

Participant and co-operative research within a social movement of recyclable materials collectors

Methodological reflections on a long-term political praxis¹

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Abstract

This article presents methodological reflections on a participant research within the National Movement of Recyclable Materials Collectors (MNCR) in Brazil. It emphasises methodological aspects of the researchers' long-term participation in the process of questioning and denaturalising of political, social, and economic inequalities by the collectors, understood as subjects of their self-organisation. It addresses quality criteria for long-term participant research, and the role of the scholar in the tension between engaging in social movement and being an integral part of academic life. The development of a master's thesis and of a doctoral dissertation between 2010 and 2016 sets the background. This article is a systematisation of the hermeneutic practice focusing on the research relations and processes of sharing of meanings between actors and researcher, aiming at the improvement of the subjects' political praxis.

Keywords: recyclable materials collectors, praxis, reflexivity, denaturalisation of inequalities.

Investigación participante y cooperativa dentro de un movimiento social de recolectores de materiales reciclables. Reflexiones metodológicas sobre una praxis política a largo plazo

Resumen

Este artículo presenta reflexiones metodológicas sobre una investigación participante dentro del Movimiento Nacional de Recolectores de Materiales Reciclables (MNCR) en Brasil. Enfatiza los aspectos metodológicos de la participación a largo plazo de los investigadores en el proceso de cuestionamiento y desnaturalización de las desigualdades políticas, sociales y económicas por parte de los recolectores, entendidos como sujetos de su autoorganización. Aborda los criterios de calidad para la investigación participante a largo plazo y el papel del académico en la tensión entre participar en el movimiento social y ser parte integral de la vida académica. El desarrollo de una tesis de maestría y una tesis doctoral entre 2010 y 2016 establece el telón de fondo de la reflexión. Este artículo es una sistematización de la práctica hermenéutica centrada en las relaciones de investigación y los procesos de intercambio de significados entre actores e investigadores, con el objetivo de mejorar la práctica política de los sujetos.

Palabras clave: recolectores de materiales reciclables, praxis, reflexividad, desnaturalización de las desigualdades.

¹ Translated by Gustavo Matiuuzzi de Souza.

Introduction

In this article we seek to report our participation in the National Movement of Recyclable Materials Collectors (MNCR) in Brazil. Through a praxis of socio-political organisation, collectors of recyclable materials sought to denaturalise political, economic, and social inequalities, to legitimise their activity as a dignified and socially relevant occupation, as well as to constitute for themselves spaces of autonomy. The intention is to present methodological aspects of the process of militant participation, done simultaneously with academic activities, in a long-term strategy.

The use of materials discarded as ‘junk’ by people living in poverty and misery in Brazil was gradually transformed from the 1980s into an alternative occupation, although precarious, for a growing contingent of people. As material recycling became industry-wide and became thematic (concerning environmental protection), the activity of picking, sorting, and reselling materials started to provide a small income. With the support of civil entities, various groups began to organise themselves in the form of associations and cooperatives, some of them formalised, others only as solidarity bonds (Bortoli 2013). A significant number of people were already living in this activity even before there was an official policy for the reuse of solid waste, created in 2010 (Souza et al. 2014; De Lorena Diniz Chaves et al. 2014). In the wake of the organisation process of this population, the National Movement of Recyclable Materials Collectors was created in 2001, in a congress that gathered more than 1700 collectors from different parts of Brazil (Pereira & Goes 2016; Fergutz et al. 2011).

The importance of deepening the methodological discussion stems from the fact that, in the field of Social Sciences, scholars engaged in practices of long-term social transformation still find difficulties in methodological terms to account for their own praxis in assisting in the thematisation and understanding of social problems experienced by sectors of the population. This difficulty derives from the classic, rigid separation between the subject of the research activity and the object to be researched, as inherited from the positivist tradition. However, there are consolidated methodological paths that break with this separation. These paths are systematised participant methodologies within, among others, the social and education sciences (Brandão & Streck 2006; Torres Carrillo 2010). The participant methodology becomes applicable in a satisfactory way insofar as it allows to interpret the relations established between researchers and researched, contributing to the improvement of both praxis and research itself.

We use here empirical data of a master’s thesis and a doctoral dissertation (Oliveira 2010; 2016). Both the synthesis of performance experiments and the theoretical and methodological categories of interpretation of the empirical data seek to provide an understanding of the effects of co-operation on the strategic reflections established between researchers and collectors. It is hoped that they will contribute to the consolidation of a critical and reflexive field of study of situations, in which economic, political, and social strategies are shared between the militant-researcher and the social movement in which he/she participates.

To account for this synthesis, the article is structured as follows: first, we address some assumptions and quality criteria of participant and co-operative research. Second, we

present the experience of one of the authors in the relations established with the collectors of the MNCR. Finally, we analyse data from interviews, feedback moments between researchers and collectors, and documents from the MNCR. In this third section, we describe and interpret, within the limits of an article, moments of sharing of strategic meanings of denaturalisation of the political, economic, and social inequalities to which a historically marginalised sector of Brazilian society is exposed.

Quality criteria for participant and co-operative research and the role of the intellectual

Participant methodologies have solid criteria for verifying their quality. Such criteria consist of social relevance of research, reflexivity, quality of the relationship between subjects, practicability of knowledge and descriptive and interpretive density (Streck 2016, p. 538). The social relevance of the research (which in this case dialogues with the practicability of knowledge) is established as the study accompanies political action in an unequal but transformable reality, stimulating the knowledge necessary to question political, social, and economic inequalities, as well as through support in the autonomous organisation of collectors of recyclable materials.

The criteria of reflexivity, and the quality of the relationship between research subjects, seem to be fulfilled through long-term praxis as immediate action in daily routines while researching with the collectors. Both provided the researchers self-knowledge before research subjects, a kind of 'research of the self'. To deepen the matter of the quality of the relation between researcher and subjects, we will describe the experience of one of the authors as a researcher as a way of highlighting a role that approaches considerably that of *organic intellectual*.

To achieve a descriptive and interpretive density, we bring excerpts of interviews and documents along with observations that illustrate how, among the collectors of the movement, the awareness that the political, social, and economic inequalities to which they are exposed come from historically constructed social relations and, therefore, subject to questioning and change. These are details captured within the movement in the collectors' context and praxis to fight inequalities. To be able to describe and interpret the perceptions that emerged in the daily life of the movement in-depth seems to us to be the greater contribution as researchers in the strategy of the movement itself.

The activity of the engaged researcher is not free from difficulties and ambiguities, nor is it the only one to be assumed. On the contrary, traditional intellectuals often consider themselves (relatively) free from strong ties to groups or social classes, and they cultivate the image that they would be able to grasp and embrace the interests of society as a whole. Others consider themselves independent, in the sense of being willing to stand by their free choice, in the service of other social groups, advising them or even assuming functions of intellectual direction. But there are also those who see themselves socially and affectively linked to social groups and with them maintain a relationship of co-operation by affinity.

The issue is not new and there is already a kind of specialised branch of sociology around it (Kurzman & Owens 2002). Almost a century ago Antonio Gramsci (1971, p 5)

asked himself: “Are intellectuals an autonomous and independent social group, or does every social group have its own particular specialised category of intellectuals?” Gramsci was an acid critic of *traditional intellectuals*, who deludingly defined themselves as autonomous. He does not deny that they could have certain class independence, but he emphasises their *functional* link when placing themselves at the service of the dominant social group. He contrasts these with the *organic intellectuals*, who derive from the social group itself, be it dominant or dominated. Gramsci was convinced that every social group occupying an essential function in economic production produces its own organic intellectuals. Advocates from within this group, bound by origin and engagement, the organic intellectuals would not be mere ideological appendages, but an inextricable part of the group to which they belong. They are the intellectuals who, together with their respective social group, construct unity as a class and consciousness of the place that the group occupies in the economy, politics, and society.

In addition to academics, Gramsci includes in this category cultural activists, people with managerial or technical roles in society, and those who participate in the articulation of their group’s strategies of struggle in the construction of class solidarity and alternative hegemonies. For the proletariat in developed capitalist societies, the great challenge, according to Gramsci, would be precisely to overcome its dependence on traditional intellectuals, and to develop leadership from its own organic intellectuals. He hoped, on the other hand, that the organic intellectuals would not only develop intellectual faculties, but would, through their praxis, be active participants in the daily life of their social group as permanent builders, organisers, and persuaders.

This position of Gramsci contrasts, for example, with the conception that Karl Mannheim (1995) has of the intellectuals as a group of people who would not be so firmly situated in the social order; they would not be a class, nor a fraction of a class. Intellectuals would be a relatively unrelated stratum, which because of its educational process, would be able to transcend the narrow limits of the social worldview, of its social origin, and to develop a broader view of the whole social and political structure. Since they did not have a specific group interest, they would be able to associate with classes to which they did not originally belonged. They would thus form a relatively free-floating intelligentsia.

In participatory and co-operative research, the social and affective bond of the researcher with the group would preclude any claim to constitute himself as a traditional intellectual or as part of a free-floating intelligentsia. But we cannot rule out the possibility that, without coming from the social group itself, as is required of the organic intellectual in Gramsci’s conception, he/she should build a relationship that allows him to be both a *participant* and a *researcher*, responding to challenges that come from the clashes of the economic, political, and social life of the social group, and from participation in the academic community.

In the logic of co-operative research, “the distance from the observer is not only considered impractical, but a limit to the process of knowledge” (Terragni 2005, p. 147). According to Streck (2005, p. 24), the involvement with research and with subjects consists of,

[...] sooner or later, researching oneself, expanding the self-awareness of limitations and possibilities. The researcher does not enter his field of research as a stable and fixed element. He changes because (or when) he learns. Writing the results is therefore also a self-writing exercise.

The act of engaging with the everyday activities of the collectors required a high degree of reflexivity for the combined production of meaning between these actors and the researchers. Research itself has become thus an articulation of encounters between the different subjects involved in the same process, whose purpose is to establish the necessary negotiations about the best ways of “pronouncing the world” (Streck 2005, p. 28). Participatory and co-operative research has proved adequate for the description of a praxis that involves aspects of the researchers’ political formation to the expressions of the strategy of denaturalising the inequalities that affect collectors of recyclable materials.

This co-operation between research subjects provides a ‘co-generative learning’ that is constituted through the “continuous activation of feedback mechanisms between the researcher and the various social actors present in the field” (Navarini 2005, p. 170). Such mechanisms are ways of putting into common the diversity of viewpoints and the partial information that each actor has, aiming to build a joint analysis. This type of study can be characterised as a relation of exchange, within which the researcher offers “the fruits of the imagination to feed the thinking of others” (Botti 2005, p. 131). The constant discussion with the collectors constituted a legitimating factor of the identity of supporters and scholars within the movement. The sharing of knowledge was a way of strengthening the social processes in which these actors are involved until the present day.

In the joint construction of knowledge, very different forms of interaction are alternated. While it benefited from participation in the daily activities of collectors of recyclable materials (in defense of social valorisation and the formal recognition of the occupation as well as of the organisation of a social movement), on the other hand, it benefited from periods of suspension of engagement, of public debates about the interpretation of empirical data, and of moments of reflexivity between researchers and collectors. Spaces of feedback deserve a special highlight. They consisted of various levels of deliberation, such as executive coordination meetings, state government’s meetings, and all other deliberation and discussion activities in which it was possible to participate. Spaces of feedback were also provided in the moments of semi-structured interviews in which, through the constant questioning to the interviewees, we encouraged the exercise of reflexivity about daily actions concerning their experiences and expectations.

We understand that, for the systematisation of a participant research, it is important to contextualise the participation of the researcher as a subject involved both in the political praxis and in the theoretical production that support and make comprehensible the strategies of the collective subjects, for themselves and for the research itself. Beyond a quality criterion of the research, the explicitness of this participation allows us to see how the researcher goes through processes of political formation and how his/her self-knowledge, his/her place in the world and his/her theoretical perspectives linked to research are transformed. During the research reported here, the participation of each co-author was very specific. Emil A. Sobottka was the academic supervisor for much of the period and, as a social movement researcher, was primarily a participant-interlocutor. Cristiano Benites Oliveira was a collector of recyclable materials, participant of the social movement and researcher at master’s and doctoral levels. Since his personal trajectory formed the backbone of our joint research experience, we have chosen to briefly describe it here.

The researcher and the social movement: intertwined trajectories

The researcher's experiences, built up along personal, political, and professional trajectories, can be taken as part of the elucidation of relationships established during the research between him/her and the social group. Not considering this dimension would be to incur an "absence of objectivity" that prevents social scientists from realising "how much their work is influenced by their experience" (Terragni 2005, p. 147). As far as research relations are concerned, we will evince three different areas of experience in the investigative process that reflect a temporal sequence: personal experience of rapprochement with the collectors, the experience of socio-political engagement, and the experience of academic research.

Approach and personal involvement

To begin this memory exercise that compiles part of my personal experience with the collectors, I recall some images of Vila Pontilhão, in the town of Gravataí, Southern Brazil. This imagining was part of my childhood, when I was vacationing at my grandparents' house, who lived nearby. Soon after my father died, it became my home. As I passed through Vila Pontilhão, I realised that many carters lived there: people collecting various materials in the city, aided by carts pulled by a horse.

The community of Vila Pontilhão since that time is composed of approximately fifty families. Their poor houses are arranged side by side along a small stretch of road in the outskirts. Even though I lived in a near community, I did not know then a single resident from that neighbourhood. I could not imagine that such poor community, at that time devoid of piped water and electric light, would be part of my own trajectory, or that in the future it would become an important base of the recyclable materials collectors' national movement.

After ups and downs in the life of my family, I entered the university and began to participate in the student movement and in discussions of a group that identified itself as anarchist. We sought non-traditional ways of action, not mediated by political parties. Four principles gave meaning to the action of this collective: direct democracy, self-management, solidarity, and class independence. There was also an Ecology Nucleus, which discussed the reality of recyclable material collectors and of carters. The members of this group started a socio-environmental work at Vila Pontilhão, which consisted of joint efforts to collect the garbage thrown into community vegetation and the construction of a communal shed in the neighborhood.

At a group meeting I reunited with Geraldo, whom I knew from my adolescence. Geraldo was 35 years old, he was a material collector and his base was Santa Tecla I, a large waste yard in the metropolitan area. He was also the national coordinator of the newly-created National Movement of Recyclable Materials Collectors (MNCR).² After being

2 Traditionally, the municipalities of the region collected 'garbage' practically without any form of separation or classification and deposited it in a large, open-air landfill, popularly known as dump ("lixão"). Poor people looked for various types of materials to be reused: food, household utensils, and materials for resale, with which they obtained their income. From the 1990s, gradually, forms of domestic waste separation were introduced, and dumps were being closed. A 2010 legislation banned this form of disposal at national level. In Gravataí, the regional dump was closed and covered with dirt, and next to it they built a shed for garbage recycling.

dismissed from the metallurgical industry in which he worked, Geraldo became a collector and was part of the Ecology Nucleus. From the narrowing of the ties between it and the residents of Vila Pontilhão, the Nucleus began a struggle for social demands: from obtaining a basic urban infrastructure, such as piped water and electric light, to the betterment of conditions of housing and labor in the community.

Faced with the social problems of Vila Pontilhão, I became increasingly interested, supporting the struggle of this community, committed to transforming their precarious condition of life. Our group congregated students from various areas such as the Social Sciences, Literature, Chemistry, Geography, Medicine, among other courses, and developed cultural and social actions such as popular high school equivalency program (“Supletivo”), community garden, health voluntary labor, etc. Progressively, our relationship began to include parties, birthdays, communitarian food, listening and telling stories, and the search for community organisation to get a voice in society.

The struggle for electric power and water was fought through peaceful demonstrations and actions of occupation of the city hall and the headquarters of the electric power company. Further communities, trade unions, and social movements expressed their solidarity with our struggle. The idea of using part of the community shed for recycling work came into light, since it was the basis of the professional occupation and of income composition of many of the local families. The shed was transformed gradually into a popular space for recycling, where street collectors could triage and classify their material, have better control over the volume of their production, and receive a better income in comparison to the income obtained with scrap dealers (commercial intermediaries, owners of deposits of recyclable materials, commonly called ‘middlemen’). In short, this space became the place where “the first discussions could be established through shared word and through the real proposals of action in the productive field” (Fischer 1989, p. 54). However, the operation of this ‘recycling shed’ was shortened in June 2000 by a fire. This event made me very sad, because we had dedicated a lot to make the shed come to life.

After the conquest of tap water and power supply, residents began to pressure the public power to obtain another structure. This mobilisation coincided with the moment of implementation of a municipal solid waste management programme. Within this programme, the political agenda prioritised the selective garbage collection. Thus, from many discussions and participation in meetings of municipal councils and in the Participative Budget, the collectors of Vila Pontilhão agreed to establish themselves in the district of Santa Tecla, some 15 kilometers away from their community. In Santa Tecla there was already a shed for the collectors who used to live on the landfill. A second shed was then built for the collectors of Vila Pontilhão. About twenty people are currently earning their income from working in this shed.

In Vila Pontilhão, shortly after the fire, residents themselves rebuilt the shed, which today is a space for various social activities in the community. There, the MNCR develops education projects with collectors’ children. I remember the many birthdays and end-of-year balls that we celebrated in the shed. During my experience with the collectors, I obtained the necessary guidelines to develop an experience of engagement as well as a political and social reflection.

Sociopolitical engagement and the organization of collectors

A little before the fire of the Pontilhão Village shed, the Association of Carters and Collectors of Gravataí had been set up at the local level, and at a regional level, the Federation of Recycler Associations of the State of Rio Grande do Sul, in an attempt to gather all state recycling associations. My relationship of active solidarity with the collectors would enter another stage when Geraldo, then secretary of the Federation of Associations, invited me to be an educator in the training of collectors, offering courses in agreement with the state government. I was able, through this work, to act in activities of formative nature aimed at the qualification of the collectors in self-management processes.

In the same year of 2001, during a congress in Brasília, the MNCR was founded. As part of the construction of the movement in our state, we made a public demonstration in December 2001 with explicit reference to the 53 years of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Through this vigil I was able to better understand the possibilities of mobilising and strengthening the identity of this category of workers.

Considering the possibilities of engagement, I began to question my own condition as an 'educator' of the recycling workers. How to plan training moments for these subjects without knowing for sure what it would be like to work and live under the same conditions as the collectors? I began then to consider the option of joining a group of collectors, to work and live as one of them. After completing my degree in Social Sciences, in 2002, I decided to learn from my own experience how everyday life functioned in a collectors' organisation. I lived in a community called Restinga, in the city of Porto Alegre, and ended up becoming a collector in the recycling shed of that locality.

I could see hence better what made me different from the collectors. Each day these differences became sharper. It costed me a lot to learn how to work with the weight of recyclable materials, both in the handling of cylinders filled with material already classified by the women at the sorting tables, and in the baling and displacement of those large bales. The worst burdens were those of white paper chips, which were very heavy and easily crumbled. But the most difficult thing was the almost daily strangeness of the collectors with regard to that person 'without callus', who uttered complicated words difficult to understand in the midst of that hard, repetitive work.

It was a difficult experience. I was able to taste what it was like to be a collector, how it was living with approximately BRL 250,00 (roughly USD 65.00) a month. I was also deeply annoyed when people felt sorry for my condition, or when they ironically dealt with the fact that I was working on recycling 'junk'. I also knew the authoritarian profile of people who occupied positions in the direction of the association and sought to favour one faction over the other within the shed.

Establishing a dialogue between the rival factions was a very difficult task, since great care had to be taken not to break with both rival groups in order to maintain a level of internal political stability, as a way of building the MNCR in that association. Today, I am convinced that the strategy of action I adopted, of trying to be neutral in relation to the conflicts, proved to be mistaken. The two factions within the association sought to bargain their adherence to the MNCR in exchange for maintaining access to the welfare benefits of the Work Emergency Fronts Programme, which guaranteed the distribution of basic food baskets and a supplemental income of approximately BRL 200,00 (USD 50.00) monthly

per member. The conflict was not overcome and the Restinga association did not formally join the MNCR.

The construction of a nursery for collectors' children was another claim of the workers. At a general assembly I was chosen to be provisionally its pedagogical co-ordinator. I believe that what weighed in this decision was my inadequacy to work with the presses and cylinders. After a transition, the kindergarten teacher took over the day-care co-ordination. This freed me to attend a call for the Movement for training activities in the three Southern states. I worked on several training projects until my entry into the master's programme in 2008.

The revitalisation of the academic experience

In the above actions, the defence and promotion of the subjects gave me sense of engagement, subjects whose valorisation would be the element capable of transforming their living conditions. However, the libertarian impulse coming from student times contrasted with governmental programmes that stimulated welfare, such as the Work Emergency Fronts Programme Assistance. Programs in Brazil are not managed professionally as a public policy, but symbolically appropriated and presented as a generosity of the governing political party in exchange for which the beneficiaries would have to owe their loyalty (Sobottka 2006). The Work Emergency Fronts Programme effectively served to distribute basic food baskets and emergency income to the collectors, but because of its insufficiency and symbolic appropriation by a political party, it led the distributive conflict into the interior of the association by dividing it. It was also necessary to deal with the projects that aimed to insert collectors into the market as part of the recycling chain. With the objective of establishing a central commercialisation of recyclable materials with a business and market orientation, the productive chain torpedoed the political channeling of the social question of the population that survives from the recycling of materials in the periphery of the big cities.³

These findings could only be formulated a posteriori through the study of the senses built among the activities of the collectors as societal actors. Since I was deeply connected to these actions, it was not possible for me to understand more accurately the processes within which the MNCR was introduced. I came to think of specialising in Pedagogy, because I was impressed with the training activities of the collectors during this period. However, the movement grew, and with it grew its challenges and problems. Only action by action, or training by training, would not bring the answers necessary for the collectors to face their social, political, and economic problems. These experiences of sociopolitical engagement were the fundamental factors that led me to the resumption of my academic career and of my commitment to study, and to sociological research on the collective paths that were embodied in the actions of this movement. From then on, another part of this trajectory was inaugurated.

To delineate the specific scope of research experience, it is important to note that personal experiences, experiences of engagement, and academic experiences differ from

3 By stimulating the dependent insertion of collectors in the recyclable materials circuit, the 2010 national solid waste policy represented a victory for local public managers and companies linked to it in terms of *business* (Demajorovic 2014; Lima 2018).

each other. The differentiation between these three types of experience lies in the methodo-methodological conditions of knowledge production, whose emergence comes from social processes and relationships within which a series of interactions with the collectors are developed. The first two spheres can be characterised by the empirical dimension of social action in its most basic form. On the other hand, the practice of research, as another field of experience, allows the researcher to perform a second-order interpretation (Melucci 2005, p. 33) capable of amplifying the production of sets of meanings and the consequent deepening of the meanings attributed to social and collective actions in the relationships within the movement. Such a second-order interpretation concerns the enhancement of both the researcher's capacity and the social actor's ability to observe the way one observes and how one interprets the relationships in which both are embedded (Ranci 2005, p. 66).

In this sense, the relations established both in the condition of actor (sociopolitical engagement) and in the condition of researcher (second-order interpretation) become significant 'inputs' directed to the practices of both one and the other. This is due to the fact that the relations established in the scope of the practices with the actors constitute the 'raw material' necessary for the construction of the objects of interpretation of the research. On the other hand, the senses of research produced from reflective interpretations within the scope of investigative practice can contribute significantly to the political maturation of the actions of the movement, by begetting reflective practice on social relations, and on the directions taken by these actors in their daily political, economic, and social disputes.

Denaturalisation of political, economic, and social inequalities

During the elaboration of the two cited academic studies (Oliveira, 2010, 2016) it was possible to systematise perceptions and intuitions that were already delineated during the period of direct engagement. Three types of inequalities directly affected collectors: political, social, and economic inequalities. Each inequality is experienced and perceived in the daily life of the social group, even if not completely conscious. Within the movement, the gradual perception followed the conviction that these are not inequalities that are naturally given, but socially constructed. Such raising awareness can be identified especially in documents of the MNCR, in interviews with leaders, and in memories from feedback spaces.

In search of political, economic, and social autonomy

Describing the beginning of the process of organisation of collectors, Michelotti (2006) identifies three distinct chronological phases. First, the participation of the collectors as mere spectators; second, their becoming into supporting actors of the process; third, their performance as protagonists of their organisation.

A social issue was present in the start: people living in garbage areas in search of something reusable, whether to eat, to use or to resell. Ministry agents from grassroots communities as well as socially engaged people and even intermediate traders (middlemen) began, in mid-1980s, to become involved and to induce a process of organisation *in favour* of these people living in poverty, not rarely taking direction roles in the emerging entities.

From the 1990s, waste collection under the responsibility of the municipalities took place, which often stimulated the creation of associations of recyclers in sheds. The rate of recycled materials grew, and a more stable market for collectors was created. However, it also increased tension between recyclers from sheds, who received the material from municipalities, and collectors who gathered materials on the street and selected it for sale. There was a proliferation of forums, committees, associations, and other forms of grouping agents involved with urban waste, such as local governments, recycling companies, purchasers of materials, and many other sorts of waste recyclers. They sought, on the one hand, to solve the problem of urban waste and, on the other hand, to participate in the emerging market. Public resources from cleaning taxes, and recyclable materials were in dispute. The initiatives were however still very local, with little articulation among themselves.

In the second phase described by Michelotti (2006), from 1995 to 2000 approximately, collectors began to become involved in the management of forums, associations, and other entities. The regional articulations of the collectors were strengthened, as was the interest of external agents (NGOs, government, companies) in the cycle of reuse of waste. There is a strong tendency among public agents in placing recyclers and collectors in a dependent position in the commercial reuse of waste, albeit collectors are more aware of the need for greater economic and political autonomy. Some of these organizations acted authoritatively (Maciel & Braga 2018) and others even fraudulently (Sterchile & Batista 2011). In Rio Grande do Sul, for example, the Federation of Associations (mentioned above) was created with the aim of gathering forces and resources. Not only did collectors participate, but also recyclers connected to sheds, small material merchants, and members of the government. The conflict of interests between the participants prevented the Federation from prospering. The Federation was one of the main promoters of a congress of collectors of recyclable materials at the national level, from which the momentum for the formation of the National Movement of Recyclable Materials Collectors (MNCR) was born, in 2001, under the organisation of the collectors themselves.⁴

The creation of a social movement organisation, and not a classic non-governmental organization, with a declaration of principles and objectives, marked the objective of keeping the prominence in the hands of the collectors and, with this, pointed straight ahead to the questioning of the political inequality that had been experienced in previous initiatives. The way in which the movement itself perceived the transition from collectors-spectators to leading-roles can be seen in the minutes of one of the organisation's bodies:

During the discussion, we started by considering that, in the beginning, the MNCR was conceived by external agents of the third sector who wanted a national entity based on several [federated] states to be able to represent the collectors in front of numerous organizations of fundraising, for their projects and for the conservation of their bureaucratic positions. At that time, NGOs, companies, and governments were articulated around the Garbage and Citizenship forums. They discussed the future of privatization policies for basic sanitation but attempted to fit in waste collectors to such policies. In the evaluation of Cristina Bové, a technician linked to the Catholic Church of Minas Gerais, if the MNCR had not been created at that 1st Congress of Collectors and Street Population in July 2001 in Brasília, these entities would have found in any

4 On the formation of MNCR, see not only Michelotti (2006), but also Pereira and Goes (2016), Fergutz et al. (2011), and Pereira and Teixeira (2011).

case a national entity to carry out their plans, the fact that it was originated from a Social Movement was a great advance (MNCR, 2007).

This passage shows an initial process of denaturalisation of political inequality when collectors question the external influence in their organisation and look for a body that does not substitute its prominence. In an interview, in 2016, a MNCR co-ordinator from the state of Minas Gerais illustrates this:

Our movement has an advantage, man. I do not know if in other movements it is like this. But we have an advantage that is: we are a collector's movement, managed and organised by collectors, so there is no leader of this movement that never pulled a cart and had never been to a dump. Unlike many movements, in which the guy sometimes never [sic] used a hoe but is the leader of the movement. [...] They are middle class people who want to help, who have good intentions, have good hearts, but who never lived under a marquee, and who never paid a rent with seven children to raise. [...] But they are leaders, they do not stop being ... But the differential of the MNCR is that everybody that is in the committees, that is in articulation, that is running errands, that is so-called 'leadership' [...] these guys and these women who are making it work, the origin of everyone is the dump and the street. There is none that is not. I do not know of. Only if there are some that I do not know of, but no, everyone comes from that.

This Movement leader brings, in his interview, elements of a conception of self-management and direct democracy, as the values established in the MNCR's declaration of principles.⁵ Such principles contribute to the denaturalisation of political inequality and need to be constantly reaffirmed. The feedback moment below highlights how this reassurance can happen.

At an executive co-ordination meeting of the MNCR in February 2010, Geraldo said we could not help but remember who we were, and where we came from. He went on to say that those present at the meeting were part of the group of actors who knew how to take advantage of a historic organisational moment, and succeeded in putting into agenda a strategy and a militant code of conduct. They would have influenced many organisations of collectors at the national level. At the end of the talk, he was asked whether the strategic objectives and principles of militant conduct would be clear to the majority of collectors at the national level, and whether it did not seem to him that sometimes not even the executive co-ordination group itself had clarity about such assumptions. In this sense, Alberto (also state co-ordinator of the MNCR) complemented the questioning by saying that the group had to 'translate' several times its struggles for itself. He also said that this group needed to work in a spirit of mobilisation and discipline to keep other collectors engaged in more than time-bound or temporary projects. He referred to a permanent process of denaturalisation of political inequality from the engaged discipline that has as guideline of conduct the organisational principles of the MNCR.

The principle of self-management also assists in the denaturalisation of economic inequality, and is very dear to the Movement (Bortoli 2009; Millar 2008). Historically, the concept of self-management has its elaboration associated with the theoretical and militant anarchist Pierre Joseph Proudhon. In short, self-management is for him the radical fusion between intellectual, theoretical, and the practical-productive making, between the political sphere of decisions and the economic instance of the production of wealth. Under self-

5 The MNCR works for the self-management of the collectors [...], with a criterion of direct democracy in which all have voice and vote in decisions [...] (MNCR, 2010, p.18).

management, and through the end of the alienation provided by it, society could consolidate a regime of direct democracy and equal distribution of economic resources (Gallo 1995; Vieta 2014).

The reference to self-management helps to have a vision of the economic process capable of denaturalising the concentration of wealth in recycling. This concentration of political power and wealth has always been one of the main sources of conflict between collectors and businesses. This reveals the following assessment of Fabiano, at the time co-ordinator of the MNCR in Rio Grande do Sul: “Because they dominate, they exploit, they have a monopoly, they are responsible for the fact that we are having this life today, a life of difficulties, of having to kill one lion a day.”

The economic conflict is also perceived by the lack of infrastructure in associations and co-operatives of collectors. This was once again evident in an episode in March 2010. Together with Beto (MNCR member) we went to an association of collectors in a municipality near Gravataí, to summon them to a training course of the Movement. On the way we passed a large glass factory. Beto said that the associations of collectors could not sell the glass they collected directly to the factory because of the lack of containers. Those who have this device could sell glass for BRL 0,11 (USD 0.04) per kilogram directly to the factory. Middlemen pay collectors only three or four cents (USD 0.01) per kilogram. In the recycling groups, the glass is crushed with improvised pylons and an iron bar. The heaviest activity is to load the bottles filled with crushed glass onto a truck, with the aid of only wooden planks. A minimum working structure is lacking both to crush the glass and to transport it.

Regarding the questioning of social inequality faced by the collectors, an example that shows the denaturalisation of this type of inequality occurred in Uruguaiana, a city on the border of Brazil and Argentina. In conversation with Tarsila, co-ordinator of the regional committee of the western border of the MNCR, after a day accompanying her in negotiation processes with the city for the transfer of the collectors from the municipal dump to another structure of work. To the question ‘why she had become a collector’, Tarsila said she became a collector because she could no longer work as a maid. She had to take her kids along to work, because there was no one to leave them with at home. So she was often insulted by her bosses. Until one day she decided to pick up materials, because in this activity she could establish her own schedule. She could leave early while her children slept, and return from work when they had awakened. Or take them with her so that she and her husband could take care of them while they worked. Tarsila’s account exemplifies some of the many motivations that lead collectors to begin their work with discarded materials. Many of these collectors are led by many other factors to remain in the recycling activity, even if precariously.⁶ To many people, a key factor to endure the

6 Several studies show that the entry into the materials collection activity is often done from a condition of homelessness, when imprisoned finish serving their sentence, and due to long-term unemployment (Magni & Günther 2014; Burgos 2013; J. Santos et al. 2013).

difficulties and risks of the activity⁷ is the income obtained from the amount of material collected and pre-classified.⁸

On the work of collecting and pre-classifying, Tarsila says that when she started her work on the dump she was impressed with her income, in the first months, of BRL 600,00 (USD 150.00) a week. Obtaining this income occurred because it is much easier and quicker to work in a dump than to work on the street. In a dump, the material is ready at the collectors' immediate disposal. On the street the collector needs to look for the material. In addition, in the dump classification can happen at the time of collection. Tarsila, however, acknowledged the existence of innumerable difficulties related to day-to-day work on the dump. For example, work done at night when there is no electric light. To get to work in the dark, some collectors burned materials like plastic or rubber. Many collectors know that making a fire with materials can be very risky because of the toxic fumes from the combustion, and methane gas expelled by the garbage, with the danger of explosion. The difficulties of working in these conditions mean that only the most experienced collectors can work at night, thanks to their touch and hearing abilities, which become more accurate over time, and which enable the identification of recyclable materials even in the dark.

Tarsila reports that, at the beginning, working at night was not easy. Nowadays she prefers the nightwork, because there are not so many people working. However, considering health issues, she thinks she has contracted an ulcer because of unhealthy work amid the 'junk bugs.' She also reports that everything gets worse on rainy days because the material gets even dirtier. Some materials such as paper are impossible to collect. Another factor that worsens working conditions is the dispute between the pickers of the dump for the so-called 'special loads', such as the 'bati' trucks.⁹ Tarsila says she eases the dispute by repeatedly reaffirming to those collectors that there is enough food for all.

This leader of the MNCR shares the sense of identity and professional appreciation that is sought by the collectors from the moment they come to understand themselves as workers whose professional activity must be recognised by society. In the daily life of these workers, shame and humiliation stem from discrimination and prejudice (Miura & Sawaia 2013), but the joy of income and affirmation of self come with the possibility of recovering their dignity as honest workers (Mayer 2009). In this sense, it was of fundamental

7 Pickers are very exposed to the elements as well as to other risks such as accidents and various illnesses (Hoefel et al. 2013; Ferraz et al. 2012; Gutberlet et al. 2013), hunger and malnutrition (L. Santos et al 2013). For a review of the literature on the subject, see Binion and Gutberlet (2012) and Coelho et al. (2018).

8 Regarding the classification of materials, collectors who are submitted to scrap dealers (small and medium commercial intermediaries) usually perform a pre-classification, because this is characterised by being too basic and much less diversified than the classification operated by the larger intermediaries. This pre-classification consists of separating plastics into four categories (PET, mixed, white mixed, soft plastic), paper into three sets (cardboard, white paper, and mixed paper) and metals in three other types (aluminum, ferrous scrap, and copper). In some cases, collectors do not even collect many other recyclable materials because the market price does not compensate for this effort. This is the case of Styrofoam, which has a lot of volume and light weight, as well as the very heavy and low value glass, which collectors seldom pick. However, a more thorough classification is made by the many types of intermediaries, or by a few associations of collectors (Lima 2017). The closer one is to the recycling industry, the more classification knowledge one holds.

9 'Bati' is the name given by the collectors to the trucks coming from large supermarkets in the city, which come loaded with fruits, vegetables, meat, yogurt, among others with expired dates (*batidos*).

importance to receive the official recognition of ‘collector of recyclable materials’ within the framework of general solid waste policy in 2010 (De Lorena et al. 2014; Maiello et al. 2018).

This form of understanding provides the denaturalisation of social inequality at the moment they claim their valorisation as professionals. This other meaning is verified by Daniel (collector from Porto Alegre and participant of the MNCR):

At this moment the collector is not recognized by society. ‘Oh! He’s a junkman, not a collector’... That’s an offense to the collector... because he’s not a junkman. This profession of collector should be recognized as a [true] profession, not as simple... I don’t know, casual work or something. Because collector is a profession, only it is not recognised now.

The expectations for the achievement of rights related to professional recognition are shaped by a shared interest among collectors. This is evident when Daniel states that there needs to be “unity, training, instruction for them [the collectors], to become aware of their rights.” He also said that “the movement is aimed at the collectors’ rights. It wants to value this work, and that’s why we fight, that’s why today I speak... because I’m also fighting for it.”

The collectors express the awareness of the historically constructed character of this social inequality through their organisation in the Movement and the claim of rights and appreciation of their activity. But social inequality persists, either because of the relatively low income, of the low recognition of their activity as well as of the difficulties faced by the collectors in the lack of access to public policies. They lack a considerable increase in social support related to the process of subjectivation that causes individuals to become subjects of their own social relations.

Concluding remarks

The questioning of the political, economic, and social inequalities to which recyclable materials collectors are exposed in Brazil occurred gradually and in parallel with the growth of their own organisation, exemplified here in the National Movement of Recyclable Materials Collectors (MNCR). In methodological terms, it was sought, in this text, to evince the construction of this consciousness as a process of research and participation together with actors of the social group. In this long journey, we experienced direct participation in the daily routine of collectors, solidarity accompaniment in the organisation and in the resistance to the hetero-determination of the local associations and groups, as well as partaking in group reflections, and some time off in such involvement for description and interpretation of data. Feedback spaces served to constitute interpretations shared between the actors, whose knowledge comes from empirical experience, and the researcher, whose knowledge comes from observation disciplined through theoretical and methodological study. This latter type of knowledge is produced in the academic field and contributes to the ‘world of research’, being different from the ‘world of life’, since qualitative research reconstructs the world of life by mediation of its presuppositions and its interpretative categories. Taking these differences into account, it becomes possible to elaborate successive questions, which stimulate and deepen the reflexivity to be consolidated from the research feedbacks.

The collector is the point of departure and point of arrival, in studies based on the achievement of a reflexive exercise involved in a hermeneutical circle of recognition, built around social and historical relations between different actors. With the focus on the modes of interpretation of the collectors, the notion of reflectivity of the actors allows the obtaining of a 'second-order observation'. Such a form of observation is made possible by the relations of exchange between the social actor and the researcher. The exercise of mutual questioning between the researcher and the actors becomes possible because of the trust established during the common journey. This is what guarantees the opening of spaces for the gathering and interpretation of empirical data. The reciprocal questions asked in the feedback moments help in the application of a method based on co-operation and reflexivity within the framework of this research.

The study, reflection, and debate based on the knowledge of the actors of the MNCR, and the knowledge provided by the human sciences lead us, the researchers, to deepen interpretative concepts and categories that help understand the Movement and the inequalities faced by the collectors. The visualisation of hegemonic processes and relations that characterise the context of the collectors' action, and the search for new processes and social relations to be generated and matured, through hermeneutic and reflexive models, can lead to a theoretical and political collaboration among sensible social actors, critics and committed to the struggles of those who seek to overcome social inequalities and injustices through their own historical effort.

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