

# Cooperative recycling in São Paulo, Brazil: towards an emotional consideration of empowerment

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*This study, set in the context of a group of recycling cooperatives in the greater metropolitan region of São Paulo, Brazil, is about the relationship between emotional geographies and notions of empowerment. Paying attention to the ways that emotional expressions of empowerment deconstruct and subvert oppressive relations of power, while simultaneously reproducing and obscuring these same oppressive hegemony, we ask: what emotions are collectively felt by those who ascribe to the movement? And more importantly, what do these collective emotions do? How do emotions align individuals with particular collective values, and how do these emotions work in relation to systems of domination? Due to the cooperatives' location within Brazilian hegemonic systems of social domination, we argue that viewing empowerment as an emotion 'I feel empowered' rather than something one is or one achieves 'I am empowered' offers the space to consider the necessarily paradoxical nature of empowerment.*

**Key words:** cooperative recycling, empowerment, emotional geographies, hegemonic domination, Brazil

It was breathtaking.  
There is no doubt that we both felt it.

One of us (Jutta) on stage wrapping up a panel discussion on social inclusion and recycling, and the other (Neil) in the audience; both moved by the raw – nearly palpable – emotions that circulated among the waste workers in the recycling warehouse-cum-conference centre that morning. Joy, solidarity, confidence, belonging, celebration: these words only faintly describe the emotions that were collectively embodied by the diverse group of recyclers that day.

As the panel discussion concluded and an intermission was announced, an impromptu celebration flooded the space in front of the stage. With an extemporaneous samba band providing the tempo and cadence for the recyclers to dance and sing, recyclers exchanged smiles, kisses and embraces as they collectively expressed their attachment and support of a social movement.

The event, the 7th annual *Festival de Lixo e Cidadania* (Festival of Waste and Citizenship) held at the *Centro Mineiro de Referência em Resíduos* (Central Solid Waste

Reference Center, in the state of Minas Gerais) in Belo Horizonte, September 2009, is a national conference that brings together various members of the waste workers' movement to discuss and raise awareness about the organised and informal collection and commercialisation of recyclable materials. Such geographies of pride and belonging, for those who earn a living from working with waste, figure largely in recyclers' feelings of community and relationships with place. A tangible and patent example of a blurring of the line between the 'mental and the visceral' (Thien 2011, see also Chodorow 1999; Laurier and Parr 2000) and a moment when the embodiment of a particular collective ideology exists at its purest and most effective form (Žižek 2008). Among those within the recycling community, this instance of shared emotion is neither an isolated nor a novel occurrence. In fact, such collective expressions define the sector.

This study, set in the context of a group of recycling cooperatives in the greater metropolitan region of São Paulo, Brazil, is about the relationship between emotional geographies<sup>1</sup> and ideas of empowerment. Paying attention to the ways that emotional expressions of empowerment

deconstruct and subvert oppressive relations of power, while simultaneously reproducing and obscuring these same oppressive hegemony, we ask: what emotions are collectively felt by those who ascribe to the movement? And more importantly, what do these collective emotions do? How do emotions align individuals with particular collective values, and how do these emotions work in relation to systems of domination? We argue that viewing empowerment as an emotion 'I feel empowered' rather than something one is or one achieves 'I am empowered' offers the space to consider the necessarily paradoxical nature of empowerment.

### Cooperative recycling

This study draws from qualitative research among waste workers from ten cooperative associations (Cooperpires, Cooperma, Cooperlimpa, Refazendo, Coopercoese, Raio de Luz, Vila Popular, Chico Mendes, Nova Conquista, Tobaão<sup>2</sup>), each located in or near the ABC region of São Paulo, Brazil, and each generally falling within the informal 'cooperative' waste management<sup>3</sup> sector. By and large, the workers of the cooperatives are drawn to autonomy, collective support and other forms of social security that is offered through their association with the cooperatives (Costa 2008; Gutberlet 2010). Despite most cooperative members committing more than full-time hours to their work, recyclers still belong to the lowest socio-economic class in Brazil, in most cases earning below the national minimum wage (Costa 2008)<sup>4</sup>.

While individuals in Brazil have eked out a livelihood from the collection and commercialisation of waste for some time, only recently have social scientists begun to explore the social dimension of informal recyclers (Medina 2005a 2005b 2007; Costa 2008; Gutberlet 2006 2008 2010 2012; Yates and Gutberlet 2011a 2011b). An emergent theme throughout this body of research touches on the opportunities created by the sector, including the role of recyclers in relation to occupational health and environmental hazards (Medina 2005a 2005b; Gutberlet and Baeder 2008; Binion and Gutberlet 2012), the creation of government and private sector policy (Ahmed and Ali 2004; Fergutz *et al.* 2011; Yates and Gutberlet 2011a 2011b) and job creation (Gutberlet 2010 2012; Medina 2005a 2007). However, there is still much work to be done to explore the emotional dimensions of cooperative recycling in Brazil.

### Empowerment

Recent scholarship on empowerment has encouraged careful consideration of the ways that the concept both misrepresents and reifies the marginal position of those

who are the focus of empowerment initiatives (Beteta 2006; Cornwall 2007; Cornwall and Brock 2005; Eyben and Napier-Moore 2009; Sharpe *et al.* 2003; Syed 2010). However, such work rarely considers empowerment strategies in relation to the pre-eminence of hegemonic regimes (Brown 1995; Cooke and Kothari 2002; Mirafab 2004; Mohan and Stokke 2000). Drawing attention to *non-emancipatory* characteristics of empowerment, Mirafab (2004) argues that too often the concept is employed from a western liberal perspective that overlooks the tendency of those employing 'empowering' methodologies to (re)produce forms of hegemonic control. Kothari (2002), Cooke and Kothari (2002) and Mohan and Stokke (2000) draw critical attention to the ways in which those who ascribe to the concept obscure larger systems of control. Kothari (2002) highlights a particular paradox, the more an individual or group ascribe to promises of empowerment, the less one is aware of one's involvement in reproducing particular power structures, and the more disempowering the process can be. Henkel and Stirrat (2002) call into question the uncanny ways that orthodoxies of empowerment become a means by which larger institutions, through subjection, earn control over subaltern populations.

Similarly, Wendy Brown offers a trenchant critique of initiatives that employ the concept of empowerment with little recognition of the disempowering effects of larger regimes of power. She argues that in many cases claims to empowerment aren't necessarily backed by any proof of empowerment, and that 'the possibility that one can "feel empowered" without being so forms an important element of legitimacy for the antidemocratic dimensions of liberalism' (Brown 1995, 23). According to Brown (1995, 22) contemporary forms of empowerment have an uncanny adaptive relationship with liberal domination 'that converges with a regime's own legitimacy needs in masking the power of the regime', producing a form of 'liberal solipsism', and a normative characterisation that obscures the existence of particular regimes of power. In line with Brown, Mirafab (2004) argues that a convergence of both the subject's and regime's interests is an indication of the existence of hegemonic processes. The greater claims to an individual or group being empowered, the more the oppressive local and hegemonic social institutions are masked, reducing empowerment to an individualised notion of progress and access to resources, further leaving 'the status quo unchallenged' (Mirafab 2004, 242).

What Brown and Mirafab inspire us to consider in relation to empowerment is daunting, albeit important. While we agree with Brown's suggestion that one can 'feel empowered' without being so, we build on this reading of empowerment by suggesting that one can feel the emotions related to empowerment while attending to

an awareness of hegemonic processes that exist. Since emotions are fluid and fleeting (Harrison 2000), considering empowerment as an emotional geography offers the space to recognise the ephemeral and contextually contingent nature of empowerment and the way that counter-hegemonic movements can exist concordantly with regimes of control. Due to the location of the cooperative within masculinist and liberal systems of control, cooperative recyclers are not in fact empowered (as framed in the traditional sense); however, their emotions related to their feeling of empowerment are indeed quite real. Ontological claims to *being* empowered suggest a certain degree of permanence, which we argue offer less room, ideologically, to self-reflect on one's own involvement in legitimising and creating allegiance with regimes of power. That is, to recognise one's allegiance to disempowering regimes of power would be to gesture to a contradiction with one's said claims to *being* empowered.

Below, responding to the way that empowerment exists as a geography of emotion, we first contextualise the social and emotional character of the cooperative and highlight the ways in which we observe emotions of empowerment operating in the cooperative, followed by a discussion of the ways that these feelings of empowerment are woven among moments of social domination.

### Emotions, empowerment and cooperative recycling

we may walk into the room and 'feel the atmosphere,' but what we may feel depends on the angle of our arrival. Or we might say that the atmosphere is already angled; it is always felt from a specific point. (Ahmed 2010, 36–7)

The recyclers involved in this study share a particular 'angle' that informs their group politics and the emotions that they experience. They experience similar stigmatisation and particular systemic challenges in their daily lives that result in them experiencing emotions of empowerment in similar ways. Academics both inside (Anderson 2009; Askins 2009; Harrison 2000; Roelvink 2010; Thien 2009) and outside (Ahmed 2004; Brennen 2004; Masumi 1995; Riis and Woodhead 2010) the discipline of geography deny the notion that emotions are private interior states and make a strong case for the importance of thinking about emotions intersubjectively. In the cooperative, the social transmission of emotions produce certain political (shared emotions offer a particular perspective regarding power), personal (shared emotions offer a particular aptitude to negotiate one's interiority), and collective (shared emotions are produced and reproduced through psychic relations) emotions that inspire change and give rise to new performances and shape new liminal subjectivities. According to Thien,

[a]n emotional subject offers an intersubjective means to negotiating our place in the world, co-produced in cultural discourses of emotion as well as through psycho-social narratives. An attention to emotional geographies is an attention to relationality, intersubjectivity, and an always incomplete being. (2005, 453)

Intersubjective relationships that exist in the cooperative, shaped through iterative daily performance, help recyclers to negotiate the social world. In many cases the relationships created through membership of the cooperative 'constitute the collective body's affect', which in this case, we argue, produces particular emotions of and related to empowerment (Roelvink 2010, 112).

For cooperative recyclers self-awareness of their value in society is an important precondition to shifting social perceptions and raising awareness of their social importance. This promotion of a shared identity is a political act that emotionally resonates among those working with recyclable materials throughout Brazil. Due to the collective support and iterative self-affirmation of the significance of their work, most informal recyclers feel that although the cooperative does not pay well and there is a lot of negative stigma attached to the work they do, feelings of honour, dignity and pride in their work justify their dedication to their activity. This positive production of emotions found in the sector enables recyclers to carry out their work with their heads held high. As one member noted, this collective pride is 'ending preconceptions that we are scavengers. We are *catadores* (collectors)! We have a name and we are recognised. We are entrepreneurs!' Similarly another member commented: 'before individuals were in the cooperative, they had no value, they were treated like garbage, as people without teeth, drunks'. Also since they joined the cooperative they have had their own collective space: 'This is our space and we are very proud of it' (Discussion group December 2009). The cooperative is a space where emotions of and related to empowerment are fostered. As one participant stated: 'I am proud that my child works as a recycler. It is a profession like no other!' (Discussion group December 2009).

Here, emotive discourses and 'emblematic practices' (Brown 2011, 220) collectively align individuals to a specific identity and (re)shape putative notions of what precludes membership into mainstream society. The cooperative helps build social cohesion among its members. As one cooperative leader observed:

In the same way there are disagreements, there is also a lot of help, for example when someone is sick everybody helps this person, asking if they are better, praying for them, offering money for them if they need to buy medicine. (Discussion group December 2009)

While social bonds are strong within the cooperative, these relationships extend beyond the cooperative into

communities where they work. As Harrison (2000, 514) describes 'feelings, experience and sense' are not 'owned' individually, they 'pass through' subjects, and become eminently telling of a wider collective context. This 'passing through' can be seen through the way that empowering emotions are experienced, embodied by individuals and circulate beyond the cooperatives into communities with which they work.

Participant 1: Yes we stop to talk when we do a collection . . . she tells us to come in and she makes coffee. There is fresh bread. And when we arrive we go in and she says 'come in come in'. She is already waiting for us. 'You can feel free to use the bathroom,' filtered bottled water all ready for us and the men go in also.

Facilitator: Oh this is a very interesting point.

Participant 2: We actually go in and out of the house of the people.

Participant 3: Day to day we always go. It's always the same people doing the *coleta* (collection).

Participant 1: They are very trusting of us and we never betray their trust. (Discussion group December 2009)

Through our own experiences with the cooperative recyclers, having found these sentiments of trust to be so pervasive and such a central part of the cooperative recyclers' identity, we have found that these common values are deeply connected with feelings of empowerment shared among the recyclers. In the cooperatives this alignment of the community exists both in spite of and as a response to oppressive hegemonic regimes:

Participant 1: The space of the cooperative has a social function. Women have a good routine of spending time together. Sometimes at home they feel alone.

Participant 2: Because the relationship is so close between [the women], on the weekend and during the holidays it is common for them to come by the cooperative to socialise with their friends. It serves as a refuge for women when the situation at home is heavy (Discussion group December 2009)

It is no surprise, then, that geographers such as Wilton (1998, 174) have argued that the connection between space and the interiority help to explain the way that 'moments of proximity' or 'the geographic proximity of difference' has the potential to create productive social boundaries. In these spaces collective emotions act as a form of boundary maintenance, reinforcing ideas about their social situation and the manner in which these boundaries are internalised. This unique space, then, despite its nearly palpable location within inescapable oppressive regimes of control, shifts the idea of the workplace from 'just a place to earn a living' to a

space that creates opportunities to imagine new ways of living.

By abstracting emotions from the social landscape, we begin to see the complex social character of the cooperative. How emotions can shape intersubjectivities, disrupt the status quo, create emotions of empowerment and hope for social change, while in the same moment capitulating to the power of dominant regimes. As will be discussed in the following section, and as this study centrally argues, these feelings, despite their incredible value and the positive progress made from empowering emotions, are ephemeral and fleeting.

### Feeling empowered (in spite of broader systems of domination)

When you work with waste there is [social] exclusion . . . those we have a daily relation with treat us with a lot of respect, a lot of caring . . . but the society in general doesn't see it this way . . . Society prefers to keep a safe distance from it, if I don't see it, I don't suffer, so I don't know. They ignore it, they prefer ignoring. In general society sees us from a distance and with a lot of prejudice, a lot. (Discussion group December 2009)

Society doesn't see [recycling] as a dignified, honourable profession. Our society wants you to be a teacher, a bricklayer. A bricklayer is well accepted. (Discussion group December 2009)

Like all social spaces, the recycling cooperatives in Brazil exist with complex and contradictory meaning. On the one hand, the cooperative is generative of a whole host of positive emotions, while on the other, these spaces conform and capitulate to oppressive hegemonic values. As McDowell (1999) describes, normative hegemonic forms of being are so naturalised that an epistemological reconstruction is necessary to overcome the discourses and ideology woven into the social fabric of institutions. That informal recycling is viewed negatively by the public and often recyclers feel some level of shame because of their career, speaks both to the larger systems of power and the ephemeral and fluid nature of empowerment. Empowerment – much like emotions – is fluid and spatially contingent. Recyclers feel empowered in spaces associated with the cooperative; however, in spaces not associated with their work, such empowering emotions are fleeting.

Perhaps looking at the way patriarchy and masculine authority as a form of social domination exist in the cooperative most clearly articulates our point. In recent decades it has been a common task for feminist geographers to problematise the gendered nature of labour and highlight the myriad ways that labour roles have been dichotomously arranged as either male or female (see e.g. Duncan 1991; Massey 1994; England and Lawson 2005).

In Brazil this same sharp ascendant binary exists that defines labour roles by gender, finding men occupying the more venerated roles (mechanised agriculture, modern and traditional manufacturing, engineering, mechanisation and construction) and women limited to the less valued paid domestic, service, teaching and childcare sectors. An important function of the cooperative is the way that it upsets this gender work binary, offering individuals employment opportunities beyond common gender arrangements. By creating opportunities to participate in labour-based roles that they are otherwise precluded from, these spaces produce emotions of and related to empowerment for female recyclers. In spite of the challenges born out of hegemonic and systemic control, participants expressed feelings of pride, optimism and hope in relation to their work and involvement with the cooperative. As one female member notes, 'we are in the dark, we don't know what will be [the result], but we have hope that we will be rewarded' (Discussion group May 2009). The female cooperative members generally agreed that this type of work offers women more personal dignity than other jobs typically filled by women. Specifically some women expressed a preference for working in the cooperative over paid domestic labour because of feelings of autonomy gained.

I worked in the domestic service and I think this is much better. You never have anyone telling you what to do, each person here knows their responsibility. When I was a domestic service worker I had to wash the panties of others. (Discussion group May 2009)

A sense of autonomy and reprieve from hierarchal and degrading forms of employment that are typically reserved for women in Brazil (maid services, food hospitality, childcare, prostitution) is an important component to shaping feelings of empowerment among female recyclers. Within the cooperatives women are given the chance to overcome hegemonic obstacles and experience feelings of empowerment through achieving leadership positions generally reserved for men. A particularly fascinating and notable feature of the group of cooperatives involved with this study is that a majority of the cooperatives were led by women. In fact, during the autumn of 2009 women filled leadership positions in six of the ten cooperatives involved with this study. The phenomenal representation of women leaders reflects a unique culture that exists among cooperative recyclers and demonstrates how emotions – specifically in this case confidence, composure and courage – in relation to specific gendered codes of conduct can define how a space can be either conducive or non-conductive to social change. This unique social context and the emotions and subjectivities that are produced through it serve to disrupt the status quo and have the potential to significantly shape the conven-

tional idea of which individuals are best fit to serve as institutional leaders – offering women the power to serve in a position that allows them the opportunity to affect institutions that are central to their lives. Despite asymmetrical gender roles and hyper-patriarchal systems of domination that exist within the cooperative, this space where women have the opportunity to serve in highly respected positions is both an emotive and transformative act fostering feelings that produce particular ends.

However, while collective values and emotions are re-imagined within the cooperative, leadership roles do not exist in a vacuum. Their roles are inextricably enmeshed with their own and other members' awareness that they are women and the oppressive sentiments and social relations attached to this social category (Yoder 2001). The reality is that women, despite feelings of empowerment earned through experiences in the cooperative, are still subject to moments of masculine oppression inside and outside of the cooperative. While there exists a clear recognition by recyclers that larger inequitable systems exist that continue to oppress them, sharing the same sphere as men with an increased opportunity to fill important leadership roles proves to be an important source of pride for female recyclers. As one female participant comments, '[women] think that they are strong, but not as strong as men, but we do the work of men' (Discussion group December 2009). Here the paradox in relation to domination and empowerment is clear. While the statement signals to the hegemonic forms of patriarchy in the cooperative that normatively frame women as weak in relation to men, it communicates feelings of pride and empowerment gained from the opportunity to work in the same sector as men. This paradox encapsulates the central focus of the study. Claims that individuals in the cooperative *are* empowered are debatable due to the systems of masculine power within which they are inescapably enmeshed. However, recyclers do feel empowered and these feelings of empowerment have certain results; they create a sense of pride and accomplishment that gestures to moments of counter-hegemonic resistance in which they are ensconced.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to inspire a consideration of empowerment beyond conventional spiritual, political, social, educational and economic measurements and to think about the way that emotions resonate among individuals and operate in relation to webs of power. We consider bringing particular aspects of empowerment – the visceral and the fleeting – into discussions and suggest that empowerment is not a permanent ontological state of being, rather, something individuals experience emotionally.

By focusing on the space of the cooperative, and the way that feelings of empowerment operate within and throughout hyper-masculine and liberal society, it becomes apparent how emotive moments of empowerment are woven amid and work concurrently with dominant hegemonies in the context of cooperative recycling in São Paulo, Brazil. Due to the location of the cooperative within various oppressive systems of control, any ideological attempt to frame a permanent ontology of empowerment is unrealistic and dangerous because it masks the adoption of masculinity and liberalism into empowerment frameworks (Brown 1995). Considering critiques of empowerment from Brown and Mirafab, and attending to an awareness of the dominant regimes of control that exist within the cooperatives, we recognise that among recyclers feelings of empowerment and emotions related to feeling empowered are indeed quite real and deserve careful consideration. This proposed emotional use of the concept contributes to discussions that consider the ways that emotions shape bodies and spaces and create opportunity, community and subversive subjectivities. Cooperative recyclers inspire us to consider how emotions become resident in our inner psyche relationally and produce a specific group politic. An example of what Thien (2011, 320) refers to as 'the resonance of place', that is, showcasing the importance of 'where we are feeling and feeling where we are'.

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### Notes

1 The distinction between affect and emotion in geography continues to be a point of hotly contested debate (see e.g. Thien 2005; Anderson and Harrison 2006; Pile 2010; Curti *et al.* 2011). Here we view emotions as an important component to understanding affective life and remain aware that affect cannot be simply reduced to emotions and feelings. However, when referring to the affect or feelings in this paper we do so in an emotional sense and side with theorists such as Brennen (2004), Kwan (2007) and Wright (2010) who choose to situate affect and emotions in the same discussion (even at the risk of 'collapsing the differences between the political orientation

and material foci' of these fields of research) (Tolia-Kelly 2006, 213).

- 2 Since the recycling cooperatives involved with this study are both organised and located in the informal sector, this study refers to the work done by recycling cooperatives as organised informal waste-management.
- 3 Although all the cooperatives follow a cooperative structure, some of the groups participating in this project are not legally structured cooperatives.
- 4 Among the 58 cooperative members surveyed in the study, the average monthly wage of the workers was 469.34 Reais per month, lower than the January 2010 national minimum wage of 510 Reais per month. During the time of the data collection (1 December 2009) US\$1 dollar was equal to 1.74 Brazilian Reais.

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