

Possible Choices, Valuable Meanings: an Overview of the Activities of Brazilian Recyclable Materials Pickers

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Recyclable materials pickers have been sorting through garbage and transforming it into usable commodities for a long time in many places across the globe. In Brazil they have been organising themselves in associations and social movements since the late 1980s. More recently, important events such as the creation of the National Movement of Recyclable Materials Pickers in 2001 and the approval of the National Law on Solid Waste in 2010 helped to raise the profile of pickers among policymakers, enterprises and non-governmental organisations.

The activity of collecting and selling garbage was originally created to enable the survival of people who had no other options for work. Collecting and selling garbage was thus a way to survive through work in a society where opportunities have always been remarkably unequal and where essential rights have long been disrespected. So, in the past, long before the institution of selective collection, pickers performed the activity of waste separation as the pioneers of this urban ecology related to waste.

In a broader work (Magalhães, 2012), it was seen that this category, more generally known as 'waste pickers' (a name that they do not recognise as the most appropriate, preferring to be called 'recyclable materials pickers') was treated for a long time with prejudice and stigma by many sections of Brazilian society, including public administration.

It could also be seen that pickers often perceive themselves as doing activities that promote cleanliness and the preservation of the environment. Thus, during the fieldwork conducted, it was noticeable that this role is often undertaken and claimed to present the pickers as directly opposed to segments of the population who do not care about recycling programmes.

It was thus suggested that the activities of pickers could be characterised as what Joan Martinez-Alier (2002) classifies as "the environmentalism of the poor". For her, the inevitable conflict between the dominant economic order and the environment gives room for the creation of this current of environmentalism. Furthermore, the author points out that "the main thrust of this third current is not a sacred reverence for Nature but a material interest in the environment as a source and a requirement for livelihood (...). Its ethics derives from a demand for contemporary social justice among humans" (Martinez-Alier, 2002).

The analysis conducted in the research also makes it possible to say that pickers are in an ambiguous situation. First, while they are responsible for extending the life cycle of products (by transforming garbage into a

commodity), thus contributing to the creation and reproduction of a market at the heart of the economic system, they are, however, excluded and marginalised in many respects. Victims of prejudice because they work with waste, they constitute part of the poorest segment of the population and subsequently are denied access to a series of rights and conditions that only higher incomes seem to provide in Brazil.

Second, considering that the pickers perform a service of public utility, the ambiguity of the role that is the preliminary basis for their activity becomes even clearer. Although part of an economy of survival for those who do the work, the reintegration of garbage into the production cycle generates positive benefits for nature and society, since it promotes the efficient use of natural resources and spaces for the storage of waste. Thus, at the same time that the pickers are marginalised by society, they perform the recycling activities that have been incorporated into the emerging paradigm of respect for the environment and, therefore, have recently become more valued by society.

These considerations lead us to ask the following questions: after the rise of the environmental paradigm in recent years, what are the effects of this new valuation of recycling? Will it produce positive outcomes for pickers? Will they be effectively recognised as the protagonists and pioneers of an activity that has only very recently been valued by society? Will they receive decent remuneration for their services and as a consequence emerge from the group of the poorest and most excluded members of society? Will there be an increase in the professionalisation of the profession, and will greater dignity follow?

Some recent steps taken by the government (for instance, attempts to include pickers in a national solid waste plan) and by the pickers (organising themselves in cooperatives and social movements and claiming their rights) are beginning to address these questions. However, most of the answers are still to come, as we still do not know whether these recent events will help to shape a new order, with greater recognition of pickers in Brazilian society, or whether they will remain excluded from formal society.

References:

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