

Solidarity Economy and the Struggle for Social Citizenship in Times of Globalization: A Study of the Cooperatives of Informal Garbage Pickers in Colombia

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization, inequality, and exclusion

Over the last few years—after more than three decades of intensification of the flow of goods, services, capital, and people across borders—the efforts of thousands of individuals and organizations around the world denouncing the various kinds of exclusion brought about by neoliberal globalization have had a considerable impact on scholarly and political debates about the world economy. Demonstrations against corporate-friendly trade agreements such as the WTO and the FTAA in Seattle, Quebec, Genoa, Cancún, Miami, and elsewhere have disrupted the hitherto smooth advance of the neoliberal agenda. Demonstrators have been joined by an emerging coalition led by major countries of the global South—Brazil, India, China, and South Africa—aimed at changing the rules and the distribution of the benefits of the global economy. Across Latin America, the left has been on the rise in the first years of the new century, especially in countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, and Brazil, which only a few years earlier were the poster children of structural adjustment policies (Rodríguez-Garavito, Barrett, and Chávez, 2005). These and similar developments—notably the consolidation of the World Social Forum—entail the emergence of counter-hegemonic economic practices and discourses that, without yet replacing the hegemonic Washington Consensus, highlights the fact that neoliberal globalization is based upon and reproduces political, social, and economic conditions that tend to create further inequality at every geographical scale (Evans 2000; Santos and Rodríguez-Garavito 2005).

At the global scale, the gap between the North and the South is increasing (Galbraith *et al.*, 1998). At the scale of the nation-state, mounting inequalities over the last two decades have wiped out the effects of progressive social

policies undertaken before the advent of structural adjustment, as the cases of the large majority of Latin America countries illustrate (CEPAL, 2003; Centeno and Hoffman, 2003; Portes and Hoffman, 2003). At the urban scale, the growing gap between the rich and the poor is particularly striking. As shown by studies on the emergence of "global cities"—e.g., New York, Tokyo, and London in the core; São Paulo, Mexico City, and Bogotá in the Latin American semiperiphery—as nodes of control in the global economic system, the economies and societies of large cities are characterized by a marked dualism (Brenner and Theodore, 2003; Sassen, 1991; Friedmann, 1995). In cities of the global South—the setting of the "planet of slums" eloquently described by Davis (2004)—such dualism manifests itself in the increasing disparity of income and standards of living between a relatively small number of skilled workers employed in the formal sector of the economy, and a large and expanding mass of semi-skilled and unskilled workers who hold temporary or low-paying jobs in the formal sector, work in the informal economy or are unemployed. In Latin American cities, the polarization of the class structure has accentuated the spatial and social distance between the fortified enclaves of the rich and the areas where the growing informal proletariat lives and works (Portes and Hoffman, 2003).

The sizable growth of the informal economy is especially relevant for the purposes of this study, not only because it constitutes the most visible type of precarious employment in major cities but also because one of its most dramatic expressions—i.e., the work of thousands of people surviving in conditions of abject poverty who eke out a living by picking through the garbage on the streets and in dumps to collect recyclable items for sale—is the topic of the case study presented below. In Bogotá—the city that this case study focuses on—the informal sector has expanded considerably over the last few years. Today, the informal economy employs 55 percent of the economically active population in the city (Uribe, 2002: 397). This phenomenon is common to other large Latin American cities and results partly from the dislocations associated with structural adjustment programs (Portes and Hoffman, 2003; Vilas, 1999). In fact, according to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL, 2003), the informal sector has become the main source of new jobs in the region.

One of the central consequences of rising inequality at every scale is the trend towards the effective exclusion of large sectors of the world population from the global process of capital accumulation. In other words, the fact that the global economy has generated unprecedented wealth while a growing number of people around the world—the permanently unemployed, landless peasants, subsistence farmers, and informal workers—are confined to its margins leads to the conclusion, as Friedmann has put it, that "modern capitalism [...] can do without [them]"; thus, "the message sent to them is very clear: for all practical purposes, they have become largely

redundant for capital accumulation" (Friedmann, 1992: 14). Redundant as producers inasmuch as the productivity of their work is relatively low. Redundant as consumers in so far as their purchasing power is extremely precarious, to the point that their participation in consumption—as Moody (1997) has poignantly noted—is often limited to window-shopping.

But social exclusion does not proceed without encountering resistance. The excluded confront it through multifarious individual and collective actions, from subsistence strategies to national and global oppositional projects and countless local initiatives. In Latin America, for instance, as Hirschman (1984) has shown in his fascinating survey of economic initiatives undertaken by the poor, such activities of resistance range from efforts by small farmers to control the commercialization of their products through marketing cooperatives, to the collaborative work of slum dwellers to gain property titles to and build decent dwellings on the land they occupy, as well as to the struggle of impoverished craftspeople to confront, by founding worker cooperatives, the threat to their livelihood posed by the competition of factories that produce crafts on a massive scale. As Hirschman notes, what these experiences have in common is that they serve as a means for marginalized sectors to organize in order to "get ahead collectively." Similarly, multiple social movements for social citizenship have arisen or continued to thrive in Latin America in times of globalization, involving, among others, indigenous peoples, black communities, industrial workers, landless peasants and women (Alvarez *et al.*, 1998; Eckstein and Wickham-Crowley, 2002).

For the purposes of this chapter, whose case study refers to the collective struggle of garbage recyclers¹ to improve their life conditions—it is particularly important to highlight initiatives undertaken by the urban popular classes, namely, the majority of the cities' population comprising poor salaried workers, informal workers and the unemployed. To the large number of workers earning the minimum wage, street vendors, garbage recyclers, domestic workers, homeless people of all ages, and the thousands of people trying to eke out a living by performing all types of services on the streets, getting by is a daily hassle. Both as buyers and as producers, members of the popular classes feed a low-cost urban economy that allows them to have access to basic goods and services. In this sense, such "popular economies" entail a form of resistance, albeit a precarious one, in so far as they are the means through which the popular classes create and exploit an economic niche in order to survive (Quijano, 1998; Burbach *et al.*, 1997). However, when seen within the context of the urban economy as a whole, it becomes clear that popular economies are far from being autonomous and, in and of themselves, emancipatory. As Castells and Portes (1989) have argued, it is often the case that informal economic activities are thoroughly articulated with the formal economy, as shown by the fact that informal garbage recyclers sell the materials they recover to intermediaries who, in turn, resell

them to large, formal industries producing paper, cardboard, and glass. Further, as the case of the recyclers clearly illustrates, popular economic initiatives can be—and often are—sources of cheap products, services and labor for the modern sector of the economy. Thus, popular economies can facilitate rather than counter the exploitation of the popular classes.

In light of the ambivalent functions of popular economies, the key question guiding the selection and the empirical study of collective initiatives undertaken in the context of such economies is the following: which strategies of collective organization and action can mitigate or eliminate the exploitation of popular economic actors and release the emancipatory potential of these types of economies? In this chapter, I argue that cooperatives and other solidaristic forms of economic organization—generally referred to in Latin America as “solidarity economy” (*economía solidaria*), a term that has gradually been adopted and expanded in other parts of the world—constitute promising strategies. The argument proceeds in three steps. In what remains of this introductory section I set up the case study of the cooperatives of garbage recyclers. I then describe the economic and social setting in which informal recycling takes place in Colombia. Against this background, I analyze the operation of the cooperatives and assess their contribution to the recyclers’ struggle for social citizenship, as well as the internal and external factors that limit their impact. Finally, I offer some conclusions.

The case study

What are the conditions for the emergence and consolidation of non-capitalist popular economic organizations that can both further the struggle for the inclusion of the popular classes and compete in an increasingly globalized market? To tackle this question I present in what follows the results of a study on the formation and development of cooperatives of garbage recyclers in Colombia. The research entailed fieldwork that combined, on the one hand, a study of the 94 cooperatives of recyclers, which was based on semi-structured interviews and the analysis of primary and secondary documents, and, on the other, a detailed study based upon participant observation in one of the most established cooperatives of Bogotá (by the name of “Rescatar”—[“Rescuing”]).²

Four reasons make this case study particularly suitable for the purposes of this article. First, the conditions of extreme deprivation in which garbage recyclers live in cities around the world provide stark evidence of the process of social exclusion to which I alluded above. Far from being a phenomenon unique to Colombia or Latin America, the existence of thousands of people surviving by sifting through the rubble in dumps and streets is common in cities in the global South, as well as, although probably in less dramatic proportions, in large cities in the North. For instance, the most reliable data

estimate that in Colombia around 300,000 people—i.e., nearly 1 percent of the national population—eke out a living by scavenging for recyclable materials (Hower, 1997). In Mexico and Egypt, informal recyclers make up as much as 2 percent of the population (Hoyos, 2000). In Buenos Aires alone, an estimated 100,000 people have turned to scavenging in the wake of the 2001 economic crisis (Koehs, 2004). In Manila, Philippines, the number of people who directly depend on “the recycling waste chain” is estimated at 12,000, while in Beijing about 82,000 migrant peasants work as scavengers (Mydans, 2000). Second, garbage recyclers are the victims of a particularly vicious kind of social exclusion. Given the generalized repugnance towards their lifestyle—which oftentimes involves homelessness—and their trade—which involves handling what the rest of society has decided to discard—recyclers are the objects of the maximum degree of exclusion and are confined to the most marginal zones of the urban cartography, i.e., the dumps, streets and ghettos where they live and sell the materials they collect. In Colombia, the degree of exclusion to which recyclers are subjected is revealed by the scornful colloquial expression *desechables* (“disposable people”) with which people refer to them. In other words, the recycler is excluded to the point of being considered disposable, like the garbage she sifts through. Far from being a fortuitous expression, the idea of the recycler as a disposable person underlies the operations of “social cleansing” undertaken by violent groups inspired by fascist ideologies, sometimes with the connivance of the police, which result in the killing of recyclers and other people forced to work or live on the streets at night. Third, recyclers in Colombia have organized themselves in non-capitalist productive units, namely worker cooperatives. Thus, the achievements and the shortcomings of this experience are useful for addressing the research question I laid out above on the potential of non-capitalist organizations as a means for the empowerment of marginalized classes in the South. Fourth, the recyclers’ cooperatives have had to face up to the challenges posed by the opening of the Colombian economy to international competition. The cooperatives were created precisely at the time (the late 1980s and early 1990s) when economic policies in Colombia veered towards internationalization and neoliberalism. Therefore, the cooperatives have experienced both the difficulties and the opportunities involved in the process of globalization. In particular, they have had to respond to the conditions created by the process of privatization of garbage collection in major cities, which is part and parcel of the general trend towards the privatization of public services in Colombia since the early 1990s. Thus, analyzing the evolution of the cooperatives sheds light on the economic potential of this type of organization in the context of globalization.

In the next section, I lay out the results of this case study. In doing so, I set out to engage the literature on popular economies, alternative

development, and cooperativism.³ Given that, as noted in the introduction to this volume, such bodies of work tend to focus on the local to the detriment of the national and the global scales, I stress the way in which the cooperatives have been affected by and have reacted to economic and political changes associated with the process of globalization.

FROM "DISPOSABLE PEOPLE" TO WORKER-OWNERS: THE STRUGGLE OF COLOMBIAN GARBAGE RECYCLERS

The market for recyclable materials

Recycling solid waste—i.e., paper, cardboard, glass, plastic, and aluminum—is a key stage in the production cycle of numerous industries, particularly those producing paper, containers of all types, tiles, corrugated cardboard, and a growing number of new materials such as the high-resistance sheets used in construction. It is estimated, for instance, that in Colombia 48 percent of the fiber used to make paper comes from recycling (Fundación Social, 1998: 23; Polo, 1990). The utilization of such raw materials is made possible by the fact that 51 percent of all the paper and cardboard consumed annually in the country is recuperated through the circuit of recycling (Fundación Social, 1990).

The use of recycled materials has key economic and environmental effects. Recycling lowers production costs as the price of recycled raw materials is usually far lower than that of new inputs. Recycling is also a remarkably dynamic economic activity. In 1990, income generated by the different activities constituting the recycling circuit—i.e., the picking, transformation, and transport of materials—reached \$22 million (Fundación Social, 1990). As for the environmental effects, it is estimated that the recycling of every ton of paper or cardboard avoids the felling of twenty trees. This means that the approximately 300,000 tons of paper and cardboard that are recycled yearly in Colombia allow for the preservation of 6 million trees (ANR, 2000; Fundación Social, 1998).

Aggregate figures on the size and impact of the market for recyclable goods do not reveal, however, the highly exploitative structure and dynamics of such a market. The circuit of recycling vividly illustrates the process of social exclusion in large cities, to which I referred above. Indeed, as practiced in Colombia, recycling is the result of the combination of the effects of a rapid and disorderly process of urbanization—among which are an inadequate garbage collection service and the absence of civic consciousness *vis-à-vis* the benefits of recycling at home—and a profound social and spatial cleavage. Such a cleavage gives rise to the coexistence, on the one hand, of a small and relatively wealthy sector of the urban population producing most of the garbage and recyclable residues and, on the other, of a large number

of people who are either unemployed or informally employed, and who turn to recuperating and selling such materials to survive. Thus, the economic niche created by the demand from formal industries and the insufficiency of services of garbage collection and recycling is occupied by a marginalized population that survives by foraging for cans, paper, bottles, and other goods in city dumps and streets—particularly in upper-class neighborhoods, where most of the valuable waste is produced.

Against such a background, it is possible to understand the structure and operation of the market for recyclable materials. The market is divided into three stages. The first one is the picking of the materials. This is a highly competitive activity since it involves more than 300,000 informal⁴ recyclers around the country, out of whom about 50,000 work in Bogotá (Hower, 1997). The second stage of the market involves the formal and informal middlemen who buy materials from recyclers and sell them to large industries. It is not rare for these middlemen to have direct links and even be funded by the industries that buy from them. The third stage involves the industries that buy, transform, and sell recyclable materials. In contrast with the collection stage, the purchase of materials is highly concentrated. Indeed, the market for recyclable materials is an oligopsony. A small number of firms buys the materials and thus gets to set the conditions and prices for the myriad recyclers.

Given the structure of the market, it comes as no surprise that the buying industries—and, to a lesser extent, the middlemen—appropriate the considerable profits derived from the recycling circuit. Meanwhile, informal recyclers, as I will explain in detail below, usually make less than the minimum wage—which in Colombia hovers around \$125 a month—and hence remain in conditions of extreme poverty. The structure and dynamics of the market also illustrate the intimate connection and exploitative relations between popular informal economies and the formal economy. As Birkbeck's study on recycling in Cali, Colombia, has shown, informal recyclers are in fact indirect employees of the handful of factories that buy and re-use the materials—although they neither recognize themselves nor are recognized by the buyers as such (Birkbeck, 1978).

The recyclers

Who are the people wandering the streets and the dumps in search of recyclable items? The fragmentary data available on the matter, supplemented by the information obtained during fieldwork, shows that men and women participate in similar proportions in the trade of recycling. Although the age of most recyclers ranges between 20 and 40, it is common to find children and elderly people working as recyclers (Corporación Raíces, 1998). Recyclers usually work in kinship groups, rather than individually. In

accompanying recyclers who are members of Rescatar—the cooperative that was the focus of the ethnographic research for this study (henceforth, “the cooperative”)—in their journeys through the streets of Bogotá, it was apparent that a division of labor existed among the four or more members of extended families working as a team. While some members of the family picked through the garbage bins, others drove the makeshift pushcarts and carriages on which the materials were transported, while yet others packed up the collected materials into compact bundles for sale. It is common for recyclers to carry their children in their carts. The comment made by Heidy, a 17-year-old member of the cooperative is illustrative in this regard: “I am a recycler since the day I was born because my mother used to carry me in a box inside the cart while she worked.”⁵

The large majority of recyclers have little or no schooling. The most comprehensive study on the recyclers’ population has shown that 73 percent of the interviewees did not finish elementary school and that 15 percent were illiterate (Corporación Raíces, 1998). My own ethnographic research on the cooperative produced similar results. Several of its members dropped out of school because they had to work fulltime as recyclers in order to make ends meet or because, as in the case of Heidy, “there was no more money to pay for school.”⁶ However, a new and striking phenomenon is the increasing number of people with a high-school or even a college degree who have become recyclers in the face of skyrocketing unemployment in Colombia. This is the case, for instance, of Henry, 51, a new member of the cooperative who turned to recycling after losing his job as an engine driver as a result of the liquidation of the national railway company in the mid-1990s.

Recycling involves three types of work. The most visible sector of the recyclers’ population works on the streets, transporting in bags, pushcarts or carriages the items they pick from garbage bins and bags. Recyclers focus on the wealthy zones of the city and do their rounds right before the trucks from garbage companies do theirs. Such a *modus operandi* entails exhausting routines that take between 8 and 12 hours a day and require that recyclers crisscross the city, usually on foot and pushing a makeshift cart. The round begins at home, goes on in the working zone, located usually at the other side of the city, and finishes with the return to the poor neighborhoods where the middlemen’s warehouses are located and the recyclers live. The second type of work is the collection of materials from dumps. Working conditions in dumps are particularly appalling. Men, women, and children sift through the mountains of garbage work in constant contact with rats and vultures—thus the name “vultures” that is given to recyclers in some cities (Birkbeck, 1978)—and must bear the fetid smell and other factors detrimental to their health. The third type of work entails sorting the materials directly at the “source,” i.e., in office or residential buildings. This kind of work is evidently more advantageous to the recycler. Working at a fixed location—the garbage

deposit of a building—is safer and less exhausting than wandering the streets or searching through a dump. However, given the generalized perception of the recycler as a dangerous, indigent person (a “disposable” person), in practice, direct access to sources of waste can prove very difficult.

The recyclers’ income is highly variable. This is because buyers and middlemen frequently modify prices, and because recyclers are paid according to the weight of the materials they collect, which changes vastly depending on how lucky they are on a given day. Incomes also vary substantially depending on the type of recycling. Incomes are higher for recyclers who have direct access to sources of waste than for those working on the streets or in dumps. The joint effect of these factors explains the contradictions evident among the few studies that have estimated the recyclers’ income. Depending on the population of recyclers under study, estimates range from sums above the minimum wage paid to formal workers to sums that constitute only a small fraction thereof. However, when the fact that the reported revenue is generated not only by the head of the family—who is the interviewee in most studies—but by her and three or more additional members of her family working as a team, it becomes clear that the recyclers’ income per head is usually lower than—or in some exceptional cases similar to—the minimum wage. Indeed, one study found that recyclers make about 50 percent of the minimum wage (e.g., about \$60) (Fundación Social, 1990), while another shows that revenue can range from 48 to 96 dollars per month (Corporación Raíces, 1998). Ethnographic work with members of the cooperative confirmed the high variation and the precariousness of their income. During trips on the cooperative-owned trucks that pick up the materials gathered by the members in the prosperous zones of the city, it became apparent that while some families with experience and contacts in the neighborhoods managed to collect daily materials worth about 30 dollars (i.e., \$7.50 apiece in a family of four), other families barely made \$15 a day.

Despite the harsh working conditions and the stigma that goes with them, informal recycling is largely a permanent occupation. In conversations with the members of the cooperative, numerous comments pointed to the fact that recycling is a lifelong occupation that, as in the case of Darly, 25, began “when I was little [...]. I have been recycling since the age of 13, when my mother would bring me to the cooperative.”⁷ Several reasons explain the persistence of recyclers in their trade. Despite being meager, the income obtained through recycling is higher than that typical of other informal activities open to people with little or no schooling and capital, such as small-scale street vending. Also, working as a recycler has a non-economic appeal that is precious to those in the trade, i.e., the independence and freedom that go along with working on their own. As Jairo, 50, a member of the cooperative for several years, put it, “I have always liked to work on my own. [...] I do not like being bossed around.”⁸ In fact, the paramount value of freedom

in the recyclers' culture—"there is nothing in the world like one's freedom, no matter what it takes," in the words of Diana, 26⁹—goes a long way towards explaining the individualistic behavior that helps perpetuate the exploitative structure of the market for recyclable materials. It also makes particularly noteworthy the efforts to organize the recyclers in solidaristic and co-operative forms of work.

The two central problems

How is the extreme marginalization of recyclers reproduced? What factors account for the stability of the social and economic structures underlying the market for recyclable materials and maintaining informal recyclers at the bottom, "locked into the lower end of capitalism, where the system is at its most brutal and divisive" (Birkbeck, 1978: 1185)? Two causes apparent in the description of the market offered above generate, to my mind, the vicious circle that perpetuates the recyclers' pauperization: economic exploitation stemming from the structure of the market and the actions of its dominant actors (i.e., large industries and middlemen), on the one hand, and the dramatic social exclusion of which recyclers are victims as a collectivity, on the other. Both causes feed on each other. The effects of the structure of the market explained in the previous section are compounded (and made possible) by the social exclusion of the recyclers. Recyclers occupy, in the eyes of a large part of the urban population, the lowest social stratum, along with beggars, thieves, the homeless and other people wandering the streets and with whom they are thought to be related. Recyclers are oftentimes excluded even by the poor¹⁰ and become victims of "social cleansing" operations. Indeed, one of the events spurring the foundation of the network of recyclers' cooperatives was the murder, in 1992, in a major city on the Caribbean Coast (Barranquilla), of eleven recyclers, whose bodies were subsequently used to carry out medical experiments at a well-known university. In sum, economic exploitation creates the conditions for the indigence and social exclusion that, in turn, confine recyclers to the urban spaces and economic niches that make possible the perpetuation of the exploitative structure of the market.

In light of this vicious circle, the few scholarly studies on informal recyclers tend to conclude on an utterly pessimistic note. The conclusions offered by Birkbeck (1978; 1979) in his studies on garbage pickers in Cali are telling in this regard. To Birkbeck, the obstacles facing recyclers are virtually insurmountable.

We cannot argue that [garbage pickers] should be incorporated into the industrial sector of the economy since they are already part of it. Neither can we argue for increasing their share of the income generated by recuperation

in anything but a limited way because of the structural constraints that operate in determining income. The garbage picker may work hard, may have a shrewd eye for saleable materials, may search long for the right buyer; in short, he may be the near-perfect example of the enterprising individual. It will not get him far. (Birkbeck, 1979: 182)

A few years after Birkbeck's study, the collective action of recyclers would challenge his tragic conclusion. In the following section I explain how a sector of the population of recyclers in Colombia has gotten together to establish cooperatives in order to fight precisely the structural limitations that seemed immutable.

The recyclers' cooperatives

Tackling the above difficulties requires a twofold strategy. On the one hand, a structural transformation of the market is needed that tilts the balance of recycling in favor of informal recyclers. The obvious means to attain this goal is the concentration of the supply of recyclable materials through a small number of recyclers' organizations capable of collecting a sizable amount of materials. This could allow such organizations to gain an important share of the market and thus wield bargaining power *vis-à-vis* buyers, as well as to cut out the middlemen. On the other hand, given that stigmatization and marginalization are important obstacles to the transformation of the structure of the market, such organizations must undertake social, political and cultural initiatives aimed at countering the social exclusion of recyclers as a whole. Among such undertakings are promoting access to basic goods and services, the lack of which reinforces the recyclers' marginalization (e.g., education and healthcare); creating mechanisms of advocacy and bargaining *vis-à-vis* the state and civil society; and forging solidarity ties among recyclers, which can create the potential for collective action. As shown by studies on empowering economic experiences initiated by popular actors in Latin America, the struggle for economic advancement is most successful when intertwined with the political struggle for social rights and citizenship (Eckstein and Wickham-Crowley, 2002; Wasserstrom, 1985; Hirschman, 1984). In the case of recyclers, the improvement of material conditions and the struggle for inclusion are two sides of the same coin. Without a viable economic strategy, recyclers are doomed to live in conditions of abject poverty or, at best, to depend upon the charity of NGOs or government agencies. Lacking a social and political strategy, economic gains cannot alter the conditions of exclusion of recyclers at large.

The need for a social, political, and economic strategy was lucidly perceived by leaders within the recyclers' community and by some NGOs and state agencies that, in the early 1980s, undertook the first efforts at organizing

recyclers. Lessons from such experiences were picked up by a group of nearly 200 recyclers in Manizales—a mid-sized city in the Colombian hinterland—that in 1986 founded the Pre-Cooperative “Prosperar” (“Prospering”). To this purpose, recyclers worked in collaboration with the national agency for the promotion of cooperativism, the city’s telephone and electricity company, and the Fundación Social (henceforth FS), a private foundation supported by a holding owned by the Jesuit community in Colombia (Hower, 1997). FS, which specializes in promoting economic initiatives in marginalized communities, would come to decisively influence the process of collective organization of recyclers throughout the country. Indeed, FS would come to play the role of the external catalyst—of “social animateur” (Friedmann, 1992)—that is frequently found in experiences of economic organization in underprivileged sectors. Initially in collaboration with the national agency for the promotion of cooperatives and later on its own, FS reached out to recyclers throughout the country and supported the creation and consolidation of the pioneering cooperatives and regional and national networks of cooperatives.

The result of the collaboration among groups of recyclers, FS and some national and local governmental agencies gave rise to the rapid proliferation of recyclers’ cooperatives in the late 1980s and early 1990s. One of the first cooperatives thus founded was Rescatar, established in Bogotá in 1987. In 1989 Porvenir, one of the most successful cooperatives in Bogotá, was created. Similar initiatives were undertaken in large and mid-sized cities throughout the country. In 1990 there were fifty cooperatives nationwide, twenty of which were partially supported by FS (Fundación Social, 1990). There arose then the need to articulate the efforts of the nascent cooperatives through regional associations and a national association. At the regional scale, for instance, the Bogotá Recyclers’ Association (ARB) was created in 1990, while the Recyclers Association of the Caribbean Coast (ARCON) was established in 1992 in the wake of the killing of the eleven recyclers in Barranquilla. At the national level, FS convened the first National Meeting of Recyclers in 1990, which gave rise to the foundation of the National Association of Recyclers (ANR) in 1991.

The creation of regional and national associations of cooperatives took place just as Colombian economic policy was taking a sharp turn towards liberalization along the lines of the neoliberal agenda. A core component of such policies was the privatization of public services. One of the first services to be privatized was garbage collection in Bogotá. In 1990, the city’s government contracted the service with private companies owned by Colombian and foreign investors. Such companies were given the responsibility of collecting garbage in 60 percent of the city. The privatization of the service revealed the two-sided effects that the opening of the Colombian economy to the global market has had on the cooperatives and the

associations of recyclers. On the one hand, the privatization of the market for garbage collection and recycling has created an economic opportunity for the cooperatives to exploit, i.e., the possibility of providing the service hitherto reserved to state companies. On the other hand, given that the stringent financial and technological conditions set by government agencies in charge of privatization processes cannot be met by such small companies as the cooperatives, recyclers tend to be excluded from the definition of the future of recycling. Indeed, the cooperatives have constantly faced the risk of disappearing in the face of the expansion of private garbage collection companies into recycling. Such a risk was in fact one of the reasons leading recyclers to organize regional and national associations capable of representing their interests before the state.

The first experience of the cooperatives with the privatization process clearly shows both the opportunity and the threat entailed in such a process. In 1992 the state company responsible for collecting garbage in 40 percent of the city went bankrupt and stopped providing its services. Thus, Bogotá underwent a sanitary emergency. It was then that the Bogotá Recyclers Association (ARB), with the support of FS, proposed to the city government that the cooperatives take over garbage collection and recycling in the areas of the city hitherto served by the public company. The city government accepted the offer and contracted with FS—which in turn sub-contracted with ARB—for the immediate collection of the garbage that had piled up in such areas. However, after the cooperatives successfully tackled the emergency, the city government demanded as a condition for the continuation of the contract that FS—rather than ARB—continue to be the official contractor, given the government’s distrust of the recyclers. As FS could not take up such a responsibility—both because of legal limitations and because of its philosophy of not taking the place of autonomous communities in the process of organizing themselves collectively with FS support—the government decided to grant the right to provide the service in this area of the city to a multinational joint venture.

Throughout the 1990s, recyclers’ cooperatives continued to proliferate. Also, as the process of privatization spread through the country, the cooperatives started forging strategic alliances with each other in order to create garbage collection and recycling companies able to face up to the competition from capitalist multinational firms. Despite the obvious economic disadvantages of such companies *vis-à-vis* large capitalist garbage collection firms, they have slowly made progress and have taken over the service in a few small cities (Fundación Social, 1998).

A sizable number of cooperatives have also made remarkable progress on their own. The most successful ones have diversified their activities to include not only long-term contracts with private and public institutions and with neighbors’ associations to collect and recycle garbage in vast areas of the cities but also the transformation of recyclable materials into reusable raw materials,

which constitutes the activity with the highest value-added component in the recycling chain. Moreover, the cooperatives and associations have tried to undertake directly the commercialization of all the materials that they collect through marketing cooperatives created for this purpose.

The number of cooperatives has recently peaked at 94, out of which 88 are affiliated with the National Association of Recyclers. It is estimated that the members of such cooperatives and associations amount to 10 percent of the recyclers in the country (ANR, 2000). The cooperatives are very diverse. Some have recently been created, lack a stable membership and adequate levels of capitalization, and are constantly on the brink of disappearance. Others—e.g., Rescatar—have consolidated their position and occupy economic niches that have allowed them not only to survive but also to accumulate, reinvest and diversify their activities.

The development of the cooperatives has gone hand in hand with the consolidation of the regional and national networks. The national association has become widely recognized as the representative of recyclers and coordinates the activities of the nine regional associations. The latter, in turn, have operated both as nodes for collaboration among cooperatives and as providers of basic services (e.g., childcare) to recyclers.

Both the cooperatives and the associations are currently going through a critical stage of adjustment and transition for two different reasons. First, in line with its goal of promoting the self-sufficiency of popular economic initiatives, FS withdrew from the cooperatives and associations in 1999. Thus, organized recyclers have been forced to make up for the economic and organizational support provided by FS for over twelve years. This has led them to take a more active role in diversifying and strengthening their economic strategies and in eliciting the support of governmental agencies, universities, foreign governments, and NGOs. Second, the deepening of the process of privatization of the service of garbage collection and recycling in Colombia has accentuated both the opportunities and the risks to the recyclers that I have argued are inherent in such a process. This trend is most visible in the current plans of the government of Bogotá to revamp the service through an ambitious, comprehensive plan—the so-called Master Plan for Garbage Collection (*Plan Maestro de Basuras*). According to this plan, to be implemented in the next few years, private companies will not only have the monopoly over garbage collection but also over garbage recycling. Thus, unless recyclers' organizations manage to forge economic and political alliances in order to wield some influence over the implementation of such a plan, the economic niche off of which the approximately 300,000 Colombian recyclers survive may disappear in the near future. The political conditions for such alliances may be particularly favorable under the new city government led (for the first time in history) by a mayor from a leftist party, who took office in January 2004.

What is the overall balance of the short history of the cooperatives and associations of recyclers? To my mind, the evolution of the cooperatives shows both the emancipatory potential of popular economic initiatives based on non-capitalist forms of production—which has been recognized through various international awards¹¹—and the multiple difficulties confronting the effort to organize a highly dispersed, disenfranchised population within an unfavorable economic and political milieu. In the following section I set out to further address this question and to offer a brief account of the current achievements, shortcomings and challenges of the cooperatives and associations. In doing so, I take into consideration not only the economic performance of such organizations but also their social performance—i.e., whether they have led to the improvement of the life conditions of recyclers both as individuals and as a community. As such effects can be fully appreciated only at the micro level, i.e., in the daily life of the members of the cooperatives, in what follows I focus on the data gathered through ethnographic work with the members of Rescatar in their activities both on the streets of Bogotá and at the cooperative's offices and warehouse.

The "social profit" of the cooperatives

References to "social profit" are common in both the documents produced by Rescatar and the discussions among its members during their periodic meetings. For instance, one of the key achievements presented by the heads of the cooperative to the thirty-seven recyclers attending the 2000 general meeting¹² was the fact that the cooperative had produced in 1999 an "economic profit" of around \$5,000 and, more importantly, that its "social profit"—i.e., the amount of money invested in promoting members' welfare (almost \$25,000)—had been high and that the year had thus been a successful one.

What exactly is the social profit? It alludes to a series of individual and collective benefits—some tangible, some intangible—that, albeit seemingly minor, entail profound changes in the lives of recyclers who belong to the cooperative. The cooperative has promoted the gradual access of its members to the benefits that typically accompany fulltime employment in the formal sector of the economy. Recyclers who become full members of the cooperative enjoy such benefits as subsidized healthcare, paid vacations, and pensions. They have thus come to partake, probably for the first time in their lives, in the benefits of social citizenship. This has resulted in situations that are exceptional in the highly stratified Colombian society. For instance, occasional collective recreational activities organized by the recyclers in working- and middle-class clubs, to which they have come to have access as a result of their paying social security taxes, give rise to the unseen coexistence, at least for a day, of the recyclers and members of such classes in the pools and on the lawns of the clubs.

Moreover, becoming a member of the cooperative usually has a direct impact on the recyclers' behavior, their working conditions, and their community life. The gradual transformation of the recyclers' behavior is the result of the largely informal and subtle ways—e.g., comments in meetings, social activities, etc.—in which life in a cooperative exerts pressure on some behavioral traits that are not rare among the recyclers—e.g., intra-family violence, sloppy dressing and the occasional use of drugs. In fact, several of the introductory courses for new members of Rescatar have nothing to do with the cooperative itself but rather with such issues as family life, personal hygiene, solidarity, and peaceful conflict resolution. For example, in one such course that I attended in July 2000 the general manager of the cooperative called for new members to “strive to learn more and acquire new skills, but this doesn't mean that knowledge makes you better than others. Equity means that those who know more have a social debt to those who know less.” During the same talk, he urged male members to respect their partners, given the recurrence of violence against women among recyclers: “We are the ones who set the standards of beauty. Do you know what the model of a beautiful woman is? The woman whom you chose as your partner [...]. Violence is out of the question. We have to learn how to resolve our conflicts.” Thus, the goal is to convert the membership in the cooperative into a conduit for the gradual transformation of the habits that prevent recyclers from flourishing as individuals and as a part of families and communities. Although the persistence of such habits gives rise to constant problems within the cooperative, the fact that none of its fifty members lives on the street and that many of them have re-entered the educational system as a result of their experience in the cooperative shows the transformative potential of the latter.

Belonging to the cooperative also has positive effects on working conditions. This is so for two reasons. On one hand, the cooperative makes possible the recyclers' access to the sources of recyclable materials, via agreements with neighborhood associations and industries that contract the service of recycling with the cooperative. This means that organized recyclers have better chances of having a stable, safe workplace and of carrying out their trade without having to endure the exhausting walks across the city or the unhealthy conditions of the city's dump. On the other hand, being a member of the cooperative has key symbolic effects that help improve working conditions. Conversations with the members of the cooperative showed that the fact that the latter provides them with uniforms that they must wear while working has had an important positive impact. The uniform, similar to the one worn by the employees of conventional garbage collection firms, gives the recycler the status of worker that she is usually denied when wandering the streets wearing humble clothing. Cristóbal, 23, tellingly said: “now the police do not beat me up any more, nor do the people look down on me

as a thief.”¹³ Henry, the new member of the cooperative quoted above, put the transformation of his working conditions after having joined the cooperative in the following terms: “when I worked on my own I didn't do great because I didn't have the same guarantees that I have here [at the cooperative]. For example, stability, wearing a nice uniform, having good advice, having my cart in good conditions [...] there are many little things one doesn't have when one works on his own.”¹⁴

Similarly, collaborative work in the various organizational units of the cooperative—e.g., the general assembly, the board of directors and the planning committees—constitutes for many their first meaningful experience in democratic participation, given the generalized political apathy among the recyclers that has resulted from having been excluded from the benefits of citizenship.¹⁵ Also, teamwork tends to mitigate the strong distrust vis-à-vis any person outside the family circle, which is pervasive among recyclers. For instance, in contrast with Birkbeck's (1978) report on the use of all sorts of tricks by recyclers and middlemen to deceive each other about the weight of the collected materials, my experience as an observer on the rounds done by the cooperative's trucks showed that the members of the cooperative fully trust their fellow cooperators in charge of driving the truck and weighing the materials. Besides allowing for solidarity ties among members of the cooperative, trust gives rise to economic gains derived from the more rapid and efficient performance of the different tasks involved in handling the recycled materials.

In sum, social benefits are an essential part of the operation and appeal of the cooperative. Indeed, in some instances they are the only reason why recyclers remain in the cooperative. Members of the cooperative often pointed out that selling materials to the cooperative rather than to a middleman did not entail immediate economic gains. The cooperative cannot offer prices that are above those paid by middlemen against whom they have to compete and, unlike the latter, cannot loan money or make advance payments to its members. Thus, social benefits explain in these cases the recyclers' desire to stay in the cooperative. The cooperative's members, moreover, actively seek to expand the membership by recruiting fellow recyclers on the streets, thus opening up the possibility for the extension of social benefits to larger portions of the recyclers' population.

Cooperative work also creates multiple difficulties that were evident during fieldwork. For instance, deliberative processes of decision-making within the cooperative give rise to constant disagreements and conflicts among members that hinder (sometimes severely) the functioning of the cooperative. The most common conflicts have to do with distrust and resentment between members occupying administrative positions and those doing manual work either as recyclers on the streets or at the cooperative's warehouse. Members also complain about the frequent meetings, which entail a

burden that comes on top of their already numerous responsibilities at work and at home. While tensions arising from participatory decision-making are common to all cooperatives, Rescatar faces an additional difficulty resulting from the characteristics of its members, namely, their low level of schooling. The fact that most members did not finish elementary school prevents their full participation in administrative positions and in the decisions of the cooperative that require specialized knowledge. For instance, Concepción, the above-quoted member of the cooperative, expressed her frustration at "not being able to understand what is said in the meetings and having to ask my daughter what they meant."¹⁶ Thus, as Ana Beatriz, 70, one of the founders of the cooperative, put it, there is a clear-cut division between "the bosses and us laborers,"¹⁷ i.e., between the manager of the cooperative and his assistants, on the one hand, and the rest of the recyclers, on the other. Although the general manager of the cooperative was himself a recycler—which is a common phenomenon in many cooperatives and associations—his transition from the streets to the cooperative's offices is exceptional when compared with the life stories of most members. As one of the assistants to the manager put it, most members "have resigned themselves to staying where they are and do not see beyond their paper, cardboard and pieces of glass."¹⁸ The division between the "bosses" and the "laborers," which is constantly stressed by both sides, constitutes an obstacle for the development of horizontal relations conducive to cooperation and deliberation, and tends to reproduce the hierarchy that is characteristic of capitalist firms. Difficulties in moving up within the cooperative, combined with conflicts arising from participatory processes and the appeal of going back to working on their own, explain the instability of the membership. Although the cooperative usually has between forty and fifty members, temporary or definitive withdrawals are not uncommon.

Finally, the social and political record of the regional and national associations shows that they have managed to become the official interlocutors in dealings with the state and other sectors of society. Nevertheless, the concrete political achievements of the associations have been modest. For instance, one of the central projects of the national association, i.e., the enactment of a law legalizing and promoting the recyclers' activities, resulted in the passing of a largely symbolic bill in 1999 whose central effect was the creation of a National Day of the Recycler.

The economic record of the cooperatives

How far have the cooperatives gone in trying to transform the structure of the market for recyclable materials? The economic achievements of the most consolidated cooperatives (e.g., Rescatar, Porvenir and Recuperar) are impressive. They own sizable capital, represented mostly by warehouses,

vehicles, and specialized machinery. Indeed, a visit to Rescatar's warehouse—where trucks, machines, and office equipment bear witness to the relative prosperity of the cooperative—would surprise anyone used to seeing recyclers' dressed in rags as they pick through the garbage on the sidewalks. Furthermore, as noted above, some cooperatives have managed to diversify their activities and forge incipient alliances in order to participate in privatization processes.

Nonetheless, it is clear also that the market continues to be controlled by middlemen and buyers. Given that 90 percent of recyclers do not belong to any cooperative, the destructive dynamic of fierce competition among recyclers is still in place. It is also evident that the recyclers' income is still very low. As the evidence gathered during fieldwork with the members of the cooperative shows, the average income continues to be lower than the minimum wage. Moreover, given that social security and other benefits are granted only after recyclers become full members of the cooperative—which can take several years—a large sector of organized recyclers continues to be excluded from such benefits.

What explains the persisting difficulties for cooperatives to modify the structure of the market? Some of the factors contributing to this result—such as the predominance of an individualistic culture among disorganized recyclers—are beyond the control of the cooperatives. However, the cooperatives have insufficiently addressed other factors. Two issues that have proven crucial for the success of some of the most prosperous cooperative experiments around the world—most notably, the Mondragón cooperative complex in Spain—are particularly important to the survival and expansion of the cooperatives in the midst of the changing market conditions to which I will refer in the following section. First, the recyclers' cooperatives have emerged and developed as relatively independent units. The associations aim at ensuring the political representation of the recyclers' interests rather than at providing the key financial and technical support for, as well as the means for the economic coordination among, the cooperatives that second-level organizations provide in such cooperative groups as Mondragón in Spain (see Santos and Rodríguez-Garavito, this volume). Thus, the cooperatives have not managed to construct a network of mutual support. The isolation of the cooperatives is compounded by the fact that in general the cooperative sector in Colombia is weak and has been declining after the failure of most cooperative banks in the mid-1990s (Valencia, 2000). Second, the cooperatives have not been able to establish stable alliances with government agencies and capitalist firms. The relation of the cooperatives and associations with the state is intermittent and variable. There does not exist a stable state policy for supporting efforts by organized recyclers. Instead, what exist are occasional projects by some state agencies in support of the cooperatives. Alliances with capitalist firms are also rare. Although there are some

exceptional cases—such as the partnership between Rescatar and a mid-sized capitalist firm for producing high-resistance sheets made from recyclable materials—in general the cooperatives have not managed to establish links with other firms. Lacking the requisite links among cooperatives, on the one hand, and between cooperatives, the state and other firms, on the other, recyclers' organizations have failed to develop the kind of sectoral—let alone local or regional—cooperative economy that characterizes Mondragón and other successful cooperative experiments (Whyte and Whyte, 1988).

Despite these limitations, the history of the recyclers' cooperatives shows that they can survive and even expand slowly under the current market conditions. However, such conditions are rapidly changing because of the process of privatization and modernization of garbage collection and recycling in cities throughout the country. These developments, in turn, accentuate the shortcomings that stem from the lack of integration of the cooperatives into networks of mutual support. In the following section, I conclude the presentation of the case study by looking into the future of the cooperatives under the changing conditions of the market.

Can the cooperatives survive?

Two key changes are taking place in the market for recyclable materials. First, large industries controlling the demand for such materials are merging to face the competition from foreign producers of paper, glass, and plastic. This entails the further concentration of demand and thus the tightening of the control of the market by buyers. This development has been clearly perceived by leaders of the cooperatives, as shown by this statement made by the general manager of Rescatar in his speech to seventy-nine leaders representing forty-four cooperatives during the annual meeting of the National Association of Recyclers that I attended in March 2000:

What is going on in the paper industry? [The dominant national producer] has become the owner of virtually all the firms producing paper in Colombia after it bought out [its main competitor.] [Similarly,] the two surviving steel mills in the country control the market for scrap metal and look how they have reduced the market to nothing; prices have plummeted. So we, the recyclers, are in the hands of a few buyers. In other words: in the hands of the monopoly.

Second, the process of privatization has deepened and spread throughout the country. In view of the shortcomings of extant systems for handling residues in cities, local governments have drafted comprehensive plans to entrust both garbage collection and recycling to large multinational firms. Given the clear technical and financial superiority of such firms *vis-à-vis* the cooperatives of

recyclers, the survival of the latter depends on their ability to create alliances allowing them to provide such services. In other words, in light of the rapid technological upgrading of the service they perform, it is unlikely that recyclers will be able to continue occupying the margins of the market by relying upon their techniques and makeshift equipment. This serious risk has been lucidly perceived by the community of organized recyclers, as demonstrated by the words of Rescatar's manager in the same speech quoted above:

Look at what is happening in Colombia and around the world. This is a globalized economy, it is universal. The very same privatizations that are taking place in Colombia are taking place in Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru [...]. We are entering the twenty-first century, but we are stuck with the tools of 1900. We are one hundred years behind! We are competing in unequal conditions, with pushcarts and carriages, while the large firms own American or European trucks that cost \$100,000. We cannot go on competing like this [...] we have got to learn how to formulate new projects.

The need to make capital investments to upgrade their machinery has put the cooperatives in a dilemma that is characteristic of cooperative firms in general. Contrary to what has happened in Mondragón, where members of the cooperatives have the funds to make new contributions to capitalize the firms (Whyte and Whyte, 1988), the recyclers' cooperatives depend on external investors to secure the necessary funds. This dilemma is compounded by the fact that the cooperative financial sector in Colombia went bankrupt in the 1990s, and that there are thus no favorable sources of credit. Under these circumstances, the cooperatives have had to rely on their limited capacity for accumulation or on occasional donations to buy capital goods.

What strategies might prevent the disappearance of the cooperatives and sustain their emancipatory potential? This question points to the challenges that scores of cooperatives and popular economic organizations face in times of structural adjustment and globalization. In the concluding section I tackle this question and set out to lay bare the insights that may be extracted from the case study presented above.

CONCLUSION

The experience of Colombian garbage pickers illustrates both the potential of and the challenges currently faced by worker cooperatives, especially those that have arisen in social contexts characterized by extreme deprivation. The central contribution of the case study to discussions on worker cooperatives is the evidence concerning the need to go beyond the emphasis on local initiatives that dominates theories on and practices of alternative economic organization. The survival of worker cooperatives in open and volatile

markets depends on their insertion into networks of support with other cooperatives, government agencies and capitalist firms at the local, national, and international levels. As Whyte and Whyte point out, "there is one proposition on which all students of worker cooperatives agree: The long-run prospects for a cooperative trying to survive in a sea of private enterprises are very poor" (Whyte and Whyte, 1988: 277). Networking, which explains the success of Mondragón and other cooperative projects, is particularly important in the case of initiatives undertaken by social groups that, like recyclers, live in poverty and work under conditions that make collective action difficult.

Establishing alliances with other national and foreign non-capitalist firms—e.g., worker cooperatives, consumer cooperatives, cooperative banks, mutualities, etc.—is a natural strategy for the cooperatives, since inter-cooperative collaboration is one of the tenets of cooperativism. What is needed is the consolidation of a cooperative sector of the economy based on the coordination and collaboration of non-capitalist firms carrying out complementary activities. In the case of the recyclers' cooperatives, at the national level it is necessary to forge productive alliances with cooperatives in the recycling and other sectors. This type of integration, through which cooperatives can complement each other in a network of production, transformation and marketing of recyclable materials, has been proposed with little success by some leaders of the community of recyclers and by studies on the market carried out from the perspective of business administration (Hoyos, 2000). At the international level, the natural means to this end would be to create links with worker cooperatives that use recycled raw materials. The latter is perhaps the most daunting task for the cooperatives of recyclers to pursue; the most successful among them are just starting to use telecommunications and do not have either the resources or the personnel to establish the necessary contacts with other cooperatives abroad. Technological and linguistic barriers are for the moment difficult to overcome. In these conditions, the support coming from abroad continues to consist of donations by sympathetic foundations and governments rather than of durable links of economic cooperation.

Collaboration between popular worker cooperatives and government agencies responsible for promoting economic and social initiatives is equally important. As Friedmann (1992: 7) points out, although alternative development must start at the local, communal level, it cannot stop there since the state continues to be a key actor. The traditional wariness of grassroots economic views and initiatives *vis-à-vis* the state has the virtue of helping to avoid cooptation and dependency. However, it is unlikely that without state support the conditions for the consolidation of a cooperative economic sector can emerge. This entails a challenge for the state and, in particular, for those in charge of economic and social policymaking. As illustrated

dramatically by the civil war that has raged in Colombia for over forty years, postponing the solution to the economic inequalities and the social exclusion endured by most of the population has explosive effects. Thus, it is not fortuitous that violence in Colombia has risen after the frustration of the redistributive project embodied by the Constitution of 1991—which enshrines specific, albeit ineffectual, rules aimed at promoting the gradual access of workers to the ownership of firms—and that the promotion of cooperatives has repeatedly emerged as a topic for discussion during several rounds of negotiations aimed at bringing an end to the civil war. It is not a coincidence either that the problem of land and wealth redistribution through programs for the collective appropriation and exploitation of land has been an essential part of constitutional pacts that have marked the transition to peace and democracy in such countries as South Africa (Klug, this volume).

Forging alliances with capitalist firms is also an important strategy in an economic environment characterized by corporate mergers carried out to face up to global competition. As shown by the case of Mondragón, this type of alliance can take place without endangering the structure and principles of worker cooperatives, when the latter are built on solid foundations. However, when the cooperatives involved are less established, it is necessary to carefully stipulate the conditions of collaboration with capitalist firms lest the cooperatives lose their nature. The case of the recyclers' cooperatives illustrates quite adequately the need for and the risk of this strategy. Unless they succeed in forming joint ventures with other firms to provide the service of garbage collection and recycling, and thus secure the requisite capital and technology for participating in privatization processes, the cooperatives run the risk of disappearing. At the same time, if such an alliance is established in terms that endanger the cooperative structure of the organizations of recyclers, the latter are likely either to be absorbed by their capitalist partners or to lose their cooperative character.

The result of the promotion of these kinds of networks of mutual support is a pluralist economy in which state, cooperative and capitalist firms coexist in a regulated market. Thus, the cooperative promise disappoints both defenders of the neoliberal agenda (for whom the ideal economy would be based exclusively on capitalist firms competing in a deregulated market) and the proponents of state collectivism (for whom centralized economic planning should substitute for the market). It is neither the utopia of the market criticized by Polanyi (1957) nor the collectivist utopia. It is a real utopia (Wright, 1998) insofar as it is radical enough not to resign itself to regulating the market without affecting the division between capital and labor, and real enough to be viable under contemporary economic conditions. And, as its vocation is global in nature—since one of the principles of cooperativism is collaboration among cooperatives worldwide—it has the

potential for becoming one of many possible forms of counter-hegemonic globalization. In order for such potential to be realized, however, worker cooperatives in the global South have a long way to go.

Notes

- 1 Henceforth, I use the term "garbage recyclers"—rather than the more common term "garbage pickers" that appears in the title to this article—despite the fact that most people working in this activity actually limit themselves to scavenging for recyclable materials in garbage bins and city dumps and selling them to intermediaries and thus do not participate in the transformation of such refuse into reusable raw materials—i.e., in its recycling. I do so not only because the organized recyclers whose cooperatives are the focus of my case study are actually starting to take up the recycling of the materials they collect, but also because they prefer to call both themselves and the disorganized scavengers "recyclers" to highlight their contribution to the circuit of recycling and to its positive economic and environmental effects.
- 2 The author carried out the fieldwork for this study in collaboration with Betsy Perafán of the University of the Andes, Bogotá, between January and June 2000.
- 3 The focus of the chapter, however, is the discussion of the findings of the case study. The introductory chapter by Santos and Rodríguez-Garavito in this volume engages more systematically the theoretical debates and proposals on alternatives to capitalist production—namely, alternative development, alternatives to development, market socialism, and cooperativism.
- 4 I follow here Castells and Portes's definition of informal economic activities as being those that circumvent official legal rules (Castells and Portes, 1989). Thus, recyclers in Colombia are informal economic actors insofar as various city regulations prohibit picking through the garbage in dumps and sidewalks.
- 5 Interview with Heidy, Bogotá, 28 January 2000. For reasons of confidentiality, fictitious names are used when referring to interviewees throughout this chapter.
- 6 Interview with Heidy, Bogotá, 28 January 2000.
- 7 Interview with Darly, Bogotá, 8 February 2000.
- 8 Interview with Jairo, Bogotá, 30 May 2000.
- 9 Interview with Diana, 23 April 2000.
- 10 This was painfully demonstrated by the fierce resistance of the inhabitants of two working-class neighborhoods in Bogotá in 1996 against the relocation to their neighborhoods of a group of recyclers that had been expelled from the land they had invaded several decades earlier. When

the mayor of Bogotá attempted the relocation in order to comply with a court order, people in the neighborhoods "revolted and staged street fights, protesting and screaming that they did not wish undesirable people to live with them" (Uribe, 2002: 403; author's translation).

- 11 Among them is the prize awarded to the Bogotá Recyclers Association in 1999 as the best community project in Latin America during the UN Summit on Human Settlements and Development. Also, the Second Conference on the Environment in Istanbul recognized FS's program of support to the associations and cooperatives as one of the thirteen most outstanding projects in the world.
- 12 The meeting took place in Bogotá on 25 March 2000. Thirty-seven members out of a total membership of fifty attended. Out of the thirteen members who did not attend, four produced a written excuse, two were not allowed to attend due to failure to pay their monthly contributions, and one was barred from attending due to a recent sanction.
- 13 Interview with Cristóbal, Bogotá, 19 June 2000.
- 14 Interview with Henry, Bogotá, 20 February 2000.
- 15 Indeed, some studies have shown that a considerable part (15 percent) of the population of recyclers lacks a national identification document, which is the minimum proof of citizenship and a requirement for voting (Corporación Raíces, 1998).
- 16 Interview with Concepción, Bogotá, 8 February 2000.
- 17 Interview with Ana Beatriz, Bogotá, 15 June 2000.
- 18 Interview with assistant to general manager, Bogotá, 30 May 2000.

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