolving dynamics of actually existing neoliberalism. Investigating local reactions to shifts in neoliberal discourse and strategy provides much-needed complexity to narratives of urban change.

4) Re-negotiating the city: Urban neoliberalism interrupted?

In addition to their symbolic and rhetorical exclusion from the vision of a modern urban Buenos Aires, many *cartoneros* are also structurally disenfranchised from urban democratic processes and decision-making systems; 94% of survey respondents commuted to the city to work, and so were not residents of the Federal Capital region of Buenos Aires (the area that elected Macri as Chief of Government). *Cartoneros* therefore have limited recourse with respect to the decisions of a municipal government that is held accountable to its electorate, its tax base, and its investors. Despite these exclusions, *cartoneros* are not passive figures in the negotiation of Buenos Aires' urban dynamics. The following section details three key ways in which *cartoneros* have responded to Macri's regime of public space by attempting to renegotiate the neoliberalization of the urban sphere.

a) Protesting the eviction of *cartoneros* from Belgrano

As noted above, one of the strategies employed in Macri's reclamation of the public sphere was the displacement of *cartoneros* and other delegitimized users from public spaces. In February 2008, a group of 70 *cartonero* families were violently evicted from a temporary settlement in the Belgrano neighbourhood. The *cartoneros* occupying the settlement were protesting the recent removal of train services that had been provided specifically for *cartoneros* as a means of transporting them and their carts between their home communities surrounding the City of Buenos Aires and their work zones in the city. The service withdrawal was defended by the private company responsible for this train line as a redistribution of resources in favour of passenger trains (Novillo, 2007a). The *cartoneros* who had been affected by the removal of the train service responded by installing themselves in a prominent public space in a relatively affluent area in downtown Buenos Aires for almost two months. They had set up temporary residence in order to

continue their work in the city, and chose this high-visibility public space in order to protest the cancellation of the train service. In effect, they were attempting to negotiate the meanings and uses of Buenos Aires' public spaces. The governmental response to this protest was definitive: the Ministry of Environment and Public Space called in the police to violently remove the protesters.

Three months later, in reflection on his first 100 days in office, Macri gave the following comment to the press: "We are showing neighbourhood residents, whether they have a lot or whether they have a little, that public space is not negotiable" (Gutman, 2008b). The author of the above-cited newspaper article interpreted Macri's statement as an affirmation of the Belgrano eviction. Implicit in his statement is the intractability of Macri's rule over the city's spaces, as well as the paramount political importance of residents who live in Buenos Aires' established neighbourhoods.

However, the removal of the protesting *cartoneros* from Belgrano also serves as an example of potential sites of resistance to a repressive municipal agenda. In response to a complaint filed by five *cartonero* cooperatives, the court system ruled that Macri's administration should have informed the appropriate judicial branches of the city government before removing people from the settlement, and publicly reprimanded them for their lack of proper process (Gómez, 2008a). Other levels of government also weighed in on the eviction. The Chief of Cabinet of the Governor of Buenos Aires Province questioned Macri's actions, suggesting that he be "less repulsive with the urban recuperators" (Gómez, 2008b). Additionally, not all established residential neighbours supported the *cartonero* eviction. Approximately one hundred residents from Belgrano and surrounding neighbourhoods marched in solidarity with the evicted *cartoneros* in protest of their eviction, the cancellation of the train service which precipitated their occupation

of public space, and the confiscation of *cartoneros*' carts and belongings during their forced removal (Clarín staff, 2008c).²

Protest is a highly visible form of dissent, and it is also a spatially strategic reaction to the exercise of government power. *Cartoneros* occasionally mount protests and public demonstrations in the city streets, public plazas, and the lawn in front of the President's residence (the Casa Rosada) in the downtown heart of Buenos Aires. They are not the only group to do so, and such public expressions of protest have become commonplace in the urban landscape. Villalón (2007) describes the widespread emergence of robust social movements over the past two decades as a heterogeneous and non-traditional collective reaction to the negative impacts of neoliberal reforms in Argentina, and Garay (2007) notes that the prevalence of public protest among the unemployed and informal workers in Argentina is a recent and unlikely expression of collective action among such traditionally dispersed and marginalized workers. Furthermore, the demonstration of middle-class solidarity with *cartoneros* suggests that Macri's neoliberal regime of public space did not fully resonate with the sensibilities of Buenos Aires' residents across the social spectrum. Kanai (2010) observed similar acts of middle-class support for the urban poor through acts of protest, government lobbying, and the provision of aid to social movements in contemporary Buenos Aires. In this case, the direct action of *cartoneros* and the public support for their protest discursively interrupted the roll-out of a neoliberal "urban hygiene" intervention.

b) Expressions of rights to the city

In addition to direct action protest, *cartoneros* have also employed more subtle rhetorical means of reclaiming their right to be in the public sphere. They have asserted their place in the city

² However, city residents are sometimes involved in protests against the presence of *cartoneros* in their neighbourhoods as well; see Clarín staff, 2007 and Clarín staff, 2008f.

streets through their self-representations, casting themselves as integral contributors to urban life. In contrast to the confrontational and public nature of protests, these claims of belonging are more typical of the “hidden” spaces of power that Whitson (2007) describes among Buenos Aires’ informal workers.

During interviews, *cartoneros* defended the social relevance of their work by asserting that they belonged to the communities where they worked, and that they contributed to Argentine society. For example, *cartoneros* frequently defended the value of their work by positioning themselves as workers:

The real workers are us, the recyclers, because we work for industry. (35 year old woman)

Yes, the work that we do...benefits them [the city]. And it also benefits the neighbours, because they feel safe when there is a cart at the door or on the corner.

(49 year old woman)

Perelman’s (2007) ethnographic work with *cartoneros* emphasizes the importance of a worker identity to *cartoneros* due to the centrality of this trope to Argentina’s national psyche. The second quote communicates a confidence in the contributions made by *cartoneros* and their work, both through the municipal benefits of their waste reduction activities, and the role of individual informal recyclers as “eyes on the street” (Jacobs, 1961) in the neighbourhoods where they work. These are statements of belonging, involvement, and inter-dependence with other urbanites. Through such statements, *cartoneros* invoke rights to the city as inhabitants and contributors to the urban sphere.

Purcell (2003) comments on not just the rights, but also the responsibilities that constitute urban citizenship. *Cartoneros* similarly express a sense of responsibility in asserting their claim to

urban inhabitation. As demonstrated in the above quotes, they comment on the contributions that they make to Argentine civil society and industry. Interviewees also expressed a sense of what it meant to be a “good” *cartonero*:

...you have to keep everything clean... But if someone comes and looks through and breaks the [garbage] bag and breaks everything, that doesn't benefit the people of Buenos Aires, or anyone. (41 year old woman)

In addition to the routine responsibilities of cleaning up after oneself, *cartoneros* also embody a greater social responsibility: their presence on the street forces Argentines and tourists alike to engage with inequality in this seemingly modern and ordered city centre. It forces people to confront the sometimes invisible juxtapositions of rich and poor people, rich and poor spaces, consuming/waste producing and waste reclaiming activities, and so on. In this sense, *cartoneros*' inhabitation of the city is an important political action that challenges the neoliberal vision of the city as a rational site of market-oriented economic growth and elite consumption.

c) *Cartonero*-municipal alliances: neoliberalism, social justice, both, or neither?

Another renegotiation of the roll-out of Macri's neoliberal regime of space was precipitated by a crisis of capitalism in the form of the environmental repercussions of growth and economic recovery. A “Zero Waste” law was enacted by the city government (under then-Chief of Government Telerman) in 2007 to mandate ambitious waste reduction targets. The law also included a provision for the complete prohibition on the disposal of any recyclable materials by 2020 (Buenos Aires City Government, 2010). Despite attempts to move toward “Zero Waste”, there was an annual increase in waste production of 5.26% by 2007, making the city's 30% waste reduction target for 2010 seem unlikely. Attempts to reduce waste production in the city had been unsuccessfully focused on formal sector diversion of recyclables from the waste stream (Gutman,

2007). Media reports of the failure to decrease waste production rates cast *cartoneros* as environmental actors who reduced the amount of waste sent to landfill, and who, if better supported, could help the city fulfill its waste reduction commitments (Novillo, 2007b; Gutman, 2008c). Because Buenos Aires' waste disposition sites were located outside of its administrative boundaries, there were monetary and political implications to these increased waste production rates: the municipal government was required to negotiate a 20% increase in payment for waste treatment services in the surrounding provinces, and to pay for the construction of two new landfills (La Nación staff, 2008e).

A public meeting was called to address the renegotiation of waste concessionaire contracts in October 2008, and an interesting allegiance emerged at this forum. Both *cartonero* cooperatives and Macri's municipal government aligned themselves in favour of the cancellation of separated collection of waste and recyclables (Gutman, 2008d). Macri's administration saw room for efficiency gains with the cancellation of the unsuccessful differentiated collection system, and used the timing of the renegotiation of waste concessionaire contracts to make this and other changes to the waste management system. In order to address the ambitious waste diversion targets set out in the Zero Waste law, Macri's redrafting of the waste management system included plans for the formal recognition of a limited number of *cartoneros* as waste diverters. Whitson (2011) argues that from Macri's perspective, this strategy also served to discipline and appropriately "place" the waste work of *cartoneros* in the city. Some *cartonero* groups saw this moment of contract renegotiation as an opportunity to better enfranchise themselves in the formal waste management system, and believed that the cancellation of source-separated recyclables collection would give them better access to these materials (Gutman, 2008d).

In an interview on the one-year anniversary of his rise to power, Macri was asked about his political about-face with respect to the city's *cartoneros*:

[Sánchez:] What path did you take from thinking that *cartoneros* were stealing from the trash to deciding to incorporate them into the recycling process?

[Macri:] A path of study. Even in the campaign we spoke about the necessity of transforming the *cartonero* into an industrial recycler who has a uniform, social security, cart, transportation, makes a change to not break bags, works on a schedule and without children. Under these conditions, his/her contribution to recycling is positive. (Sánchez, 2008)

Some of Macri's comments in the above quote are timely political posturing and revisionist history; his support of the cancellation of train services and the Belgrano eviction demonstrate that Macri did not intend to support *cartoneros* and their transportation needs early in his administration. Further, it is not clear whether plans to incorporate *cartoneros* into the formal waste management system represent a solidaristic political alliance or a renewal of actually existing neoliberalism. It is likely that these plans will provide some material benefit and social legitimacy to a limited group of workers based in the more affluent areas of the city where the formalization efforts are centred, so long as these workers agree to abide by municipally-determined codes of conduct in public spaces (Parizeau, 2013). The primacy and predominance of Macri's neoliberal regime of space combined with the spatially- and socially-restrictive format of the formalization plans for *cartoneros* suggest that these efforts may provide a convenient way to co-opt *cartoneros* and neutralize the threat that they present to an ordered and sanitized public realm. At the same time, sanctioning a limited form of *cartoneo* allows the government to announce that it supports urban recycling, just like "more advanced" countries do (Gutman,

2008c), while also mitigating the impending environmental crisis posed by the rising rates of waste production that have accompanied Buenos Aires' economic recovery. These benefits do not come at the full cost of a government-organized and funded recycling program (complete with full salaries and regulated working conditions), but at the discounted rate of wage subsidies, limited benefits, and a modicum of job security offered to precarious informal workers. It furthermore does not provide for all *cartoneros*, and is likely to further marginalize those who are most vulnerable and thus unable to insert themselves in the municipal program (Parizeau, 2013).

5) Conclusions

An analysis of moments of shift and renewal can provide insight to extended processes of urban neoliberalization. I have argued that an investigation of the introduction of a regime of public space under the administration of Macri enables an analysis of transitions in neoliberal strategies (i.e. enclosure vs. exclusion), distinct tenors of neoliberal rhetoric (such as the emergent focus on the modern, hygienic city), and the ways that shifts in strategy can open new opportunities for renegotiating urban neoliberal agendas (e.g. protest, reactive discursive framings, and new alliances that may represent “less-than-happy marriages;” Peck et al 2013, p. 1093).

This account of actually existing neoliberalism reveals a number of local contextual factors that have influenced the uneven roll-out of neoliberal urban strategies in Buenos Aires as manifest in the waste management sector. The election of a Chief of Government with familial ties to private waste management companies in the city has influenced his administration's political orientation toward informal waste workers. The historic moment of economic crisis in 2001-2 created a local need for *cartoneros*' work in order to provide materials for industry and to provide a source of income for disenfranchised workers. The path of economic recovery has led to attempts to position

Buenos Aires as a clean and modern space for the benefit of local elites, tourists, and foreign investors; some perceive *cartoneros* as a threat to this image. Finally, the environmental crisis associated with increased waste production during years of economic recovery has also constrained and influenced municipal decision-making processes concerning *cartoneros* and their role in the public sphere.

In addition to these place-based observations, an analysis of Macri's regime of space demonstrates the value in focusing on key moments of shift in ever-evolving urban neoliberal agendas. Shifts may enable a renewal of the priorities and agendas of urban elites as championed by municipal governments, but they also make visible the paradoxes and contradictions inherent to neoliberal urbanisms, and can therefore reveal openings for resistance and opposition. As Mansfield (2007) suggests, alternatives to neoliberalism may be found within it, and inherent contradictions may be used to deconstruct and resist neoliberalisms. Two key paradoxes are apparent in this case study of a regime of public space. First, the paradox of neoliberal "public" space aims to invite people into shared civic spaces, but in practice excludes a number of users and uses (Berney, 2013). Rather than creating a democratic space that can be collectively negotiated by the people who occupy it, Macri's neoliberal strategies imposed hierarchical and authoritarian regimes of behaviours and meanings onto shared city spaces. Second is the paradox of anti-state neoliberal strategies that require increased state intervention for their implementation. In order to structure and discipline public space and thus protect private financial interests (such as property and financial investment opportunities), the municipal government has had to increase its active governance of the waste management system through *cartonero* formalization efforts and public policy creation, thus revealing the internal contradictions of a seemingly anti-state neoliberal ideology (Peck, 2004). While neoliberalisms are capable of holding their contradictions

in-tact, shifts in urban neoliberal strategy (such as the introduction of Macri's regime of public space) necessitate renegotiations of the terms of urban policy (including neoliberal paradoxes, urban social relations, and discursive framings of the city and its uses).

This analysis has documented a number of such renegotiations, including the provision of opportunities for government-facilitated capitalist accumulation (such as the renegotiation of lucrative waste concessionaire contracts), the brokering of allegiances that are potentially beneficial to both the neoliberal municipal government and some of the informal workers it seeks to discipline, and the creation of social conditions that enable opposition. In the case of Buenos Aires' *cartoneros*, a neoliberal regime of public space sought to redefine "modernity" as urban hygiene, revitalize public spaces in affluent neighbourhoods, and discipline public space, its users, and its uses. What resulted from the roll-out of this regime was the counter-definition of urban modernity as environmentally-responsible public service provision (including increased waste diversion), and the incorporation of informal workers in the provision of waste management services. Similarly, while Macri's regime of public space sought to enforce civic responsibility by policing individual behaviours, these efforts also aroused an insurgent citizenship among *cartoneros*, residents, the court systems, and media commentators. These actors put the onus for civic responsibility on municipal actors, calling for effective environmental management and the fair treatment of all city inhabitants. Buenos Aires' continuously evolving neoliberal regime of public space thus both contains and provokes challenges to its coherence. Some of the efforts to contest and renegotiate Macri's regime of public space have effectively interrupted strategic and discursive aspects of this regime, while others may yet support the evolution of local neoliberal agendas. The churning of neoliberal urbanism in Buenos Aires has created increased urban inequality, as well as potential moments of resistance and subversion.

This case study of neoliberal urbanism in Buenos Aires has highlighted the value of investigating sidewalks, curbsides, and municipal waste commons as sites where the neoliberal governance of public space occurs. It has also demonstrated that the perspectives of informal recyclers and an analysis of their working conditions can provide insight to the rationalities, policies, and practices that mould the public spaces shared by all inhabitants of the city.

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