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The Zero Garbage Affair in Bogotá

On 11 December 2012 Gustavo Petro, the mayor of the Colombian capital Bogotá elected early that year, launched the Zero Garbage Program (Basura Cero). This scheme looked like an extraordinary opportunity for radical political and environmental change. On the environmental side, it introduced for the first time ever a recycling policy into Bogotá's municipal waste management scheme. On the political side, it opened the political and economic door to waste pickers, a marginal but numerous population in the capital city.

The proposal, advanced by the Colombian urban ecologists in Petro's team, was explicitly inspired by the global zero-waste movement, particularly by the experiences of Halifax (Canada), Zero Waste New Zealand Trust, and the city of Buenos Aires. As a national antecedent, it also acknowledged a proposal put forward in 2007 by a congresswoman (now Minister of Education) and two congressmen to "instrumentalize the Zero waste culture."[1]

According to the official statement of the Bogotá Basura Cero, it aimed to "minimize the environmental and health impact of debris and solid waste, including special and hazardous residues, produced by the city." This policy required "a cultural, educational and public policy change on waste management"—the official statement declared—that would involve not just the government, but citizens and businesses as well. It provided for various different types of waste reduction measures, including the production of reusable and biodegradable consumer goods, "building a culture of source separation of waste," and improving industrial processes for recycling and minimizing landfill waste. "In the medium and long run," the proposal concluded, "the actions are directed towards the target of reducing waste production, steadily increasing the amount of waste that is reused, and eliminating the social segregation, environmental discrimination, and depredation of the environment caused by the current structure of waste services."[2]

1 Gina Parody, Armando Benedetti, and José Name, Proyecto de Ley Número 04 de 2007 "Por medio del cual se instrumenta la cultura de basura cero," Senado de la República, Comisión Quinta, Bogotá 20 Julio 2007.

2 Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá D.C., "Plan de Desarrollo 2012–2016, Bogotá Humana" (2012), 203–6, http://www.sdp.gov.co/portal/page/portal/PortalSDP/Home/Noticias/OtrosDocumentosArchivados/PlandeDesarrollo/PLAN-DESARROLLO2012-2016.pdf (author's translation). See also: Secretaría General de la Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá D.C., "Proyecto de Acuerdo 249 de 2013 'Por Medio del cual se institucionaliza en el Distrito Capital el programa de Basura Cero'" (2013), http://www.alcaldiabogota.gov.co/sisjur/normas/Norma1.jsp?i=54891.

This may seem like a straightforward narrative of how a municipal government in the Global South is taking action towards environmental and social justice: a project aimed at protecting the environment by reducing waste, while offering social justice and providing livelihoods for individuals in the informal sector. But reality is usually less straightforward. Indeed, the Basura Cero program of Bogotá is revealing of a complex history of power and politics and economic interests embedded within an urban ecology discursive turn in city policy.

Why is it often the case that the adoption of a waste management system is entangled in the complexities of socio-environmental arrangements? Can a "waste regime" reveal the inner nerve of a social system and its urban metabolism? This Colombian case is a local story, but its national tentacles make it a valuable playground for reasoning about the general political significance of "trivial" garbage.

A Landfill and Waste Pickers for Bogotá

This story begins in the 1980s with the creation of the landfill Doña Juana. Like the US landfill technology on which it was modeled, its aim was to solve a sanitary problem: to dispose of the fast growing solid waste of Bogotá. However, waste was not simply sent to the landfill; before its arrival at the southwestern margin of the city where the landfill was eventually opened in 1988, the waste was searched and selected by waste pickers, or *recicladores*. Their activities were unregulated by the city's official waste management system. They collected recyclable materials (paper, cardboard, metals, plastics, glass) from public bins and households by opening up plastic bags in the streets. Some of them made informal deals with janitors and neighbors to collect specific types of garbage—i.e., paper or plastic from offices and shopping malls. They traveled along established routes, carrying the waste to wholesalers using handcarts or horse-drawn carts called *zorras*. The wholesalers put the waste back into the economic chain, making substantial profits at the same time.

More than 21,000 recyclers are said to be working informally or in cooperatives in Bogotá. Their existence is socially marginalized—they receive no wages for the services they provide, they are exposed to toxic chemicals, and they have little legal support or protection—but their organization is politically active. In 1990 the Asociación de Re-

cicladores de Bogotá (ARB) was established.[3] In 2003 the ARB helped to set up the Latin American network of waste pickers (Red Lacre), and in 2008 hosted the First World Congress of Waste Pickers. With its some 3,000 members from various cooperatives, ARB has become one of the largest and most influential waste pickers' organizations in Colombia, with an influence that extends to Latin America more generally.

When Petro took office in January 2012, the landfill Doña Juana was an open battlefield of economic and political controversy. Until 2010, a Spanish multinational firm, Proactiva S.A., had run the very lucrative business of municipal collection and disposal. When its contract expired, months of legal controversies and scandals regarding the new contract ensued. Eventually, in 2011 a Brazilian-Canadian-Colombian alliance won the public tender, and Petro would have had to proceed with the acknowledgment of the new operators. Instead, the process came to a standstill. Following a legal suit put forward by Nohra Padilla, leader of the ARB, the Colombian Constitutional Court ordered that the public bidding process be suspended. Padilla, a recycler herself, argued that the waste pickers had been unfairly excluded from the public tender.

Supported by the US-based global action-research advocacy network known as WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing) and other NGOs, she based her claim on Article 13 of the Colombian constitution, which stipulates that the state must promote social inclusion of marginalized and discriminated groups, something that the tender patently failed to do with respect to the waste pickers. Although the tender required the new contractor to hire people to provide recycling services for the first time ever, it did not establish strict criteria about the contractor's necessary qualifications on recycling. As a result, it favored opportunistic organizations with very little experience—such as the NGO created by the sons of former Colombian president Alvaro Uribe—instead of promoting long-established associations like the ARB with its three thousand members who were better qualified to perform the task.

The ARB's successful challenge to the waste management tender was the most recent in a series of legal battles aimed at securing more rights for waste pickers. The Constitutional Court had already issued important rulings in 2003 and 2010 that stated the need for measures to include waste pickers in municipal waste management, but the Bogotá

3 The ARB was not the first recyclers' association in Colombia. In 1962 the waste pickers of Medellín created the first such organization in Latin America.

government had not yet done anything to comply. This legal battle was an important victory on behalf of one of the more vulnerable social groups in the country and against powerful private companies; in 2013 Padilla was awarded the Goldman Environmental Prize (awarded annually to grassroots activists around the world) for her efforts.

Zero Garbage Program, 2012

Mayor Petro's Basura Cero program seemed that it would change all this. With its emphasis on environmental and social justice, the program is revealing of the political ideology of the mayor and his staff, but it is also a lucid illustration of how politics are embedded in any waste management system.

Gustavo Petro, a former member of the M19 guerrilla movement, was a congressman in the Chamber of Representatives in 1991–1994 and 1998–2006, and in the Senate 2006–2010, during which time he uncovered several scandals of corruption and influence of paramilitary militias in Colombian politics. He became a prominent opponent of the right-wing Alvaro Uribe, who was president from 2002 to 2010. In 2010 Petro ran in the presidential election; although he was unsuccessful, his popularity won him the election as mayor of Bogotá the next year. The informal sector of the waste pickers was one of his more formidable supporters.

The Basura Cero program was aimed at transforming the work of informal recyclers into a formal economic activity while introducing a recycling policy into the city's waste management. Recyclers would earn a fixed wage from the municipal tariff on waste collection; they had previously received compensation for their work only through the sale of the recyclables they collected. City dwellers would therefore be forced to internalize the cost of urban waste. Additionally, after almost three decades of private handling, the new scheme would put the majority of the lucrative waste disposal business in public hands by assigning it to one single city-run company and firing private contractors, with a net fee reduction for the dwellers of Bogotá.

But good ideas do not go far if they have short legs. Within two weeks of the official launching of Basura Cero, the new scheme had turned into a stinky fiasco. Petro cancelled existing contracts with private waste collectors as he prepared to return waste

management to municipal control. On 18 December and for the next four days, municipal solid waste was not collected in most of Bogotá. The disaster was a product of mixed causes: on the one hand, the unfair opposition by the dissatisfied private contractors, who were accused of having left behind in the streets, on their last day of operation, a third of the waste usually collected daily. One the other hand, the poor planning and mismanagement of the introduction of the new waste management system by Petro and his staff (i.e., not having trucks ready), allowed the fast accumulation of garbage in the streets. Political opponents clamored for Petro's removal; a fierce media campaign urged the same. Faced with a major garbage crisis just before Christmas, the mayor was forced to quickly renegotiate the former contracts with the old private companies and rent 110 used collection trucks imported from Miami in order to cope with the sanitary emergency.

The garbage crisis was gradually resolved, but it sowed the seeds of a major legal and political battle between the elected mayor of the capital city, Gustavo Petro, and Inspector General Ordóñez. Their fight turned into a platform for massive popular mobilization. This magnified the enduring harsh political division of Bogotá public opinion along classic right vs. left lines, but it also revealed the increasing political importance of other, more "postmodern" divides, such as new forms of citizenship, human rights, and urban sustainability.

The Zero Garbage Program as a Political Battlefield

In December 2013, Inspector General Alejandro Ordóñez Maldonado, an ultraconservative and close ally of the former president Alvaro Uribe, ousted the mayor and banned him from holding public office for 15 years, a virtual declaration of political death. He argued that during the four-day crisis in 2012, the mayor had put the health of Bogotá citizens at stake because of the accumulation of garbage in the streets. Furthermore, he claimed, Petro had violated the constitutional principle of free competition by firing garbage collection contractors and putting the waste disposal business in public hands.

This sanction seemed extreme even to many of Petro's political opponents. In a country where legal impunity is more often the rule than the exception, even where

atrocious crimes are concerned,[4] four days of garbage in the streets and a poorly planned change in a municipal utility was a comparatively minor offense—certainly not enough to deserve 15 years of ostracism. Regarding Petro's ousting, the *Guardian* wrote: "When a legal system confirms the removal of a democratic leader for this kind of technical issue the problem is far worse than just a rightwing ideologue abusing his influential position. The whole system is laid bare, and the fears of millions that they will never get a fair hearing is justified."[5]

At a time of the year when Bogotanos are usually enjoying Christmas lights in public parks and family *novenas*, Petro successfully called for a massive gathering in the central Plaza Bolivar. His rhetorical ability, a populist use of city-run media and social networks, and the passion of his supporters ignited public opinion so much that "a new Bogotazo" was announced, recalling the violent unrest in 1948 that marks a turning point in Colombian history and the beginning of the period known as *La Violencia*. Under the strict and tense supervision of a helicopter and troops in the streets, a crowd assembled several times in downtown Bogotá. The protesters ranged from the *recicladores* to members of social and indigenous movements, artists, intellectuals, human rights defenders, students, left-wing citizens, and finally residents of the city's poorest sectors, who arrived on buses provided by Petro's staff. Waste succeeded in generating a larger political mobilization than many other more traditional causes.

However, as so often in the past, the specter of the revolution that haunted Colombia ultimately put on an attorney's robe instead: in few weeks' time, the fight had moved from the streets to the courts. Hours before his removal, Petro's legal defense team filed a lawsuit against Inspector General Ordóñez with the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights in Washington, DC, which ruled that Petro's removal from office violated his political rights. After several twists in the legal battle and a new legal order by a national court, President Santos restored Petro to office in April 2014, just in time to secure the political support of center-left voters in the forthcoming presidential election, which Santos won in June 2014.

4 I.e., crimes committed by members of the guerrillas and the state during the more-than-50-year internal armed conflict; crimes committed by paramilitary forces and not fully punished, especially during the 1990s and 2000s; political crimes that have still not been brought to trial, like the extermination of the left-wing political party Unión Patriótica through the systematic murder of its leaders in the mid-1990s; or the disappearance of civilians during the military response to the assault on the Supreme Court by the guerrilla movement M19 in 1985, which is still waiting for the judicial truth.

5 Jonathan Glennie, "Colombian Democracy Took a Backward Leap with Ousting of Bogotá Mayor," Poverty Matters Blog, *The Guardian Online*, 9 April 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2014/apr/09/colombia-democracy-ousting-bogota-mayor-gustavo-petro.

With Petro's return to office, Basura Cero was no longer in danger. It developed smoothly, promoting educational campaigns on recycling and source reduction of waste, bringing more recyclers into the scheme, and implementing a program for replacing horse-drawn carts with motorized vehicles as part of a general pro-animal policy. As a compromise, the old contractors have been kept on in a limited capacity; at the end of Petro's term of office in late 2015, they were responsible for 47 percent of the collection and disposal of municipal solid waste.

While the social and environmental justice content of the Basura Cero program (albeit not necessarily its implementation) was acknowledged as admirable even by several of Petro's opponents, its effectiveness as a waste management system was generally evaluated as poor. Traffic, waste, and insecurity were listed as the three greatest concerns of Bogotá dwellers in opinion polls prior to the municipal elections on 25 October 2015. Even to sympathetic observers, the city looks dirty, while organized and large-scale recycling is still more a promise than a practice. To the citizens' eyes, recyclers continue to work the same way they always have. The Doña Juana landfill also has not changed its role or practices, notwithstanding the continuous warning about its short lifespan.

Sadly, the limited results of the Basura Cero in Bogotá as far as waste collection and recycling are concerned probably helped reduce the appeal of waste as an important issue in the agenda of the recent municipal elections. The next mayor, Enrique Peñalosa, neither included this topic in his proposals as candidate, nor commented about the future of the Zero Garbage Program after his electoral success in October 2015. Quite surprising coming from a man who was granted the 2009 Goteborg Award for Sustainable Development in recognition of his urban development model during his first term as mayor of Bogotá from 1998 to 2000.

Waste as a Litmus Test

Waste is a hybrid, both a sociocultural artifact and a physical matter. Its existence depends on a culturally based decision ("trash is created by sorting," Strasser wrote[6]) entangled with biophysical features and technology arrangements upon which the

6 Susan Strasser, *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), 5.

transformability of waste depends. Its management requires social negotiations; it reflects political ideas and reveals expectations about the future. But refuse is also physical material and its disposal occupies concrete space in a specific territory. Because of the enormous volumes of waste, the scale of the technology, and the gigantic financial flows involved, starting in the twentieth century waste has ceased to be simply a local topic: it has become a glocal issue. Furthermore, private and public, individual and collective are never distinguishable in any of the processes for producing, reducing, recycling, or disposing of garbage. Because of all these considerations, waste touches the nerves of social systems, but also the veins of the urban metabolism.

This Colombian case of a political battle about the implementation of a zero-waste program sheds light on the complexities of waste policies in the twenty-first century. In Bogotá solid waste policy acted as the material playground of politics and social institutions, the place where ideas about state vs. market, individual vs. collective, private vs. public, and present vs. future needs materialized. Rather than suggesting a political judgment about the experience of Petro's Basura Cero program, the discussion of this ongoing case of environmental public policy aimed to show the degree to which waste is a political matter.

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