

Race-based structural informality and the exploitation of the informal waste pickers in Barcelona

Authors and contributions

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Developed the theoretical framework, led the development of the data collection framework, contributed to the data collection. In charge of the data analysis. First author of the paper, author of the present draft.
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Abstract

In recent years, Barcelona's waste management system has increasingly noticed the presence of informal recyclers, commonly called *chatarros* (from the Spanish *chatarra*, metal scrap). Estimated to be around at least 3000 individuals, they are excluded from the formal labour market mainly due to their status as illegal migrants or to other socio-economic vulnerabilities. These workers select, collect, transport and accumulate scrap metals and other materials and objects from the streets and the unsorted trash, to sell them to the recycling industry and second-hand shops, thus contributing to the circularity of the city's economy. However, the informal character of their work renders them highly vulnerable to social and economic marginalisation and exploitation. Through the lenses of urban political ecology, we investigated the social and economic conditions under which they live and work, addressing the following research question: *how do power relations shape the life and work of informal recyclers operating in Barcelona?* Particular attention was given to the degree of stigma, marginalisation and socio-economic exclusion they face in their interactions with the urban environment. Moreover, we investigated the environmental injustices and potential conflicts that they face as the result of the enforcement of a waste governance and management system that is not designed to interact with them cooperatively and inclusively.

Through the lenses of urban political ecology, we investigated the social and economic conditions under which they live and work. Particularly, we observed the stigma, socio-economic marginalisation and environmental injustices they face in their interactions with the city. Theoretically, we developed our analysis around the concepts of capital accumulation, exploitation and urban metabolism, understood as the interaction between

material and energy flows and the socio-political dynamics underlying the circulation of these flows. Demaria and Schindler (2016) and Scheidel et al (2018) define cities as social-metabolic systems regulated by the dialectical interaction between material and energy flows (i.e. the materiality, or biophysical dimension) and the socio-political dynamics underlying the circulation of these flows (i.e. the political economy). We suggest to frame the waste system of Barcelona as a metabolic process that has a material and a political economy component. In this paper, we focus primarily on the power relations underlying and shaping its political economy. Under capitalism, capital accumulates not only through economic processes of exploitation (Marx, 1867) but also through extra-economic processes or expropriation, such as dispossession (Harvey, 2012). Building on this understanding, Fraser (2023) frames capitalism as a broader “institutionalised social order”, that contains a separation between the capitalist economy, where workers are exploited for a wage, and what is outside of it, and can be invisibilised and expropriated. Every capitalist society develops legal-institutional configurations that define what belongs to the realm of the capitalist economy and what does not, according to what favours capital accumulation. Of particular interest for this paper is Fraser’s concept of racialised accumulation: in certain instances, capitalism develops legal-institutional configurations that exclude groups of people along racial lines, creating “racialised others” who are marginalised or excluded from the market economy and whose work and bodies can be expropriated more easily. In many instances, such legal-institutional frameworks constitute processes of institutional racialisation (Omi&Winant, 2014) that are enacted via migration laws, creating illegal subjectivities that are excluded from the formal labour market and confined into the informal economy. Finally, we deploy the concept of “super-exploitation”, that is the extraction of an additional share of value from labour by compressing wages below the level of social reproduction (Latimer, 2021), to explain the level of exploitation that informal recyclers in Barcelona endure.

Methodologically, first we implemented a systematic review of the existing literature on informal recycling in Barcelona and its region Catalunya. Secondly, we conducted an ethnographic fieldwork based on participant observation and the collection of approximately 100 surveys and 10 semi-structured interviews with informal recyclers and other relevant actors. These data were backed by the collection of secondary data, such as city-level official statistics or other relevant sources identified during the process.

Our hypothesis is that informal waste recyclers in Barcelona contribute substantially to the circularity of the waste metabolism, but their work is invisibilised and undervalued through social-institutional arrangements that favour profit maximisation along the recycling value chain. Our findings show that informal recyclers contribute substantially to the recycling rates of the city. However, their work is invisibilised and undervalued through a process of labour informalisation based on racialisation. Drawing on Fraser’s conceptualisation of capitalism as an Institutionalised Social Order, we suggest the existence of a legal-institutional system of race-based structural informality that displaces their activity outside of the formal economy, allowing for the super-exploitation of their labour.

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