

Revolution in the Garbage Dump:
The Political and Economic Foundations of the Colombian Recycler Movement (1986-2011)¹

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Abstract

Flouting 150 years of reports on their political impotence, millions of informal workers have recently begun mobilizing for labor rights. What provoked this unexpected development? This article analyzes the Colombian informal recycler movement—a “least likely” case for successful mobilization due to the recyclers’ extreme marginality and the Colombian state’s violent repression of labor movements. The paper argues that the rise of neoliberalism and the consolidation of democracy created political opportunities that conventional perspectives on the informal economy would not lead us to expect. Three specific links connected these macro-level transformations to increases in the recyclers’ collective organizing capacity. First, technical, financial, and symbolic backing from NGOs enabled recyclers to develop innovative organizing models. Second, new human rights provisions contained in the Constitution of 1991 created an opening to challenge state policy. Third, the privatization of waste management spurred recyclers to action by leaving them with two clear-cut possibilities: waste corporations might permanently displace them, or recyclers might collectively organize to protect and improve their livelihoods.

Key Words

informal workers, labor movements, economic development, recyclers, neoliberalism

Once seen as a transitory phenomenon soon to be erased by economic development (e.g., Rostow 1960), the informal economy today employs most workers in developing countries and increasing numbers in many industrialized countries (Chen 2012). Labor scholars have long dismissed informal workers—whose work is not recognized nor protected by the stateⁱ—as too weak and fragmented to organize as a class (e.g., Arandarenko 2001; Bairoch 1973; Geertz 1963, Kurtz 2004; Marx [1852] 1978; Veltmeyer 1997). In one of the first scholarly accounts of an informal worker organizing drive, Birkbeck (1978) analyzed the labor struggles of families who subsisted by salvaging paper, aluminum, and plastic from a dump in Cali, Colombia. Birkbeck found that while the recyclers at times organized on an ad hoc basis to protect their access to the dump from local authorities who saw them as a source of crime and disease, they lacked the legal protections, bargaining counterparts, time, and money needed to build enduring organizations. The recyclers' desperate poverty and illusion of "self-employment" undermined their sense of class solidarity, a problem exacerbated by the piecemeal earning structure that pitted recycler against recycler. Moreover, Birkbeck (1978) found that the price of recyclables was too low to underwrite decent jobs, leading him to conclude that, "the revolution will be a long time coming to the garbage dump" (pp. 1181).

Thirty-eight years later, the revolution does not appear as far off. Thousands of Colombia's informal recyclersⁱⁱ—who today more commonly work on streets than in dumps—have self-organized into cooperatives. They have boosted earnings by collectively processing and selling goods and by negotiating direct service provision contracts with building managers and public officials. They have also won seven landmark victories in Colombia's Constitutional Court, which affirmed and reaffirmed their right to be remunerated by the state for their labor (Parra and Fernández 2013). Widely recognized as the world's first recycler movement (Medina 2007), the Colombians have served as inspiration for parallel movements in dozens of countries. They helped build transnational networks to connect these movements, and in 2008 hosted the first World Conference (and third Latin American Conference) of Waste Pickers, which convened recyclers from over 30 countries. All of this was achieved from 1986-2011, a period of violent repression of labor rights in Colombia during which over 4,000 unionists were murdered—a greater death toll than the rest of the world combined (Kuehnert 2008).

Though this paper focuses on the historic foundations of the recycler movement, a series of recent developments illustrate its contemporary force. In December 2012, Bogotá's leftist

mayor, Gustavo Petro, responded to court rulings in the recyclers' favor by bringing the majority of waste collection—previously run by an oligopoly of private waste corporations—under direct city control. Petro implemented a “zero waste” plan that aimed to contract recycler organizations to provide city-wide recycling services, which would eventually wholly supersede the “waste collection and burial” model (Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá 2012). On December 9, 2013, however, Colombia's inspector-general removed Petro from office and banned him from political activity for 15 years on the grounds that Petro had violated the free market rights of private waste contractors and triggered a sanitary crisis during the transition to the public system (New York Times 2013). Four months later, following mass protests spearheaded by recyclers and an injunction by the Inter-American Human Rights Court, the Superior Tribunal of Bogotá reinstated Petro, who continued to implement his Zero Waste Plan.

By the end of his term in December 2015, Petro's administration had identified 14,000 recyclers through a multi-year census process, provided 18,000 city uniforms to registered recyclers, delivered pickup trucks to nearly 3,000 recyclers who previously worked by horse-and-buggy, established monthly participatory forums on recycler policy in each of the city's 19 boroughs, campaigned for residents and businesses to hand over materials directly to recyclers, and—most groundbreakingly—made bi-monthly payments to 13,000 recyclers in recognition of their public service (UAESP 2015). The city paid recyclers via text messages with codes that were redeemable for cash at ATMs based on the quantity of goods that they had sold to registered scrap dealers. To be sure, these policies were neither flawless nor comprehensive, and at times proved controversial even among recyclers (Parra 2015). Nonetheless, they represented a paradigm shift for a city that historically treated recyclers as criminals, and an astonishing victory for a group of workers recently dismissed as powerless to contest policies that impact their lives.

What political and economic opportunities emerged since the time of Birkbeck's writing to enable this unlikely development? And what strategies did recyclers and their allies build to exploit these opportunities? In the first section of this paper, I review historical arguments about informal workers' lack of power and unity. In the next, I provide background on the Colombian recycler movement. I then argue that two broad economic and political shifts—the ascendance of neoliberalismⁱⁱⁱ and consolidation of democratic rights—created threats and opportunities that galvanized the emergence of the Colombian recycler movement. I conclude by reflecting on how

this case challenges conventional assumptions about neoliberalism and sheds light on the causes and potentials of the recent global upsurge of informal worker organizing. Importantly, I do not seek to negate the crippling impacts that neoliberalism has had on global labor movements, but rather to highlight how, as Evans (2008) argues, “Every system of domination generates its own distinctive set of opportunities for challenge and transformation, and neo-liberal globalization is no exception” (p. 298).

<A> **“Unorganizable” workers**

Writing at the dawn of industrial capitalism, Marx and Engels first popularized the idea that workers who would come to be known as “informal” were too weak, fragmented, and capricious to organize as a class. They categorized “rag pickers” (recyclers), “organ grinders” (street musicians), “knife grinders” (knife sharpeners), “tinkers” (iterant tin smiths), and “porters” (carriers) as “lumpenproletariat,” an underclass of outcasts and criminals who lacked the solidarity and structural power to collectively challenge capital (Marx and Engels [1852] 1978). Ironically, some of Marx’s fiercest rightwing critics, the modernization theorists of the 1950s and ‘60s, helped entrench pessimism about informal worker mobilization. Rostow’s (1960) “The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto,” proposed a linear theory of development, in which capitalism gradually led to widespread prosperity and security. By this logic, there was no need to contemplate the revolutionary potential of informal workers, as they were merely precapitalist relics, soon to be absorbed into the modern economy.

Both the Marxist and Modernist traditions share what Agarwala (2013) calls the “problematic assumption” that informal workers are “temporarily operating on the margins of the central labor-capital relationship.” (p. 8) This assumption lives on in some labor and policy circles, but has largely been debunked in scholarship over the past 35 years by a formidable and rapidly expanding body of literature on formal-informal sector linkages.^{iv} Nonetheless, scholars continue to point to structural barriers that appear to hamstring informal workers’ capacity for collective action, which Collier and Palmer-Rubin (2011) summarize as “an unclear target of grievance (e.g., common employer), small networks for collective action, and minimal or uncertain flows of time and money available to devote to problem solving” (p. 28). Such pessimism is in part an artifact of the “industrial unionism” model that has dominated the past 75 years of labor organizing. This model assumes that workers are joined together by a common formal employment relation that allows them to bargain with employers, whose profits depend

on production in fixed locales. This premise is no longer a good starting point even for many manufacturing workers with formal jobs, but makes no sense at all for most of the world's workers.

* Organizing the “unorganizable”*

Flouting 150 years of reports on their political impotence, millions of informal workers have recently begun mobilizing to make their voices heard by governments, employers, and transnational organizations.^v To be sure, organizing informal workers is not a wholly novel phenomenon—at the beginning of the 19th century all workers were informal, and examples abound throughout the twentieth century of worker groups defying assumptions about their lack of strength and unity.^{vi} What appears to distinguish the past twenty-five years, however, is the scale, pace, and sophistication of organizing among workers previously excluded from the labor movement. There have been major breakthroughs in organizing among domestic workers, street vendors, home-based workers, and recyclers—all of whom have built robust transnational networks to exchange strategies and advocate to transnational bodies (Bonner and Spooner 2012). In response, the International Labor Organization has adopted resolutions on the rights of home-based workers (1996), informal workers (2002), and domestic workers (2011).

This unexpected development is forcing scholars to pay heed. New works shed light on how informal workers address the three problems highlighted by Collier and Palmer-Rubin (2011:28). First, many organized informal workers overcome “the unclear target of grievance” problem by making rights-based demands to the state for legal protections (Bhowmik 2007, Cross 1998), welfare benefits (Agarwala 2013), and official remuneration (Jacobi and Besen 2011). In this way, ironically, informal workers often push the state to play a more direct role in ensuring their livelihoods than it does for formal private sector workers (Agarwala 2013:199). Second, many organized informal workers approach the “small networks for collective action” problem by organizing in neighborhoods rather than at worksites (Andrae and Beckman 2013); bringing together scattered workers into cooperatives and worker centers (Rodríguez-Garavito 2006, Fine 2009, and Chen et al. 2006); and using identity cards and self-esteem workshops to construct collective identities as workers and citizens (Wittman, Desmarais, and Wiebe 2010). The latter strategy helps many informal workers forge solidarity across divisions of gender, race, and class (Quiroz-Becerra 2013). Finally, many informal workers overcome the “uncertain flows

of time and money” problem by mobilizing resources from the state, NGOs, development funds, corporations, and universities (Kabeer, Milward, and Sudarshan 2013).

Though recent works shine light on the innovative strategies of informal worker campaigns, less attention has been paid to the underlying political and economic structures that facilitate such innovations. Such information is key to addressing the puzzle of why so many informal worker organizations have emerged globally over the past thirty years, a period when neoliberalism is said to have eroded workers’ basis of power. Resolving this puzzle is far beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on a single case study. Nonetheless, recycler movements are a reasonable entry point for this line of inquiry because, as Medina (2007) notes, recycling “epitomizes the informal sector: it constitutes a labor-intensive, low-technology, low-paid, unrecorded, and unregulated activity” (p. 64). Recyclers’ extreme marginality and the Colombian state’s violent repression of labor movements make this a “least likely” case (Flyvbjerg 2006), in which circumstances appear highly favorable to the “unorganizable informal worker” hypothesis. The aim of this paper is not merely to falsify such conventional wisdom, however, but to identify structural factors that facilitated the emergence of the Colombian recycler movement, and to challenge conventional assumptions about the impacts of neoliberalism and democratization on labor movements.

Throughout this paper, I draw on three concepts from social movement theory that shed light on the dynamic relation between movement contexts, strategies, and outcomes. First, *resource mobilization theory* posits that social movements emerge when aggrieved groups access resources such as “legitimacy, money, facilities, and labor” that are typically controlled by elites (McCarthy and Zald 1977:1220, see also Jenkins and Perrow 1977). Though scholars have criticized this theory for exaggerating movements’ dependence on elites (e.g., McAdam 1999, Piven and Cloward 1979), research suggests that elite support plays a central role for informal workers. For example, based on analysis of nine informal worker movements in four countries, Kabeer, Milward, and Sudarshan (2013) find that “spontaneous self-organization among these workers is extremely-low... organizational impetus has largely come from the efforts of middle-class actors belonging to NGOs” (p. 14). Second, *political opportunity theory* highlights the role of perceived vulnerabilities within political systems (e.g., opening of political institutions, elite disputes, shifts in levels of state repression) in catalyzing popular mobilizations (Eisinger 1973, McAdam 1999, Tilly 1978). Such apertures are key for movements of informal workers, which

typically make demands directly to the state rather than to capital (Agarwala 2013). Finally, *frame theory* calls attention to the ways in which movement actors “assign meaning to and interpret, relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support and to demobilize antagonists” (Snow and Benford 1988:198; also Snow et al. 1986, Johnston and Noakes 2005). Such struggles over meaning loom large in informal worker movements, which contest and redefine norms about what it means to be a worker and who has the responsibilities of employer (Chun 2009). In the widely influential tradition of the political process model (McAdam 1999; Tarrow 2011), I integrate insights from resource mobilization, political opportunity, and frame theory.

<A> **Methods**

I conducted interviews, participant observation, and archival research in Bogotá for four months in 2011 and 2012. I sought to understand the shifting strategies and logics of Colombia’s most politically influential recycler organization, *The Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá (ARB)*, as well as those of other actors in its field. I conducted in-depth interviews with 20 ARB recyclers and 8 recyclers from two rival organizations, whom I recruited through snowball sampling. About 50% of the interviewees were women, which was representative of the actual demographics of Bogotá’s recycler organizations (Acosta and Ortiz 2013:9). I oversampled leaders, interviewing 13 recyclers who held or had previously held leadership positions, as they had the deepest knowledge of their organizations’ history. I triangulated leader’s accounts by interviewing 15 rank and file members. To deepen my understanding of recyclers’ practices and perspectives, I spent ten days collecting, sorting, and processing materials alongside organized and independent recyclers.

Additionally, I conducted in-depth interviews with ten NGO workers from six NGOs that worked with recycler organizations, and seven government officials from four government agencies. I concluded every interview by requesting introductions to other relevant actors in the field, and by the end of my research I was confident that I had spoken with representatives from the key NGOs and agencies shaping Bogotá’s recycling politics. Many of my original interview contacts were made during the course of a six-week embedded ethnography with an environmental justice NGO called ENDA. Through this internship, I gained access to ten internal ARB meetings and five meetings between organized recyclers, allied NGOs, and government officials. Finally, I conducted archival research on court rulings, municipal reports, and

newspapers—all of which were available online. Also, the ARB and ENDA granted me access to internal organizational documents and archives of relevant books, reports, and newspaper clippings. This archival research helped to corroborate and supplement the historical account provided in interviews. All interviews were recorded and lasted from 30 to 90 minutes. For reasons of confidentiality, pseudonyms are used for many recyclers and NGO workers throughout this paper.

<A> **Background on Colombia’s recycler movement**

The World Bank estimates that 1% of the developing world’s urban population—some 15 million people—subsist by collecting, sorting, and selling goods thrown away by others.^{vii} Given the absence of state-run recycling programs, this work provides considerable economic and ecological benefits: reducing waste transportation costs, saving room in landfills, cutting the quantity of virgin materials needed for production, and mitigating climate change. Unlike other waste management workers, however, recyclers have not traditionally received state compensation for their labor. Instead, they eke out a living by selling their goods to middlemen, who in Colombia, pay as little as 5% of the industry rate for recyclables and sometimes exercise political control over recyclers (Medina 2005:7). Many recyclers work and live in hazardous conditions, which are aggravated by inadequate safety equipment and medical care. Recyclers’ work is further encumbered by public scorn and police harassment. Four interview subjects claimed that they were routinely arrested while collecting recyclables in wealthy neighborhoods in northern Bogotá during the early 2000s. Two reported that the police had jailed them for 24-hours, burned their pushcarts, and then forced them to sweep streets. According to Bogotá NGO-director, Ricardo Valencia (interview 2011), “People see the recyclers as a sickness, a bad thing. Recyclers should not be seen, but rather thrown away in black bags like garbage. They are a lower caste”. Stigma against recyclers is prevalent around the world (e.g., Gidwani and Reddy 2011), but has manifested in an exceptionally sadistic form in Colombia. Since the late 1980s, fascist-inspired “social cleansing” groups have killed at least 2,000 recyclers, beggars, and prostitutes—to whom they refer as “*desechables*” (disposable people) (Medina 2007).

Seeking to increase their voice and power, thousands of recyclers in small and large cities across Colombia collectively organized into cooperatives, many of which united into regional networks. The most politically influential network and the object of analysis of this study, is the *Asociación de Recicladores de Bogotá (ARB)*, which formed in 1990 when four Bogotá-based

cooperatives came together to fight the closure of a landfill. Today, the ARB comprises 17 cooperatives with 1,800 members, many of whom are third and fourth-generation recyclers (Acosta and Ortiz 2013:9). Though most ARB members earn less than Colombia's minimum wage, they have slightly higher average incomes than non-cooperative recyclers, and very few are homeless (Aluna 2011). Most ARB members have not completed primary school, however, and 28% are illiterate (Aluna 2011:12). Women are overrepresented in the ARB, making up 52% of cooperative membership, though they only constitute 30% of the city's recyclers overall (Acosta and Ortiz 2013:9; UAESP 2014:9). One reason for this may be that cooperatives help members negotiate agreements with building managers to access trash at designated hours, thereby evading dangers of the street.

Though its outsized public profile could give the impression that the ARB represents the vast majority of Bogotá's recyclers, it in fact counts only 1,800 recyclers among its ranks (Acosta and Ortiz 2013: 9), about 10% of the city's estimated 1,800 full-time recyclers (Schamber et al. 2007).^{viii} The rest of the city's recyclers can be loosely categorized into three groups. First, several thousand recyclers are members of non-ARB cooperatives, some of which are engaged in intense conflicts with the ARB. Such rivalries stem from competition for resources such as membership, political influence, state and NGO-support, and service provision contracts, and are at times exacerbated by ideological differences and accusations of corruption. Second are "independent" recyclers who work outside the cooperatives, but like most cooperative members, are not homeless. Independents earn slightly lower average wages than do cooperative members, but many of them believe that they can work more efficiently and harmoniously outside of institutional settings (Aluna 2011). Though independents constitute the majority of Bogotá's recyclers, their atomization largely thwarts their ability to exercise political power. Finally, the most voiceless and denigrated recyclers are the homeless, who are commonly looked down upon as drug addicts and criminals even by their housed counterparts. Notably, ARB cofounder Silvio Ruiz-Grisales (Interview 2011) claims that "the role of our organization is to defend the rights of *all* recyclers—those who wear our shirts, those who wear the shirts of other organizations, and, to an even greater extent, those who do not even know that recycler organizations exist." To be sure, the ARB's political and cultural struggles have yielded benefits for recyclers far beyond the bounds of its own membership, or even its own city and country. Yet as Betancourt (2010) argues, "Bogotá's waste pickers do not necessarily share similar needs,

objectives or struggles, and they largely differ in the way they work, organize themselves and relate to waste picking activities” (p. 19).

 The ARB organizing model

The ARB’s organizing model centers on the pursuit of three mutually reinforcing, overlapping objectives. First, ARB members seek to increase their *social standing* by reframing their work from parasitic survival activity into a productive profession.^{ix} One member explains: “What we have done basically is to take the lowest profession there is and to raise it to a professional level, to demonstrate that recyclers actually help construct our society” (Interview José Manuel Nieto 2012). To this end, the ARB uses performative strategies including professional conduct courses for members, the provision of uniforms and credentials, media outreach, and presentations at public forums, schools, and fairs. Second, ARB members pursue *political empowerment* by contesting norms not only about what it means to be a worker, but about who has the responsibilities of employer. This is a daunting challenge due to the recyclers’ befogged structural relations with the many beneficiaries of their labor. As Ruiz-Grisales (interview 2011) explains:

You don’t have a visible employer, but you deliver recyclable materials to multinationals. You don’t have a visible employer, but you are part of the state’s public waste management service. You don’t have a visible employer, but you are collecting recyclables for citizen consumers. In fact, you have four or five bosses, but nobody is paying you.

ARB members and allies respond to this quagmire by making rights-based claims to the state, which holds consumers, multinationals, and waste management contractors accountable for financing inclusive recycling programs. The ARB’s third objective, *improved earnings and working conditions*, is pursued through entrepreneurial strategies aimed at transforming their position within the market and accessing state and philanthropic resources. The creation of cooperative enterprises enables recyclers to pool resources, collectively process and sell goods, negotiate with managers of buildings to directly access their recyclables, and win contracts to provide official services to the city.

Notably, the ARB occupies only one tier of an elaborate, transnational mobilization structure. At its base, neighborhood cooperatives focus on entrepreneurial activities such as processing and selling recyclables. Such work also facilitates political mobilization by serving as

a ‘shop floor’ upon which the previously atomized workers forge social ties and cultures of comradeship. Political mobilization is primarily organized at the second level by regional associations of cooperatives, the largest and most influential of which is the ARB. The ARB also bolsters economic enterprises of base level cooperatives by funneling financial and technical support to them. On the third level, the National Association of Recyclers (ANR) encompasses 40 cooperatives with some 4,000 recyclers across the country. Though interregional conflict and concentration of power in Bogotá have hampered the ANR, it continues to serve as a critical space for exchange of collective action frames (Snow et al. 1986) and strategies. At the fourth level, the Latin American and Caribbean Waste Pickers Network facilitates leadership building, strategy exchange, and solidarity campaigns among recyclers in 15 countries. Finally, at the fifth level, the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers and Allies (GAWPA) connects recycler organizations and allied NGOs in 28 countries, and organizes recycler rights delegations at global summits on climate change, sustainable development, and international labor standards (Ciplet 2014).

<A> What Changed?

Though the earliest known recycler cooperative in Colombia—and indeed the world—was established in Medellín in 1962, attempts at collective organizing over the next 25 years were scarce and largely abortive (Medina 2007). Based on his analysis of two such fruitless efforts at the Cali dump, Birkbeck (1978) concluded that, “it is... doubtful that such organizations can ever achieve any radical changes for the garbage picker” (p. 1184). What has changed in the “political opportunity structure” (Tarrow 1998) of Colombian recyclers since the time of Birkbeck’s research?

In the following sections, I highlight three mechanisms through which the rise of neoliberalism and consolidation of democratic rights enabled recyclers to build organizations, forge collective agendas, and challenge state policy. First, human rights and development organizations grew exponentially in Latin America beginning in the 1980s due to the neoliberal rollback of state services, the expansion of democratic freedoms, and advances in communications and transportation technology. Though, the merits of the “NGOzation” of social movements are widely debated, the rapid rise of recycler movements in Colombia would not have been possible without support from domestic and transnational civil society organizations. Second, the privatization of waste management raised the incentive for collective organizing

both by threatening to usurp much of the role of recycling from recyclers and hand it to corporations, and by creating a narrow window by which they could protect and improve their livelihoods through formalization. Third, democratic reform, particularly human rights protections of the Constitution of 1991, served as a key avenue through which the recyclers gained leverage over state and private interests.

<TABLE 1, about here>

<A> Shift 1—the expansion of civil society support

Many scholars have lamented the so-called “NGOization” of political struggle in the Global South (e.g., Alvarez 1999, Biekart 1999, Jenkins 2008; Munck 2006; Pisano 1996; Silliman 1999). Critics contend that elite sponsors deradicalize popular movements by funding only non-threatening activities (Haines 1984, Roelofs 2003), by professionalizing grassroots groups (McCarthy 2004), and by constructing organizational fields that subtly channel organizations towards moderate goals (Bartley 2007). Many detractors view NGOs as being functional to state retrenchment by providing services previously under state purview, while others paint NGOs as active agents of neoliberalism and imperialism (Petras 1997; Petras and Veltmeyer 2005).^x Though I do not dismiss such arguments wholesale, I argue that the case of the Colombian recyclers contradicts the NGOization thesis—at least in its narrowest form—in three ways. First, rather than displacing a previously autonomous movement, NGOs enabled the emergence of a new, albeit elite-reliant, one. Second, though elite sponsorship likely constrained the recyclers’ ability to adopt certain radical stances, it also facilitated their entry into the perilous field of Colombian labor politics. At critical junctures, recycler leaders demonstrated agency and fortitude by strategically recruiting NGO allies who would provide them with legal representation, political protection, and material resources needed to contest the state. Third, rather than facilitating state retrenchment, the recycler’s NGO allies helped pressure the Colombian state to radically increase its support for recyclers and zero waste programs.

The inception of the Colombian recycler movement

Birkbeck (1978) knew of only one enduring recycler organization in all of Colombia, about which he wrote that “it is clear that outside agencies are essential in maintaining this kind of organization” (p. 1184). Birkbeck’s axiom holds true today^{xi}— what has changed is the

availability of such support. In Colombia, as in much of the world, civil society organizations proliferated over the past three decades due to democratic openings, frustration with state-centered development programs, increased polarization of wealth and resultant philanthropy, and communications technology breakthroughs. During this period NGOs, foundations, transnational development funds, and individuals provided Colombian recycler organizations with millions of dollars' worth of capital donations, loans, and in-kind services (Aluna 2011). The recyclers and their allies, in turn, leveraged this support to access even greater resources from the public and private sectors.

A signal moment in this development occurred in 1986 when Manizales, a satellite city of Bogotá, closed a dump where 150 recycler families had worked and lived (Medina 2007).

Fundación Social (FS), a Colombian foundation created by a Jesuit priest in 1911, began organizing workshops and discussions with the displaced recyclers oriented around self-esteem, collective identity, social capital, and strategies for economic empowerment. At the time, recyclers were commonly referred to as “*basuriegos*” (garbage dwellers), or disparagingly as “*desechables*” (disposables) or “*gallinazos*” (vultures). Former FS Project Director, María Eugenia Querubín (Interview 2011), says that the FS worked with recyclers to coin a new term:

If people can't be garbage, then they can't be called *basuriegos*. So we held some large workshops and meetings in Manizales where recyclers talked about their lives and said, 'what we do is transform garbage.' Then one of them, I can't remember who, suggested the term *reciclador* (recycler).

Soon after, FS began providing training, technical advice, moral support, and funding to help the displaced recyclers form and fortify cooperatives. Previously, foundations had only supported such initiatives on an ad hoc and small scale basis. Based on its success in Manizales, however, FS began furiously promoting the creation of cooperatives across the country and linking them to one another, creating the networks and strategies that undergird the Colombian recycler movement today.

In his book *The World's Scavengers*, Martin Medina (2007) writes that “[FS's] support for scavengers was unprecedented in modern times and made Colombia's the world's most active scavenger movement during the 1990s” (p. 157). Indeed, FS played a role in the creation of some 94 recycler organizations and 40 warehouses for sorting and selling recyclables (Fundación Social 1995). In 1990, FS sponsored Colombia's first national meeting of recyclers, which

convened 27 organizations from 20 cities—laying the groundwork for the creation of the ANR two years later (Fundación Social 1996). By its apex in 1996, FS’s annual budget for recycler programs had grown to US \$700,000, and FS helped recyclers access an additional US \$300,000 in state funding (Aluna 2011:106). That year, however, FS announced a plan to phase out recycler programming over the next two years due to internal financial problems.

* Withdrawal of FS and the ARB’s political turn*

Though FS created organizations and networks that would engage in large scale political struggle, such struggle did not take shape until after FS’s withdrawal in 1996. During the early 1990s, ARB leaders focused their energies on cooperative development and social service provision. The downtown headquarters was used as a food kitchen and attention center, where members could receive free food, education, health, recreation, and childcare services. After FS’s withdrawal however, ARB leaders dramatically altered the organization’s programming, shifting focus to policy change, while continuing to develop revenue-generating projects. Ruiz-Grisales (interview 2011) explains: “We realized that delivering a few lunches does not solve structural problems. It may calm today’s hunger, but only by becoming a more politically active organization, more like a labor union... more class-based, could we fight to win the structural changes that we needed.”

Shifts in both the ARB’s external environment and internal composition helped incite the ARB’s political turn. Though FS worked with grantees on strategies to diversify revenue streams, many cooperatives became financially insolvent after it withdrew support. ARB leaders, alternatively, kept the organization afloat by suspending social services, renting out the lower floor of its headquarters, and arranging fee-for-service agreements for garbage collection from markets and businesses. The leaders worked for two years without salary, recycling by night to sustain themselves (Interview, ARB president, Nohra Padilla 2012). An unintended consequence of this austerity appears to have been the development of a more politically militant, if smaller, membership. Many ARB members left during this period due to the reduction in short term incentives for participation. According to founding ARB member, Ana Selina Arias (interview 2012), “those who left had a more individualistic mentality, they only sought personal benefits. Those who stayed were more committed to the struggle of all recyclers and more willing to attend meetings, to participate in trainings, to study laws, to protest.” Another critical factor that

provoked the ARB's politicization was a series of legal threats to recyclers' right to pursue their trade, described in the next section.

After FS's withdrawal, ARB leaders began strategically recruiting supporters who could boost the organization's political capacity by building legal strategies, collective action frames, and spaces for local, national, and transnational organizing. The most pivotal ally in this regard was a small group of well-connected lawyers, who began providing pro bono services to the ARB in 2002. Among the first generation of Colombian attorneys to be trained under the Constitution of 1991, these lawyers used innovative arguments to win six historic victories in the Constitutional Court that affirmed and reaffirmed recyclers' right to inclusion in formal waste management. Though Bogotá's three mayors from 2003-2011 failed to fully implement the rulings, they took initial steps in this direction. They conducted an initial recycler census, providing uniforms and technical trainings to recyclers, granted them access to waste from within government buildings, and built a facility for recycler cooperatives to collectively sort and sell goods.

In a second key development, the ARB and other Colombian recycler organizations began to procure support from abroad. Backing from a cadre of high profile international NGOs, foundations, corporations, and development funds helped recycler organizations boost their budgets and perceived legitimacy.^{xiii} ARB leaders argue these prestigious backers served as a "protective parasol" that shielded them from paramilitary repression (interview Ruiz-Grisales 2011). Also, international supporters facilitated the creation of transnational recycler networks, which served as platforms for leadership development, information exchange, solidarity protests, and diffusion of movement frames.

Third, ARB leaders have forged alliances with a host of national and transnational environmental justice NGOs (e.g., ENDA, GAIA, CEMPRE, The Zero Waste Alliance) to demand policies that protect both recycler livelihoods and the environment. Together, they have lobbied municipal officials for zero waste policies and sent recycler delegations to five global climate summits to advocate for resource recovery programs as an alternative to waste disposal technologies. Ciplest (2014) finds that the transnational delegations have had limited policy success, but have generated "unprecedented" media attention for recyclers, increasing their legitimacy in the eyes of domestic and transnational funders (pp. 88). The ARB's embrace of the increasingly resonant environmental frame is a classic example of "frame extension," that is, the

extension of a social movement's "primary framework so as to encompass interests... of considerable salience to potential adherents" (Snow et al. 1986:472) While recycler movements in many parts of the globe have portrayed recyclers as environmental champions, this framing may be especially important in the Colombian context as an alternative to the more perilous "labor rights" frame.

<A> Shift 2 —the privatization of waste management

A second major shift in the recyclers' position since the time of Birkbeck's writing occurred due to the privatization of waste management, part of Colombia's aggressive agenda of neoliberal reform during the 1980s and 1990s. Typically, privatization refers to the outsourcing of government functions to the private sector. The privatization of waste collection services in the developing world, however, is often accompanied by a second form of privatization: a transfer in the legal status of waste from a common property resource to private property of waste management companies, which attempt to usurp the role previously played by informal recyclers (Samson 2009a:84). Since the 1980s, privatization has successively threatened recyclers' very existence by cutting them off from their three access points to waste—dumps, streets, and buildings. As ARB-President Nohra Padilla explained in an address to the 2013 International Labor Conference, "Recyclers who are denied access to garbage are like fishers without fish, or farmers without land. We cannot survive..." (Bonner and Spooner 2012). Yet while privatization is typically presumed to have uniformly erosive effects on labor's power, for the recyclers, it has also created a narrow aperture to protect and vastly improve their livelihoods by winning inclusion in formal waste management.

For most of the 20th century, Bogotá had a two-track waste management system in which the city provided official door-to-door solid waste pickup and final disposal services, while recyclers salvaged materials from many points along the waste stream (Aluna 2011). The history of official waste management dates back to 1875 when the town council supervised a band of 100 prisoners who cleaned the streets daily (Ruiz-Restrepo and Barnes 2010). This soon proved insufficient, so a business tax was levied to raise funds for a small fleet of drivers, coaches, animals, and—eventually—trucks to collect waste. In 1954, Bogotá established EDIS, a state-owned enterprise that ran the city's waste pickup and disposal operations. Meanwhile, thousands of farmers migrated to Bogotá's urban slums fleeing the violence that killed three hundred thousand peasants in the 1950s (Palacios 2003). Many of them began to search through waste to

find food for consumption, scraps to feed animals, materials for shanties, and fuel for heat in the winter. Soon, they discovered their ability to earn a living from waste (Medina 2007:55). Most recyclers during this period collected from dumps and riverbeds, but some, known as *botelleros* bought newspapers, bottles, and jars from residents, while others known as *chatarreros* collected scrap metal on the streets. Such activity mushroomed over the second half of the twentieth century, as the city's population swelled from 1 to 7 million (Medina 2007:154-6).

Over the past thirty years, Bogotá and other Colombian municipalities have attempted to dissolve the two track public-informal waste system and replace it with one that is run exclusively by private corporations (Ruiz-Restrepo and Barnes 2010). Such privatization is driven not only by classic neoliberal logics of cutting public expenditures and increasing efficiency, but a related set of material and symbolic concerns. Developers and city officials see recyclers as impediments to the production of modern, “green and clean” urban landscapes, blemishes to be removed from view like the trash that they handle. Also, as waste streams expand due to increased consumption, and the demand for recyclables escalates due to environmental consciousness and industrial growth, waste management has become increasingly lucrative (Medina 2007). Municipal governments raise revenue by granting waste corporations monopolies on all aspects of waste management including recycling.

* Eviction from the waste dump*

The first major step in this development occurred in the mid-1980s, when cities began to replace state-owned open dumps with privately-run sanitary landfills that prohibited informal recycling. By 2005, when Decree 805 nationally banned public access to dumps, recyclers already had been shut out of most dumps for many years. Though policymakers justified such regulations based on legitimate concerns about the health and safety of dumpsite recyclers, as Sampson (2009b:b) observes in a parallel case in South Africa, “complete loss of income is an even graver threat to the health of the reclaimers and their families” (p. 15). Loss of access to dumps without alternative employment provisions pushed thousands of recyclers into the more poorly remunerated and physically arduous worksite of the streets, where they traveled by foot or horse cart average distances of 20 to 30 kilometers per day (Interview NGO director, Federico Parra 2011). The new worksite also increased recycler's public visibility, according to Ruiz-Grisales (interview 2012):

Recyclers have worked in Colombia for more or less, poorly counted, 100 years. We developed our trade for the first 60 or 70 years without any apparent problems. Why? Because we were in the dump where nobody entered. The politicians didn't go there, the government didn't go there, neither did the media. Nobody went there because it simply didn't exist. Society turned a blind eye to us. There were a few things moving around in the garbage, but they weren't human beings. They were garbage.

The sudden appearance of thousands of people digging through trash on the streets of middle and upper class neighborhoods amidst the tumult and violence that consumed Colombia in the late 1980s provoked a spectrum of reactions. At one pole, a coalition of foundations, NGOs, universities, and government agencies helped recyclers build organizations in order to improve their conditions and incomes. At another, the recyclers faced scorn from many citizens, some of whom formed vigilante “social cleansing” squads to assassinate them and other street dwellers. In 1992, around the peak of this activity, eleven corpses of murdered recyclers were discovered at a medical school in Barranquilla. Their organs had been sold for transplants and their bodies used for dissection (Medina 2007).

The attacks created new external sympathy and internal urgency for the recyclers' cause. The Barranquilla killings made national headlines and provoked the first large-scale recycler protests in several Colombian cities. The public outcry also played a major role in pushing the Colombian Senate to pass law 511 in 1999, which declared March 1 “National Recycler Day” in commemoration of the killings, and requested that local governments provide recyclers education, housing, and health benefits. Though such benefits never materialized and the senate has not passed follow up legislation, the toothless law was an important first step in increasing the legal and public recognition of the recycling trade (Restrepo Barnes 2010:102). At the First World Conference of Waste Pickers in 2008, March 1 was declared “Global Waste Pickers Day”, which is now celebrated annually by recycler organizations in Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Honduras, Uruguay, India, South Africa, and—of course—Colombia.

Entry and exit from formal service provision

While the Colombian state began to evict recyclers from garbage dumps in the 1980s, over the next two decades it attempted to prohibit them from collecting in streets and buildings as well. And while the dumpsite evictions prompted recyclers to organize entrepreneurially (see above), the new threats propelled them into a political struggle for inclusion in the formal waste

management system. The ARB's first taste of formal service provision came in 1994 when, in the midst of a spate of privatizations of public utilities, Bogotá began to liquidate the state-owned waste enterprise EDIS due to its inefficiency, low quality services, and financial insolvency (Ruiz-Restrepo and Barnes 2010). The closure of EDIS threatened the livelihoods of hundreds of municipal workers, who responded by striking. To avert a sanitary catastrophe, the administration solicited services from the fledgling ARB, which collected 700 tons of waste daily during the strike (Samson 2009a). Ruiz-Restrepo and Barnes (2010), lawyers who have advocated for the ARB, claim that this decision was made with the "acquiescence" of the municipal workers union. Samson (2009a:80) argues, however, that this case fits into a troubling international trend of cities pitting recycler organizations against municipal worker unions.

The strike failed and the municipality disbanded EDIS gradually from 1994-1996, during which time the ARB and FS jointly took a contract to provide 10% of the city's pickup and disposal services (Samson 2009a:66). After EDIS was fully dissolved, however, the municipality terminated its contract with the ARB and began exclusively commissioning to private corporations. The recyclers were once again relegated to the informal economy, but the experience of working for the city left them determined to push their way back into formal service provision. Padilla (interview 2012) says, "That experience was the basis for our struggle today. We learned that we *could be*, that we *knew how to be*, and that *we must be* included in formal waste management." By this point, recyclers in small municipalities such as La Plata and Chiquinquirá had already won official roles as service providers (Ruiz-Restrepo and Barnes 2010:101).

The privatization of waste management created a prospective avenue through which Colombian cooperatives could not only compete to win formal service provision contracts, but also expand their range of operations. Yet winning entry would pit them against well-healed and well-connected rivals, private waste and recycling firms. Moreover, just as some recycler cooperatives strived to penetrate the realm of formal door-to-door waste pickup, the private firms began taking steps towards usurping control of all aspects of the increasingly profitable field of recycling. Such efforts were abetted by policies that threatened to shut recyclers out of their two remaining access points to waste, the streets and buildings. In 2002, Colombia's president attempted to transform waste's legal status into the private property of waste management firms. Meanwhile, beginning in the mid-1990s, the municipal governments of Bogotá and several other

cities discussed plans to obligate citizens to separate recyclable from non-recyclable waste, both of which would be picked up by official service providers. Though such programs have yet to be widely implemented, municipalities began to sell off exclusive collection rights to private firms, potentially displacing recyclers who currently collect recyclables from buildings (Sampson 2009:70). Notably, the ARB and other recycler organizations strongly support the creation of official recycling routes, but argue that they should be run and staffed by recyclers.

<A> Shift 3—juridical empowerment

Social movement activists in the global south are increasingly using the language of human rights to frame their political objectives, and turning to courts to advance them (Couso, Hunees and Sieder 2010). Many scholars have criticized this trend as undermining insurgent political projects and paving the way for imperialism (Douzinas, 2007; Feldman 2009; Spivak 2004; Yiftachel 2009). For example, Brown (2004) argues that by focusing on negative liberal liberties (freedom from state oppression) rather than positive ones (access to food, shelter and healthcare), the dominant human rights paradigm fatalistically concedes possibilities for “a more substantive democratization of power” (p. 462). Moreover, human rights discourse is said to justify imperialist interventions by producing individualized, decontextualized, and depoliticized subjects who appear to need external assistance (Brown 2004, Rancière, 2004; Zizek, 2005). Meanwhile, juridical strategies for advancing rights are seen as legitimizing the status quo by circumscribing the role of mass-based movements and shifting contestation to sanctioned institutional channels (Munger 2012).

Given these condemnations, why are social movement activists flocking to frame social justice demands in the language of human rights? One response is that reductive critiques of human rights overlook the diversity of forms in which human rights are created and recreated through local movement struggles (Stammers 2009). As Fadaee (2014) argues, the very concept of “human rights” may be understood as an empty signifier, “which can only gain meaning if attached to specific contexts and practices” (p. 568). In what follows, I argue that while the aforementioned criticisms of human rights are not unfounded, they do not align with the experiences of Colombian recyclers. The ARB used human rights strategies to pursue both negative rights (countering laws that would cut off their access to waste) and positive ones (winning inclusion in the formal waste management system). Rather than rejecting politics, recyclers pushed the state to expand its role in guaranteeing their livelihoods. And rather than

abandoning popular protest in favor of legal advocacy, recyclers used both strategies in concert. They organized protests first to signify the subjects and directives of rights, and then to hold policy makers accountable for their implementation. Importantly, legal understandings were not only generated within the courtroom, but through a gamut of informal subnational and transnational spaces.

 The 2003 Cases: The right of Cooperatives to Compete in Bogotá

In late 20th century Latin America, democratic consolidation led to a crop of new constitutions that expanded social, economic, and cultural rights, and created higher courts with stronger powers of enforcement. Colombia was a trailblazer in this regard, as significant democratic reforms were carried out throughout the 1980s, culminating in the ratification of the Constitution of 1991—also known as “The Constitution of Rights.” The new constitution, catalyzed by a student and political movement called “We Can Still Save Colombia,” definitively adopted the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and created new enforcement mechanisms. Colombia so frequently falls short of these ideals that it has earned the ignominious distinction of having the hemisphere’s worst human rights record (Human Rights Watch 2007; Justice for Colombia 2012; Witness for Peace 2010). Nonetheless, the Constitutional Court, which is charged with defending the integrity and supremacy of the constitution, has served as a countervailing power to Colombia’s *mano dura*^{xiii} political leaders and a strategic leverage point for the recyclers. The recyclers have won seven victories in the Constitutional Court from 2003-2011. In what follows, I describe two of the early cases that established recyclers’ right to pursue their trade and to be included in privatization and formalization processes. Later ones helped specify what these rights meant in practice by reversing national and municipal policies which threatened the recyclers’ livelihoods.

The first recyclers’ rights case was brought to the Constitutional Court by the ARB and its pro bono legal aid in 2003. As discussed in the previous section, from 1994-1996, the ARB helped the city to collect waste during the municipal workers’ unsuccessful strike and the subsequent period in which the state-owned recycling enterprise was phased out. Once this process was completed, however, the city terminated its contract with the ARB and handed over rights to all recycling services to private corporations. Undeterred, ARB leaders prepared to compete for a contract in the subsequent tendering process in 2003. They procured international partners to provide financial backing, conducted studies of Bogotá and Buenos Aires’s waste

management systems, and improved their own operational capacity (interview ARB leader, Olivia Maza 2011).

When the ARB and its legal team began to prepare a bid in 2002, however, they ran up against two barriers to their entry into the competition. First, according to Law 142, only stock owned companies—not associations of cooperatives such as the ARB—could compete for contracts in large cities. Second, the city’s narrow terms for the tendering process restricted bidding to companies that had provided services in cities with at least a half million people for the preceding five years. This excluded the ARB from competition *de facto*, without affecting the corporations that had won contracts in the previous tendering process. It also presented a daunting challenge to the ARB’s pro bono legal team, as human rights law is difficult to apply to highly technical administrative matters such as a tendering process (interview ARB lawyer, Adriana Ruiz-Restrepo 2012). Nonetheless, the ARB legal team argued that policy that was “technically and formally legal” could still undermine human rights principles by threatening recyclers’ sole survival niche (Samson 2009a:68). The Constitutional Court accepted the case, and ruled in the recyclers’ favor, stipulating not only that the recyclers must be allowed to compete in tendering processes, but that affirmative action clauses should be implemented on their behalf. However, the municipality expedited the closure of the tendering process and awarded contracts before the ruling was made. The ruling could not be applied retroactively, thus the recyclers would have to wait another eight years for the next tendering process for a chance to compete (interview Constitutional Court clerk, Javier Francisco Arenas 2011).

In the midst of the Bogotá recyclers’ (temporarily) unsuccessful bid for inclusion in the formal waste management system, President Andrés Pastrana, on his last day in office, issued a national decree that endangered recyclers’ right to pursue their trade informally as well. Decree 1713 of 2002 stipulated that once garbage was left on the sidewalk in bags or bins, it became the property of the waste operator for that area, creating the potential that recyclers who collected from the street would be charged with theft. Due to lobbying by recyclers and their legal support, this decree was nullified by a subsequent one, Decree 1505 of 2003, which reclassified trash left on curbs as abandoned property which could lawfully be appropriated by anyone (Ruiz-Restrepo 2009).

* The 2008 case: the rights of displaced recyclers in Cali*

In 2008 a second attempt was made to outlaw the practice of collecting recyclables from the street nationally, this time on environmental grounds. Law 1259 imposed a fine of up to US \$500 for opening garbage from bags or cans in public or transporting trash in non-motorized vehicles, once again threatening most recyclers' sole survival niche (Samson 2009a:70). The ANR solicited assistance from CIVISOL, a NGO created by lawyers involved in the 2003 cases, which recommended an ambitious line of attack. Rather than challenging Law 1259 through judicial review, CIVISOL intended to demonstrate to the Constitutional Court that the law fit into a broader pattern of exclusion, then compel the court not only to revoke the law, but to mandate sweeping action towards protecting and formalizing the recyclers' trade. Moreover, CIVISOL sought "to obtain clarification, once and for all, of the scope and breadth of all waste pickers' rights in Colombia, whether in Cali or in Bogotá, whether surviving through recycling in a waste dump or by street collection" (Ruiz-Restrepo 2010:104). This strategy would require use of the *tutela* (writ of human rights)—a special court order created by the Constitution of 1991 that mandated swift state action in response to human rights crises that could not be addressed through other channels.

CIVISOL soon learned that recyclers in Cali had already filed *tutelas* to protest their eviction from the Navarro Dump—ironically, the very site where Birbeck wrote of the recyclers' political impotence 30 years before. In 2008, the city had replaced the publically owned Navarro Dump with a private landfill, the last step in a comprehensive privatization plan for Cali's waste management system. The city had promised 600 displaced recycler families compensation for their loss of livelihood, but the assistance never materialized, provoking the recyclers to occupy a historic church in protest (Samson 2009a). Additionally, twenty-four recyclers filed *tutelas*, which were rejected on the grounds that the city had "no type of responsibility" to the recyclers because "no contractual or legal relation" linked the two parties.^{xiv}

CIVISOL began collaborating with the recyclers to prove a broad pattern of rights violation by linking the *tutelas* to the case against Law 1259 (interview Adriana Ruiz-Restrepo 2012). The lawyers argued that though there were legitimate environmental and health rationales for closing the Navarro Dump, the new arrangement violated the Constitutional Court's 2003 ruling that recyclers should be included in all waste procurement processes. Moreover, Law 1259 blocked recyclers' access to waste on the street, leaving many with no means of subsistence. The court sided with the recyclers, overturning the provisions in Law 1259 that affected their

livelihoods and ordering the formalization of all of Cali's recyclers. The court also declared the right of the recyclers to be formalized as entrepreneurs, rather than employees of large factories:

It must not be forgotten the fact that the recyclers, although informally, acted as entrepreneurs. Therefore, an appropriate alternative, rather than converting them into employees of the big recycling companies, is providing them some space to keep acting as entrepreneurs, promoting their organizational capacity and strengthening their capacities and opportunities to appropriately carry out the activity that they had developed throughout time.^{xv}

The Court mandated the creation of an ad-hoc committee to design a socially inclusive waste management program for Cali.

* The role of the labor movement*

If the recyclers' key political leverage came through legal victories, what was the purpose of mobilization? That is to say, what was the division of labor between the social movement and its lawyers? One answer is that recycler organizations provided the vision and initiative behind the legal strategy. As lawyer Ruiz-Restrepo (interview 2012) explains:

“I am a legal, public policy translator of their needs and frustrations. But who had the vision of saying we need to [compete in the tendering process]? That wasn't me. I didn't go looking for waste pickers and saying 'hey, you have a chance here.' That was [ARB leaders], Nohra [Padilla] and Silvio [Ruiz-Grisales]. So the initiative is theirs, completely. That's the social movement. They had to detect and spot change, they had to understand their environment, that their environment changed, that the opportunities narrowed, and that in that little tiny hole—they had to get in. And they had to look for lawyers.

Ruiz-Restrepo credits ARB leaders not only for pivoting focus from social service provision to political struggle after the withdrawal of FS, but for collaborating in the creation of legal strategy. For example, ARB members found the Cali recyclers who had filed *tutelas* and helped Ruiz-Restrepo develop the idea of demanding rights as entrepreneurs.

A second manner by which the recycler movement likely contributed to the legal victories was by influencing judges and the broader public through displays of what Charles Tilly (2004) terms “WUNC” (worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment). As Ruiz-Restrepo explains:

“These cases would have [hypothetically] been won in the abstract because they are about the reasonableness, the rationality, and the constitutionality of reform. So your rights are your rights—it doesn’t matter if you’re one or 300,000 people. Now, that is in theory of course. It’s not the same if you have 300,000 people in front of the court.”^{xvi}

Indeed, organized recyclers often show up to public hearings en masse, though their largest turnouts have numbered in the thousands rather than hundreds of thousands.^{xvii} They also draw upon other traditional “contentious collective action repertoires” such as demonstrations, media outreach, and participation in public meetings, as well as solidarity statements and protests from allied domestic and international recycler organizations (Tilly 2004:42). Importantly, winning the public’s trust to perform a vital sanitary service requires that the *desechables* not only communicate their worthiness and commitment as protesters, but as workers and managers. To this end, they have created a different type of symbolic repertoire, ranging from everyday performances of professional identity, to collective dramatizations of work. For example, to demonstrate their commitment to public service during a sanitary crisis in December 2012, 120 ARB members volunteered to sweep streets and collect garbage in the city’s historic center for two weeks, which their NGO allies chronicled and publicized online through a mini-documentary.^{xviii}

The third and perhaps most exacting role of the social movement is to hold reluctant policy makers accountable for implementing the Constitutional Court’s decisions. The need for such outside political leverage is evidenced by successive municipal administrations’ (2003-2011) resistance to creating inclusive waste management policy, even after twice being found in contempt of court. According to a frustrated Ruiz-Restrepo and Barnes (2010:106), “Seemingly, a case lost by the authorities in front of the Court is believed and felt by the State as nothing more than a reproach, rather than a binding legal decision. The same attitude applies with respect to judicial writs, which are interpreted as suggestions.” ARB leaders accused municipal administrations during this period not only of flouting the court’s rulings, but of attempting to undermine the recycler movement as a whole by pitting organizations against one another and promoting the creation of “false organizations” run by government allies posing as recyclers. Adversarial relations with municipal policy makers, waste management companies, and rival recycler organizations have pushed the ARB to rely on displays of WUNC not only to make

claims about the rights of recyclers, but to defend its own legitimacy as a representative of recyclers.^{xix}

<A> Conclusion

Labor scholars and organizers have long dismissed informal workers as “unorganizable,” presuming them to be too weak and fragmented to collectively challenge capital and the state. Undeterred, millions of “the world’s most vulnerable workers” have begun mobilizing for labor and human rights over the past quarter-century, a period when neoliberalism is said to have crippled workers’ power (Agarwala 2013:5). What has enabled this unexpected development? I have explored this question through a case study of the Colombian recycler movement—a “least likely” case for successful mobilization due to the recyclers’ social and economic marginalization and the Colombian state’s violent repression of labor movements. The rise of neoliberalism and the consolidation of democracy created political opportunities and threats that galvanized the recycler movement in ways that conventional perspectives on the informal economy would not lead us to expect. Three specific links connected these macro-level transformations to increases in the recyclers’ collective organizing capacity. First, technical, financial, and symbolic backing from NGOs and foundations enabled recyclers to develop innovative organizing models. Second, human rights provisions contained in the Constitution of 1991 created an opening to challenge state policy. Third, the privatization of waste management—fueled by structural adjustment pressures and the increased value of recyclables—spurred recyclers to action by leaving them with two clear-cut possibilities: waste corporations might permanently displace them, or recyclers might collectively organize to protect and improve their livelihoods.

Ruiz-Restrepo (interview 2012) likens formality to a house and informality to the area surrounding it, where “waste pickers were being socially cleansed and running around the pool.” This metaphor overstates the informal/formal dichotomy,^{xx} but is useful in envisioning the power asymmetry between informal recyclers and waste corporations. Elaborating the metaphor, we might imagine that for nearly a century house outsiders eked out a living by sorting through a trashcan full of waste primarily produced within the house, and selling back valuable components. Over time, members of the house demanded more raw materials to fuel their consumption, which in turn produced more waste and provided employment for more members of the growing population of outsiders. The swelling hordes of recyclers repulsed and frightened

house insiders, some of whom saw a business opportunity. These insiders privatized the increasingly valuable resource of waste, bringing the trashcan back into the house in order to sort through it with modern technology. Just as they were closing the door, however, a group of outsiders stuck a wedge in it, pried it open, and declared, ‘If you take the can into the house, we’re coming with it.’ If civil society support was the vehicle that recyclers used to arrive at the door of the house, then the Constitution of 1991 was the wedge. Notably, the employment of these tools required collaboration between outsiders and sympathetic insiders. The door is now open, but it remains to be seen how many recyclers will be welcomed into the house and whether they will be capable of building enterprises within it.

How does the Colombian recycler movement help us understand the unexpected global boom in informal worker organizing? Generalizing from any single case study is hazardous and the Colombian recyclers have admittedly made exceptional gains relative to most of their national and international counterparts. Nonetheless, though much of the specific configuration of threats and opportunities that stimulated their movement are specific to the Colombian waste industry, many of the processes behind it had their genesis at the global level. It is not unreasonable to conjecture that given a local political context of democratic consolidation and a local social context in which civil society organizations provide support, grievances created by neoliberal reforms are likely to provoke increased informal worker organizing efforts. Systematic cross-national and cross-industrial analysis of informal worker movements are needed to corroborate this hypothesis. Nonetheless, the gains of the Colombian recyclers suggest that working in cohort, marginalized workers and civil society groups may tap into reservoirs of power that are not anticipated by narratives which view neoliberal globalization and the resultant erosion of labor’s power as an inevitable and monolithic process.

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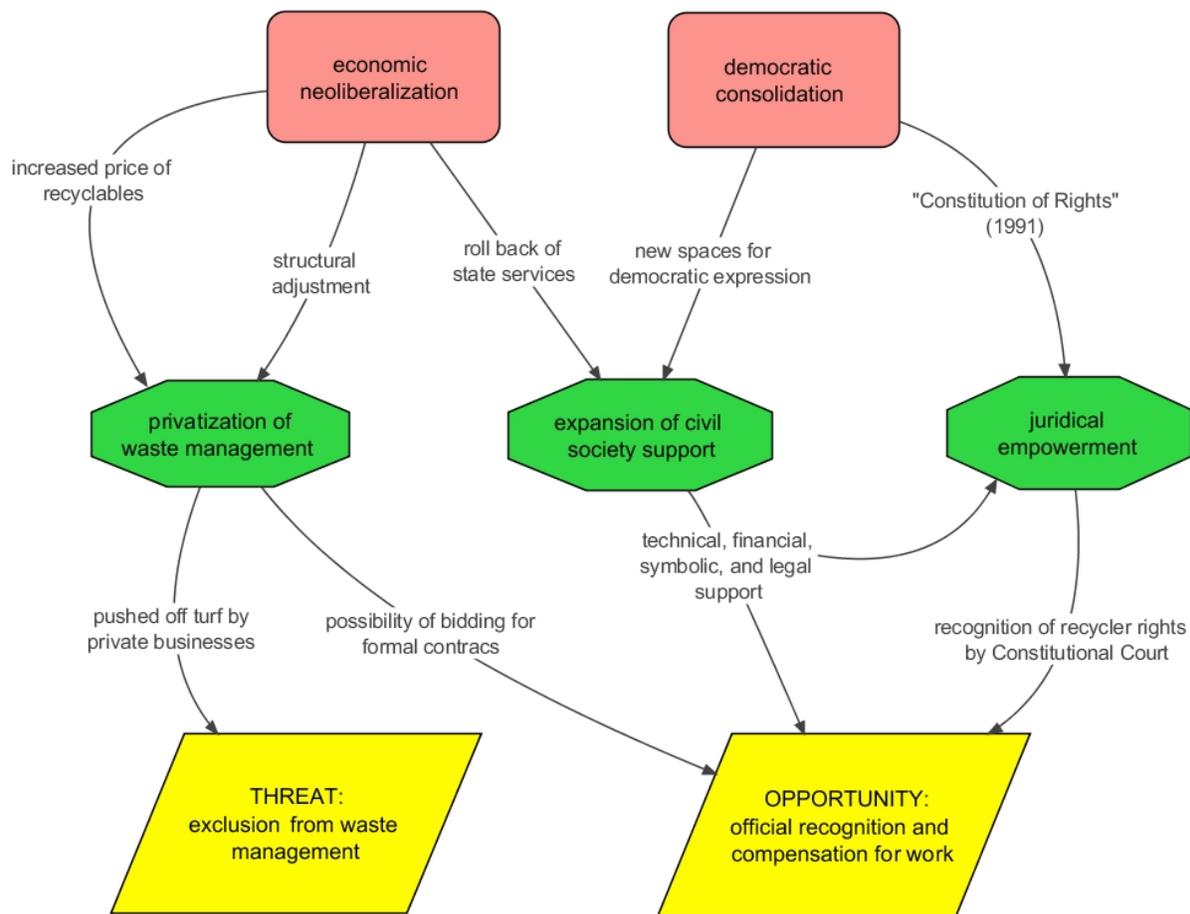
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Table 1. The shifting political opportunity structure of the Colombian recycler movement



NOTES

ⁱ This definitional approach was first proposed by Castells and Portes (1989) and later widely adopted. One advantage of this definition is that it defines informality in relation to state policy, thereby creating ostensibly clear lines of demarcation (Collier and Palmer-Rubin 2011:5). In practice such lines often become muddled, but they still provide the potential for a sharper conceptual framework than definitions that highlight the precarious nature of informal work or the lack of bureaucratic sophistication of informal enterprises.

ⁱⁱ Many terms are used to refer to recyclers including binner, dumpster diver, informal resource recoverer, poacher, rag picker, reclamer, salvager, scavenger, and waste picker. Following the example of Garavito (2006), I use the term “recycler”—a translation of the Spanish term “reciclador.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Evans and Sewell (2013) claim that neoliberalism is an “essentially contested” concept, which may refer to an economic theory, political ideology, or policy paradigm (p. 3). I discuss neoliberalism primarily in the latter sense—as a set of market-oriented reforms including privatization of state-owned enterprises, roll back of social programs, market deregulation, and structural adjustment conditionalities.

^{iv} For an excellent review of 200 recent works on formal-informal linkages, see Meagher (2013).

^v Unfortunately, there is little quantitative data on the growth of informal worker movements, which tend to evade traditional metrics of collective action such as union density, strikes, and protests. Nonetheless, the Indian government has conducted rigorous research on this phenomenon and estimates that 8% of the country’s informal workforce—some 9 million workers—are unionized (Agarwala 2013:8).

^{vi} For example, Bonner and Spooner (2012:20-22) provide accounts of how seasonal rice farmers in Northern Italy organized highly successful strikes and rebellions throughout the first half of the twentieth century, and Bolivian cooks and flower vendors inspired by anarchist ideologies formed the General Women Worker’s union in 1927.

^{vii} This estimate comes from the World Bank Study “Decade Watch: The Value in Wastes” (Bartone 1988). A more recent study estimates that there are 1.5 million recyclers in India alone (Chaturvedi 2010). There is, however, little reliable data about the number and demographics of recyclers worldwide. Most academic research on recyclers is qualitative rather than quantitative. Systematic large scale data collection is difficult due to the profession’s informal nature, porous borders, seasonally fluctuating workforce, and widely dispersed and mobile worksites. Thus, the large scale estimates that do exist are mainly extrapolations based on very small original research samples.

^{viii} A significant population also recycles on a *part-time* basis to supplement other income sources or on a *temporary* basis to stay afloat while in-between jobs. Very few studies have been conducted on these groups.

^{ix} For more on the “classification struggles” of marginalized workers, see Chun’s (2008) analysis of subcontracted service workers efforts to contest and redefine norms about employer-employee identities. The recyclers’ case also bares parallels to Jenness’s (1990) analysis of sex worker organizations’ efforts to publically recast sex workers as legitimate workers with rights as such.

^x Lavalley and Bueno (2011) and Guenther (2011) provide more comprehensive responses to the NGOization thesis.

^{xi} Ruiz-Restrepo and Barnes (2010), lawyers who work with the ARB, explain this dependency as follows:

“Organization depends on three resources that are very scarce when living in poverty: time, space and money... [there] is never enough to invest in creating and running a business establishment or a civic-solidary organization, whose utility is still an unproven risk.” (p. 95).

^{xii} Key backers include transnational development banks (e.g., The Interamerican Development Bank, The World Bank), foundations (e.g., Ford and Gates), corporate sponsors (e.g., Natura Cosmetics and PepsiCo), and NGOs (e.g., WIEGO, ENDA, AVINA, GAIA).

^{xiii} Literally “strong handed”—used to describe leaders who are tough on crime, guerillas, and leftist movements.

^{xiv} Constitutional Court ruling T-291-2009:611.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, 601.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 610.

^{xvii} 300,000 refers to a commonly cited estimate of the total number of recyclers in Colombia (see Hower 1997).

^{xviii} WIEGO and ARB. 2013. “Chronicle of a fight for Inclusion: the December 2012 garbage crisis of Bogotá.”

Directed by Christian Mantilla. Retrieved on July 20, 2015 (<http://globalrec.org/2013/03/26/chronicle-of-a-fight-for-inclusion-the-december-2012-garbage-crisis-of-bogota-now-with-english-subtitles/a>)

^{xix} I shall save further analysis of the contemporary relational dynamics between ARB and other actors in its political field for future writings, as the present paper focuses on the political and economic dynamics that led to the emergence and growth of the recycler movement.

^{xx} Over thirty years after coining the term “informal sector”, Hart (2006:24, 29) warned that the concept poses an either/or fallacy. The informal/formal dichotomy “gives the impression that [informal and formal] are located in different places, like agriculture and manufacturing” and leads scholars to “mistake the category for the reality it identifies.” In fact, the formal and informal economies are closely interwoven and many enterprises exist in a grey area between the two ideal types. Cobb, King, and Rodriguez (2009) propose a “spectrum of formality.”