

JOURNAL FÜR ENTWICKLUNGSPOLITIK

vol. XXXV 2/3-2019

WASTE AND GLOBALISED INEQUALITIES

Special Issue Guest Editors: Nicolas Schlitz, Stefan Laser

Published by:
Mattersburger Kreis für Entwicklungspolitik
an den österreichischen Universitäten

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ROBERT HAFNER, FRANK ZIRKL

Waste De_marginalised?

**A Comparative Analysis of the Socio-Economic Effects
of In_formal Recycling Activities. Argentina, Brazil and
Germany Revisited**

ABSTRACT Waste collection and recycling increasingly appears on the socioeconomic and political agenda both in the Global South and North. In the case of waste pickers, Latin America has a long-standing past of dealing with informal and marginalised activities, slowly making their way towards formalisation. In this paper we make two arguments. First, on a conceptual level, we highlight the implication of the semantics and synonyms of waste, which are then reflected in the ambivalence and de-dichotomised way of understanding de_marginalisation and the in_formal. Second, we empirically compare cases from Argentina and Brazil with Germany to highlight the pitfalls of Eurocentric perspectives on in_formal waste management.

KEYWORDS waste, informality, marginalisation, Global North/South

I. Introduction

At the end of 2017, the Chinese government decided to drastically reduce the import of plastic waste; some European countries such as Germany and Great Britain became alarmed (Der Standard, 1/5/18): As their recycling capacities were not able to handle all the growing amount of plastic waste, the question of how and where to recycle became evident. This is not an isolated example. On a global scale the quantity of all types of waste is increasing, and new forms of recycling activities are subsequently developing.

It becomes increasingly obvious that waste is more than simply its materiality and the desire to get rid of it. This comes along with ‘new geographies of waste’, where, beside a traditional conceptualisation of waste (e.g. as a hazardous material to be processed), social science approaches are becoming popular. Via a (socio-) spatial perspective, it has become a topic in its own right to analyse waste as resource and to bring together the informal and formal aspects of waste and consumption, environmental behaviour and (social) marginalisation (Moore 2012).

Our approach focuses on a socio-economic view of waste, based on different perspectives on the in_formal, (de_) marginalisation, and the social construction of waste. In so doing, we begin with a critical review of the theoretical concepts at hand. Methodologically, we rely on qualitative research methods and long-term fieldwork periods in our case study countries of Argentina, Brazil and Germany (c.f. Hafner 2014; Zirkl 2007).

With our contribution, we want to open the discussion about the terms ‘waste’, ‘marginalization’ and ‘informality’ in such a way that waste picking can be understood not only as a problem, but also as a first step towards conceptual expansions of marginalisation (seen here as a form of “de_marginalisation”) and a reconceptualisation of informality (towards the in_formal). Our focus is based on the questions of how terms such as marginalisation, informality and waste are perceived by the local population and which conclusions we can draw by analysing these different positions. Here, we compare commonalities and differences among the different perspectives taken from case studies in Argentina, Brazil and Germany.

We develop three conceptual aspects. First, in a theoretical framing, we call for a semantic and synonymic outlining of waste, highlighting the normative baggage that comes with the terms applied. Second, we critically analyse the concepts of marginalisation in order to raise the question of pre-set notions and interpretations that may hinder the reconceptualisation of recent trends in waste collection and recycling. Third, we discuss the notions of the informal and formal, giving an overview of the different interpretations. The result thereof will be our proposition of ‘in_formal’ in the framework of recycling, highlighting the trans-dualist notion of the informality concept. To put it differently, we are interested in the waste-related actions that are positioned in the fluid gap between the informal

and the formal. Here, we argue that socio-cultural and political contexts have to be explicitly taken into account for understanding the normative conceptualisation.

Waste, de_marginalisation and the in_formal are then contextualised within the case studies from Argentina, Brazil and Germany, in order to empirically visualize alternative interpretations of the activity of waste collection. Argentina and Brazil have long-standing experiences in the informal waste handling business. The socio-economic and human aspects are at the foreground, which then move towards more technical and formal modes of action. Germany acts as a counter-example. With a significant focus on technical solutions to waste, informal activities of bottle collection have re-emerged during the last decade, opening up new – and unintended – opportunities to create informal income.

2. Waste, garbage, filth, rubbish – different wordings and conceptualisations

Waste is primarily seen in a materialistic way. From a human geography perspective, we focus on waste as a social construction. Regarding the situation in France and Germany, Keller (2009: 22) shows that waste is part of the materialistic culture of a consumer-related society. When a product reaches the end of its life cycle, the transition from a desired good to an undesired (and hopefully soon invisible) piece of waste remains in the common perception of consumers. However, how do we define the materials that we – after their use – consider as garbage (and which we try to get rid of)? Besides this material aspect, a socio-cultural meaning of waste is present: waste and its symbolic connotations reflect certain social practices, not only regarding how people produce and dispose of waste, but also how in_formal waste economies are organised in different cases.

When writing about the connection between waste and human action and perception, it has to be borne in mind that the term ‘waste’ is normatively loaded. Moore (2012: 782), for example, plots the different connotations of waste on the axes of positive-negative (x) and relational-dualist (y). While helpful at first glance, she however mixes different definitional categories, ranging from synonyms for waste (e.g. resource)

to others, such as disorder. When focusing on informal waste collection and recycling, Sicular (1992: 19) makes the distinction between 'waste-as-waste' (it is what it is, no adding of socio-economic value is considered) and 'waste-as-ore' (the material and socio-economic potential is recognised). The former definition is predominantly applied by formal waste deposit companies, while the latter attributes to waste the characteristic of being an additional economic resource, as it will be shown by in_formal waste collectors in the three case studies below.

Besides the diverging normative definitions of waste, the semantic aspect of pseudo-synonyms also has to be considered: waste is not the only term used in this context. Bierbrauer (2011: 25f.), in the Argentine example highlights the distinctions between *basura* (residuals of household waste that are not recyclable or do not have enough economic value to be sold), *residuos* (disposed materials that have the potential to be recycled), and *materiales* (where recycling is highly likely). To further contextualise, those normative attributions are not only observed in the Spanish language, but have their counterparts in the languages of our three cases (i.e. Spanish, Portuguese, German, as well as English). Table 1 classifies the terms most commonly used in the four languages. While waste is the more general and technical expression, garbage (among others, c.f. table 1, column a) stands for materials that are considered without value and to be disposed of. This category is represented by the traditional waste business, where economic aspects (e.g. collection, treatment, deposition of municipal garbage) as well as socioeconomic implications (e.g. different types and quantities of waste regarding different socio-economic urban neighbourhoods) and ecological problems (environmental implications through garbage treatment) can be observed. With the third category (recyclable materials), a more ecologically sound characteristic of waste management is at the foreground, contributing to a more sustainable process of waste treatment (resource recovery etc.), including formal and informal recycling business activities.

	a. Materials to be disposed of (not recyclable)	b. Technical definition: materials that can be treated and recycled	c. Materials (recyclable)
English	garbage, rubbish, litter, refuse, trash	waste	recyclables
Spanish	basura, deshecho	residuo	material reciclable
Portuguese	lixo	resíduos	material reciclável
German	Müll, Reststoffe	Abfall	Wertstoffe

Table 1: classification of waste-related terms in English, Spanish, Portuguese and German

Source: own elaboration

Consequently, we want to highlight the fact that frequently-used synonyms for waste – in addition to their contextual usage and translational incommensurabilities with other languages – do come with their own normative baggage and have to be critically evaluated according to the intended use.

3. De_marginalisation

The second concept closely related to in_formal waste management is marginalisation. To avoid confusion, there are three different shapings of the word: marginal as an adjective, marginality as a situation, and marginalisation as a process. ‘Marginal’ used as an adjective is connected to a physical or cognitive location distant from the centre and considered insignificant. ‘Marginality’ expresses a situation (relative to the status quo, i.e. a marginal position). In this sense, Braun and Gatzweiler (2014: 3) define marginality as “an involuntary position and condition of an

individual or group at the margins of social, political, economic, ecological, and biophysical systems that prevent them from access to resources, assets, services, restraining freedom of choice preventing the development of capabilities, and eventually causing extreme poverty.”

We, however, are more interested in the processes behind the marginal. ‘Marginalisation’ focuses on the process of becoming marginalised in different ways. Two perspectives arise: first, marginalisation is anchored in a spatiality located at the edge or even outside of pre-set spatial limits. A focus is put on spatial (and socioeconomic) aspects of peripheral areas and the analyses of the circumstances by which these spaces become marginalised. Geographies of marginalisation (cf. Trudeau/McMorran 2011, Pelc 2017) focus on spaces on the margin and on how social inequalities produce (spatial) exclusion and marginalisation (which can be instantiated in, for example, minority groups or the socio-economically underprivileged).

Taking a socio-economic view, marginalisation is normatively characterised as a process towards poverty and social exclusion. Poverty and marginalisation are mutually dependent (being poor can lead to a marginal position, while facing a marginal position very often is the reason for being poor) and appear for example in vulnerable settings and living conditions in fragmented urban areas (see e.g. informal squatter settlements in the vicinity of gated communities in Brazilian cities).

Marginalisation thus implies two aspects: (a) It is a shift of a person’s movement towards less favourite circumstances; and (b) this movement is not desired or initiated by the person(s) affected. While we agree with (a), it has to be understood that marginalisation comes along with (and in part has to be differentiated from) other characteristics such as stigmatisation, precarity or (non-)participation, adding additional normatively laden conceptions to the table. Bearing this thought in mind, (b) is challenged. Does somebody fall into a marginal position because of personal activities (‘external marginalisation’, or being regarded as marginal by others) or do people consider themselves to be marginalised because of their individual situation (‘auto-marginalisation’; here, the person considers themselves marginalised through her/his own actions)? The point we want to make here is to highlight the fact that marginalisation depends to a large degree on interpersonal interpretations, contextualisation, and perspectives.

Marginalisation is one central parameter for our observations regarding waste / recyclable pickers. From an external perspective, people become marginalised – in a socially constructed perspective – because their socio-economic (i.e. marginalised) situation makes them collect waste. Due to this activity, their marginalisation is reinforced. However, as modern consumption patterns are becoming increasingly critiqued (e.g. as regards environmental aspects, sustainability, socioeconomic problems), some impacts arising from discourses on local and global waste management can be detected. As shown later new forms of waste and recyclables management emerge, reducing the generation of waste as well as improving recycling activities. Consequently, particularly in the Global South, veteran marginalised actors such as the South American *catadores/cartoneros* start to lose their negative (marginal) image and become important partners in modern urban waste treatment. While waste picking is still stigmatised, the inclusion of the actors in the waste management cycle does, however, lead to a partial trend reversal of marginalisation. To semantically express the ambivalence of remaining in the realms of marginalised life conditions but managing to move beyond it, we suggest the term ‘de_marginalization’ within the ‘in_formal’ (see following chapter below) urban economy of recyclables.

4. The concept of the in_formal

Our three empirical examples will show that waste collection and recycling is carried out in the grey area between the informal and the formal. Remaining in the realms of established definitions of informal and formal, the question arises, however as to which aspects of waste collection are to be classified as informal, formal, or something in between, and what the legal, social and economic implications are thereof.

We identify three forms of positioning the informal towards the formal. First, the informal can be seen as an equal-level alternative to the formal. Being praxis-driven, the main argument here is that there are many actors in the whole system and some are informal, while others are formal. Here, the actors’ positioning within the Global South or North does not have any significance, since all are a part of the whole system.

The informal, however, is located outside of the formal (Samson 2015); the informal can then be used as an “unregulated arena in which micro-entrepreneurs choose to operate in order to lower costs and increase profit” (Phillips 2011: 384). Thus, the informal is considered as a tool to influence and change settings. The goals for doing so are twofold: closely connected to neoliberal theories (Komlosy et al. 1997: 16), the orthodox objective is to remove regulations in order to enable an expansion of the formal setting to previously informal actions. Thus, it acts as a blueprint for changing formal rules. The pragmatic goal goes in a different direction and celebrates informality as an answer to ‘modernist’ large corporations’ actions (c.f. Samers 2005). With the informal challenging the boundaries of the formal (and ultimately expanding them), this becomes a subversive expression of the current formal system.

The second form of positioning considers the informal as subordinated to the formal. Here, in the modernisation theory inspired (Komlosy et al. 1997: 14) dualist understanding, the spotlight lies on unskilled and labour intensive work. Focusing on the workers rather than on the structure, the informal is seen as inferior to the formal and considered a last resort for those who cannot make it within formal structures. This was well-defined by an early ILO definition of a “non-structured sector that has emerged in urban centres as a result of formal sectors’ inability to absorb new entrants” (International Labour Office 1972: 9). It was later revised to a “viable alternative to formal sector employment” (International Labour Office 1993: 3), showing the problematic vertical dichotomisation of the informal and the formal. Nonetheless, the main goal of the dualist framework remains to formalise the informal, a task that has to be carried out through public policy. Addressing the main critique of the dualist approach, the structuralist perspective acknowledges that the formal and informal are intertwined. The informal is still considered a subordinate part of the whole system, by being subordinated to the formal’s goal of improving competitiveness, flexibility and reducing costs (Moser 1978; Portes/Castells 1991). The goal here is not so much system change, or the informal’s absorption by the formal, but rather to maintain the status quo of production and informal labour. Thus, normative elements are not so prominent; as it neglects the forms in which micro-enterprises use their social networks (Cheng/Gereffi 1994). What remains is the valuation

asymmetry in favour of formality. For better analytical purposes, Komlosy (2015: 41–46) uses conceptual coupling and synonymisation to describe the formal vs. the informal: legal vs. illegal, legally regulated vs. unregulated, socially secured vs. nonsecured, and the combination of different work relationships. While the first three category pairs are manageable in empirical fieldwork, the latter plays tribute to the increasingly ambivalent working and living situation between informality and formality. Thus, Komlosy implicitly acknowledges the boundaries of binary classification methods. This viewpoint is also found in the latest ILO topologies, where instances of non-standard forms of employment are used to avoid the bipolar dichotomisation of formal vs. informal work (International Labour Office 2015: 32–33).

The third positioning of the informal is diametrically opposed to the second: which is a romanticised portrayal of resistance. This occurs particularly in the debate on housing, where it is praised as the “reconquest of the urban” (Brissac-Peixoto 2009: 246), reflects “informality as subaltern practice” (Varley 2013: 7), or even talked about in the form of “‘inverse’ colonialism” (Yiftachel 2009: 91). Thus, it comes as no surprise that traditional characteristics of the ‘informal’ – low entry barriers, lack of organisation, irregular income, or health risks related to the working conditions – are increasingly questioned (Oteng-Ababio et al. 2014: 164). This form of informal economy is rich in synonyms such as ‘underground economy’, ‘shadow economy’, or ‘survivalist economy’. The terms remain ambiguous and are accompanied by negative connotations (Mingione 1983: 311), an aspect that Oteng-Ababio et al. (2016: 267) criticise as being too narrow minded. This is also underpinned by transformations observed in this sector; key words here are crowd- or click workers or solo-entrepreneurs experiencing similar hardships as in the ‘classic’ informality-scheme, but who are – legally – in formal settings (cf. Mahnkopf/Altwater 2015: 28). To overcome the normatively and negatively charged sensations, a particularly interesting alternative is the concept of ‘system D’, originating from the French/Caribbean *débrouillard* (i.e. resourceful), which attempts to add a positive spin to the negative connotation of informality through the active visualisation of elements of social capital and improvisation (cf. Meagher 2003; Neuwirth 2012; Grant 2015: 136).

As shown with the example of the crowd and click workers, the boundaries between the informal and the formal are blurred economically, legally, and socially. Similar amalgamations between the informal and the formal are observed by Mahnkopf and Altvater (2015: 19) when they consider the changing nature of work of the 18th century (i.e. the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society; Sittel et al. 2015: 61). Like in the 18th century, work relationship and dependencies are now re-structured. They do not go along with ‘the usual’ historical forms and norms of doing and organising work, and are thus considered informal. Even though those workers emerged in a digital age, significant similarities are observed in the case of waste collectors. Thus, we go along with the critical remark by Inverardi-Ferri that we should move beyond the informal–formal divide (and particularly the gap between theoretical concept and the “fact”; 2017: 2) but to beware of a simple substitution of the term with others. Formal-informal do not stand on their own but are rather intertwined and blurred along axes of context-based categorisation (e.g. legal–illegal, registered–unregistered, visible–invisible, etc).

As a result, we consider informal and formal as still important umbrella terms. We will show how the different positionings of the informal towards the formal (equal, pejorative or superior) have an effect on the respective waste collectors’ (auto-) perception and economic as well as social strategies. Additionally, we want to highlight the conceptual challenges of binary frameworks as being too black-and-white by introducing a new written form of the informal and formal: *in_formal*. In so doing, we want to make the fluidity of actors’ movement between the informal and the formal explicit and semantically visible.

5. Waste, the *in_formal* and *de_marginalisation*: experiences from the Global South and Global North

So far, we have stressed both the negative effects of ‘not being part of the norm’ and also clearly highlighted the potentials that arise thereof. Thus, we agree with Oteng-Ababio et al. who argue from a Global South perspective that informality is neither exclusively a matter of the Global South nor “just a set of marginal last-resort survival activities” (2016: 267).

This is further highlighted through our understanding of the in_formal as a “mode of practice” (Roy 2004), emphasising that these modes (in our case the act of collecting recyclable material) do not only occur in the Global South but are increasingly visible in cities of the Global North (e.g. deposit bottles in Germany).

When dealing with the topic at hand, the sentence “there where somebody lives, there will be waste”, has to be refined and expanded with the phrase “and those who live off it” (Hafner 2014: 79). Each of the three examples from Argentina, Brazil and Germany show their proper dynamics, presenting three contexts on in_formal waste management. To analyse the different realities in the Global South and Global North, (participant) observation was the entry point to obtain first-hand information on the respective situations (for example, in Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, and Curitiba). Additionally, we conducted narrative interviews to better understand how people have started working in in_formal waste businesses and how their experiences and their expectations look like now, and are considered in terms of the future. We also conducted group interviews with recycling material collectors to identify everyday problems, as well as obtaining their individual views on organisational aspects such as participating in a recycling cooperative. In-depth interviews were carried out with community leaders and stakeholders from the formal garbage segment. In a few cases, we mapped waste collectors’ movements in public space and their identification of locations with conflict potential.

5.1 Waste treatment in Brazil: the in_formal and de_marginalization

Profound socioeconomic disparities are a major characteristic of Brazilian life, which is also reflected in the country’s formal and informal waste management. While urban areas, especially in the southern and south-eastern region, account for an elevated sanitation infrastructure, the rest of the country still needs to improve significantly. Some brief facts characterise the waste sector in Brazil (data for 2016/2017, see IBGE 2018; Perreira/Goes 2016):

- more than 90% of households receive some kind of public waste collection,
- almost all of the collected municipal waste is destined to landfills (one third of the garbage still goes to illegal dump sites);
- technical know-how as well as a juridical basis (the first comprehensive waste law, n° 12.305, from 2010) do exist, and waste management is widely discussed in the political realm; waste engineering techniques are well known and put into practice;
- waste reduction still has to be improved, and even if the so called “3 Rs” (reduce, reuse, recycle) are discursively popular, their implementation is still lacking;
- waste separation on a municipal level started in the 1990s, and official (municipal, national) as well as private programmes do show some primary results (e.g. aluminium recycling is very common, due to an individual initiative by an aluminium can producing company);
- a significant number of environmental education programmes have been implemented (some governmental, some by NGOs), but there is still a gap as regards putting the initiatives more efficiently into practice;
- informal waste management (e.g. recycling material pickers, so called *catadores*) and recovering recycling materials are quite common in urban areas.

The organisation and monitoring of urban waste management are tasks of the municipality, while in practice private companies are in charge of waste collection, treatment and disposal. The third group of actors are a significant number of usually informal collectors of recyclables. These *catadores* look for recycling materials in two locations: on municipal landfills, remaining invisible to the general public and thus both spatially and socio-economically marginalised, or through mining in waste containers on their intensive waste collection walks in urban areas. As participatory observations and go-alongs have shown, the second mode of collection is prone to greater socio-cultural vulnerability, as they are visibly marked as the ‘informal ones’. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the self-perception of their work is anchored in the latter positioning of informality being subordinated to the formal.

In both cases, as interview results have shown, the most desired materials are paper, plastic, aluminium cans and metals, as well as glass. For a long time, *catadores* usually worked on their own without any subsidies from the municipal government, but experienced increasing integration into more formalised structures through the creation of cooperatives or the individual ways of cooperation of the local *catadores*. Consequently, a shift from the informal to the formal occurs, leading to the blurring of boundaries (much like in the case of click-workers). The in-betweenness becomes apparent, which is a central feature of the in_formal.

Coming back to the empirical level, this trend is grounded in an increasing collaboration between the formerly marginalised *catadores* and the municipality. Being part of a cooperative partly changes their legal status (documentation of activities, legal work conditions, some entrepreneurial structures etc.). Furthermore, as a member of a cooperative the social position changes: usually supported by the municipal government through some financial and administrative help, there are also educational and marketing initiatives to promote recycling activities and stimulate the local population to separate recyclables from garbage (a well-known example since the 1990s is the southern Brazilian city of Curitiba, see Zirkl 2007).

Those municipal-level initiatives became up-scaled to the national level and left some traces on new and progressive ways of managing the Brazilian waste economy. With the national Movement of Recycling Material Collectors (MNCR), the *catadores* established the first nationwide network of its kind in Latin America. In the past decade, the Brazilian Government did launch some legal instruments to strongly support the work of the *catadores*. Politically subsidised by an inter-ministerial platform (CIISC, as part of the nationwide project of solidarity economy), the long-established informal work with recycling materials is becoming increasingly formalised (e.g. integration into formal national and local recycling programmes). This also helps to draw the *catadores* away from a long-standing image of filthy marginalised second-class citizens ('dirt-savengers') and now promotes them positively as 'specialists for recyclables' instead (see for more details Demajorovic/Lima 2013; Pereira/Goes 2016). Through those semantic changes, the process of de_marginalisation is started.

5.2 From waste surgeons to environmental promoters: the case of Buenos Aires, Argentina

As much as in the Brazilian case at the beginning, the topic of waste in Argentina has always been treated on a municipal level. However, the Argentine system is still rooted in municipal, local level initiatives and reactive political agenda-setting. From a legal perspective, since 1905 (due to the growing number of illegal waste collectors) it was permitted to individually collect and sell waste (Suárez 1998: 17). This accomplishment, however, experienced major drawbacks during the 1970s military dictatorship and the official discourse of removing slum villages and waste treatment sites from the city – a new mega-landfill was then created in the province of Buenos Aires, depriving *cirujas* (so-called waste surgeons looking for recyclable materials on landfill sites) of their livelihoods and disengaging citizens of Buenos Aires from the field of waste (c.f. Schamber 2009). *Cirujas*, nonetheless, continue their work, but now they carry out their tasks on illegal landfill sites in the province of Buenos Aires, in absolute informality and illegality (Hafner, 2014: 83). Spatial as well as social marginalisation becomes apparent.

The end of the 1990s re-visibility waste collectors in Buenos Aires (Boy/Paiva 2009: 2f.): (1) The neo-liberal economic politics of the 1990s drastically reduced the workforce of the urban middle class. (2) On a political-legislative level, the handling of waste was theoretically regulated, but the system did not work in practice – waste remained in the streets of Buenos Aires. (3) The de-coupling of the Argentine Peso from the US Dollar and the subsequent devaluation of Argentina's currency drastically increased the prices of raw materials; recycling became – as often stated in interviews with waste collectors – economically relevant. Those three factors led to an increasing number of people collecting predominantly cardboard from the streets of Buenos Aires. Many of them did not fall under the classic scheme of the *cirujas* but seized the opportunity to compensate for their job loss. Referring back to the theoretical discussion, the auto-perception circulates around the theme of stepping back from the formal, respectable life, towards some subordinate informal activity of waste picking. This perceived negative turn also becomes apparent when waste collectors refer to the shift in their discursive description of work, as the pejorative term *basura* is used instead of a more neutral *residuo* or

material reciclable (c.f. Table 1). Out of necessity, a less favourable and not prestigious task is carried out to maintain and improve one's livelihood. In other words, an auto-marginalisation of one's own socio-economic status is performed to survive.

A new term, the *cartoneros* (cardboard collectors) is introduced, giving the Argentine economic crisis a face of people who are "*pobre pero digno*", poor but dignified, working in an informal (and still illegal) setting but without opting for criminal activities. Their work ethics resemble those in a formal setting, even if the work itself is informal/illegal, yet the perception of their work shifts towards positive acceptance in the dominant societal discourse. *Cartoneros* become visible, and their actions are increasingly positioned at the space between the informal and the formal.

As a result, the pressure of the street (scientists talk about 100,000 to 300,000 *cartoneros*; Mesa 2010: 45) and the support from civil society puts pressure on politicians to pass Law 992 to re-legalise individual waste collection in public spaces, also introducing a semantic change from *cartonero* to *recuperador urbano* (urban recuperator) (Hafner 2014: 86).

This semantic change provokes a couple of consequences. One of the most prominent features of change is the encouraged registering of waste collectors, making a transition from being legally invisible (and pre-law 992 illegal) to officially becoming part of the waste collection system alongside traditional and formal waste collecting companies. The former are in charge of recyclable goods while the latter now deal with organic waste. Furthermore, the facilitation of the registration of cooperatives of urban recuperators allows for a diversification of action: cooperatives such as *Del Oeste* are now in charge of one of the recycling centres (so-called *centros verdes*) where they "work on a formalised, isolated island" (*centro verde* worker, own translation) receiving recyclable material from other cooperatives. Even though they have a limited contract with the city of Buenos Aires for running the *centro verde* (and are thus legally formalised), members of the cooperative still see their work as a way of earning money that is nurtured by a prescribed informality from society – numerous interviews unearth the feeling of workers' shame at carrying out their task of recycling. Other cooperatives studied for this paper, such as *El Ceibo*, follow a dual strategy of managing a *centro verde* (and being proud of it, maintaining a high profile on an international level with perfect marketing strategies), as

well as collecting recyclable material directly from individuals and shops in the borough of Palermo. The cooperative is formally registered, but at the time of conducting interviews there were still members of the cooperative that have not individually registered as urban recuperators. So, they work under the radar of official authorities but within a formalised framework. Another approach is carried out by the largest group, *Amanecer* (MTE), self-defined as a movement of excluded workers. Here, the legal framework of a cooperative is used as a strategy to get access to financial means provided by officials to waste collectors, but the organisational structure and goal of the movement is criss-crossed by elements of resistance against the current political (and legal) system, also reflected in their motto: “If you touch one, you touch everyone” (interview, 2014). Lastly, cooperatives like *El CorreCamino*, in a more anarchic manner, have their clear focus on the materials they collect and the local neighbours they collect them from. Formal registration of members is no priority among the few members. They want to stay below the radar of visibility of legal authorities. An anything-goes hustle in the streets mentality is observed: whatever you can find on the streets is the finder’s property. This praxis still reflects the thought styles of the dwindling early-day individual waste collectors; in short, marginalisation does not play a major role here. Members of *El CorreCamino* pride themselves with their task, auto-branding themselves as *promotores ambientales* (i.e. environmental promoters).

5.3 Leisure marginalisation ‘made in Germany’: the ‘not so formal’ collection of deposit bottles

The perception of waste treatment in Germany is defined by two basic characteristics: technical solutions are predominant (landfills, incineration, separation and recycling, but also significant waste exports) and citizens’ participation in waste separation seems to be more engaged than in other regions.

Waste management is far more formalised than in the above cases, nurturing the pre-assumption that there is not much space for informal activities. Nonetheless, a growing number of people collects deposit bottles in public spaces in Germany. Two recent laws (“Kreislaufwirtschaftsgesetz”, “Verpackungsverordnung”) are responsible for the charging of 25 Euro-Cent deposit fees for ‘one-way’ bottles, creating this new informal business.

Nowadays, waste bins in airports, train stations, in public areas, as well as in special events (e.g. music shows) are being searched for deposit bottles. But who are these people, and why are they doing so? Some of our own empirical work, combined with various research studies (cf. Moser 2014; Catterfeld/Knecht 2015), show that this phenomenon is making its way to urban realities in Germany. They usually work on their own, evoking similarities to the Argentine case around the economic crisis and job losses of the early 2000s. However, no cooperation-like organisational structure comparative to, for example, the Argentine or Brazilian cases has so far been established. The dominant groups are pensioners and people on social welfare. Unlike in South America, their often daily collection of deposit bottles is rarely used to secure their livelihood. It can, on the contrary, be considered as an extra supplement to their usually small pension or governmental support. Through the last years, due to increasing immigration rates, migrants can be identified as another important (and growing) collecting group (e.g. people that migrated from South-Eastern Europe to Germany, especially from Romania, are heavily involved in the deposit bottle collection at Munich Airport).

Broadly speaking, we observe that there is a certain suspiciousness towards these people in parts of the society (on the other side some compassion can be noticed as well), and interviews show that a significant number of bottle collectors do certainly feel embarrassed about their situation, as they consider themselves auto-marginalised. However, in this context, a new form of marginalisation is identified: particularly for the ones that started collecting bottles without a severe economic need to survive on this task, we consider their somewhat involuntary ‘hobby’ (not to be understood in a pejorative way) of collecting deposit bottles as ‘part- or leisure time marginalisation’.

6. Conclusion

Perceptions of waste collection and management are changing. In this paper we have taken three short examples to open the spectrum to address how aspects of the in_formal and de_marginalisation are dealt with in different socio-economic and cultural contexts. It was important to us to

show that the in_formal does not only occur in the Global South (looking at Argentina and Brazil), but is increasingly visible in the Global North (e.g. Germany) too.

We have shown that waste management is predominantly a matter of municipalities. However, the Brazilian case highlights the potential of national and supra-national cooperation and the networking of in_formal waste pickers to demonstrate the impact of bottom-up structures on national legislation (e.g. the waste law of 2010). Argentina, entering the stage later than Brazil, still maintains the close local level structures with little inter-urban or national exchange of waste pickers. Nevertheless, low level structures and elements of the in_formal do not have to be interpreted as a negative feature; the strategies of recyclers' cooperatives have to be analysed to identify whether further growth and/or formalisation is *desired* at all. Re-coupling results from the Global South to the North, Germany is the youngest example of in_formal material collection; the activity is carried out on an individual level, often due to the socio-economic and cultural contextualisation (e.g. basic income plus additional income from bottle collection). Viewed from a temporal perspective, a deeper path analysis (from Brazilian, via Argentine, to German experiences) has the potential to add more social components to the predominantly technically-structured form of German waste management.

All three examples have in common the fact that actors are moving between the two poles of informality and formality. To pay tribute to this feature, we have conceptually coined the term 'in_formal', expressing the inherent in-limbo situation, be it desired or not. The goal of the introduction of in_formal was to go beyond the dominant ascription that the informal is bad *per se*, while also rejecting the romanticisation of informality as a counter-capitalist reaction to the dominant society's thought style. The in_formal can shed light on a more pragmatic, context-based understanding of varying living and working situations. In so doing, the artificial dichotomisation of informal and formal is abolished, allowing for a less conceptually restricted and more context-adaptive analysis of heterogeneous living situations.

Finally, it was important to show that in most studies of in_formal waste management, the concept of marginalisation has too much of a bias towards the victimisation of waste collectors. We could instead show

that, depending on the individual and/or cooperative strategies, the act of collecting recyclable materials can be both a mode of social and cultural marginalisation, and at the same way a vehicle to escape said marginalisation. Context matters, as do individual strategies and perspectives in order to be able to de_marginalise waste, and even more so, focus on the process of de_marginalising the waste collectors.

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ABSTRACT Abfallsammlung und -recycling tauchen in zunehmendem Maße auf der sozioökonomischen und politischen Agenda auf, sowohl im Globalen Süden als auch im Globalen Norden. Auf Abfallsammler fokussierend hat Lateinamerika eine lange Tradition im Umgang mit deren informellen und marginalisierten Aktivitäten, die sich langsam in Richtung Formalisierung bewegen. Zwei Argumente sind in diesem Artikel zentral. Erstens heben wir auf einer konzeptionellen Ebene die Semantik und Synonymität von Abfall hervor. Diese werden in weiterer Folge bei der Diskussion der Ambivalenz und des de-dichotomisierten Verständnisses von De_Marginalisierung und In_Formalität relevant. Zweitens werden empirische Beispiele aus Argentinien und Brasilien mit Deutschland verglichen, um die Tücken eurozentristischer Perspektiven auf in_formelles Abfallmanagement aufzuzeigen.

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