

"The economy of cartoneros (from paper to book scrapping) in Buenos Aires: a literary essay"

1. The survival mode of paper scrapping

This is not a work of fiction, nor a technical study. It is, rather, the work of a practising lawyer who has been observing the reality which surrounds him as recent years have been going by. It started unobtrusively except for esthetic reasons, when dismally poor people in the urban underclass of Buenos Aires found an unorthodox way to make a living, though one of extreme poverty.

Such work is not really illegal to begin with, and the political powers of the times have all tried to eliminate it, without succeeding or making it wholly illegal: it is now partly illegal, but tolerated.

The new experience begun when poor people started to open the bags containing refuse intended for public garbage collection. A few hours before their own delivery times, they take out whatever corrugated paper (cartón) they find in the garbage bags of each building, collect it in improvised personal carts which they themselves pull, and hurriedly continue to meet the deadline of their own recollection system.

Some time before midnight, very old and dilapidated trucks appear in their own chosen meeting places, and each cart puller presents his day's collection, to be weighed and payed in cash on the spot. This part of the system also corresponds to an underground economy, of course.

Due to the speed with which they have to work, they do not have the time or the inclination to make an orderly search of paper, so they naturally tend to leave behind them some debris of garbage, for the public garbage collection system to deal with, not always a successful image of cleanliness.

The employees who work for the public collection system do not take kindly to the dispersal of broken garbage bags, and therefore they do not pretend to do a thorough job of garbage collection either: They have their own time limitations to deal with, and they just take what they can.

It being now very late in the night, and because of economic limitations, those who have sold their daily collection of paper do not return to their far away living places, but rather stay the night as if they were totally homeless people.

They are not literary homeless in the absolute sense of the word, but they are *factually homeless* in the big city because of the working conditions in which they manage to survive.

Their homelessness is not definitive but temporary as long as they do this kind of work. I have no statistics to support this observation, which must then be considered as the product of literary imagination, not scientific research. My imagination, however, is not intended as fiction but as probable fact.

2. The new input of each building paper collection

With the passage of the years, a first layer of supporting underground economy was born. The employees in charge of the maintenance of buildings make their own selection of paper refuse, mostly the discarded newspapers of the neighbours in his or her building, to be sold for pennies, as it were, to the cartoneros. The cartoneros buy it at a competitive price in relation to their own paper collection from the refusal bags, and sell it --together with the rest of their daily collection-- to the nearest almost midnight collection point.

Another rare yet legal way of bypassing the breaking of garbage bags, is for a person of the building, usually a commercial one, to prepare the refuse packages of cartón, wait at the sidewalk of their own building, and direct the employees of the public collection system straight at the unopened packages, to take them away without any prior breaking.

His own benefit is to have a cleaner sidewalk in front of his commercial building, yet he defies the underground system. I happened to see it just once, probably because it starkly presents the conflict of public cleanliness at each building' sidewalk with the survival mode of people under non state law.

3. The latest frontier: From paper to book scrapping

A decidedly illegal new practice has been growing in the dark, without any possibility of easy control by the authorities. The postal system public employees who have to deliver heavy books find an easy early disposal system of their own daily deliverance obligations.

They just sell to the next cartonero the books that they were supposed to deliver at home with the addressees. They cheat their employer and both those who sent the books and those who were expecting them. They help the cartoneros to make a living by selling them the postal books, a huge weight indeed.

This, mind you, is pure guess work of mine, whose only indirect proof lies in the fact that I do not actually receive any books from the mail but only those who are entrusted to private delivery organisations. For my part, when I have to send a book to someone, something that I frequently do, I use a myriad of ways.

- A note on the use of "I": The reader will easily discern when the use of the first person singular, from now on, is purely a way of saying that my wife manages to somehow get it done.

The main thing is that postal distribution of books is not any more factually or economically feasible.

4. The growth of alternative delivery systems.

The most direct and expensive one is to use myself (see previous note) one of the privately mail delivery companies. I use it frequently for foreign delivery, although the cost is forbidding. When I travel abroad I take with me as many books as is economically feasible and distribute them directly to my colleagues at the Universities I visit. My wife brings some gifts and I give my books.

Some countries' customs object to this "import" "business", and sometimes I have to pre-prepare huge ink seals to indelibly and very clearly stamp all over each book, to indicate that it is a gift not fit for sale or any commercial use.

Within the country there are other various ways of distributing books to the intended person. In one of the rich Provinces a young professor has offered his free public interest help: free for me, not for himself, for he has to use time, resources and organization to make his end of the friendly operation properly function.

I make a huge truck delivery of books intended for my, and his, colleagues. The systems depends of truck space and weight availability in moving companies. It may take a week or even two, but in the ends the books arrive successfully at their destination and there my young colleague proceeds with the distribution. I have not dared ask him how he does it, but I am pretty sure that he does not use the postal system.

If the books are intended for a nearby city, my wife tracks someone in the legal profession who is willing to take them, or receive them, and proceed with distribution. In other instances, a friend of hers not in the legal profession receives the truck and proceeds to use a local distribution network at reasonable prices.

Whenever anyone in the same professional specialty happens to visit me at home, I always have book availability to freely offer as gifts. It is not just generosity, it is an awkward and devious ways of bypassing a system of postal distribution that does not at all work.

Foreign visitors have to contend with the same offer, not always welcome: not everything that I receive abroad sees the way back home. I assume the same thing happens to my books, so I am very careful to ask everyone whether he or she has weight availability in his or her airplane baggage.

When I send books for the members of the local judiciary, the private distributors find themselves directed by public employees, not to go to each judge's chambers as indicated in the individual packages, but to a general official distribution center in the public building. Most but not all of the books arrive at their destination.

There is a huge book fetish that tempts just too many otherwise decent people to intercept delivery and keep the book for themselves. Here again, this is pure guesswork arising from the fact that not all the books reach their intended destinaries.

The margin of error is compounded by another of our society's failings: It is not customary anymore for all to acknowledge receipt of a book.

I am and have always been there. In bygone times one thanked the author for his book and tried to make some intelligent commentary. This requires time to peruse the book and inspiration for some friendly comment. I frequently find that I have none, so I just omit thanking the envoy. My colleagues do the same.

Superior Court judges have another way of bypassing this difficulty. They send a thank you note written in official paper, obviously prepared by an employee, and just add a word or two in their own handwriting, preceeding their own signature: it works satisfactorily for me, for the handwriting indicates some kind of affectionate regard and I get to know that the book arrived.

Other colleagues in the academic world send a very simple mail. A more elaborate way is to have the letter written by a secretary, signed by the recipient (or even "signed" by the computer facsimile of the sender's signature, in blue ink to hopefully make it look better against the black typography of the letter) then scanned and added to the thankyou mail.

The whole system is supplemented, in my case, by putting the book freely available in Internet. It does not have, though, the personal touch of sending the book oneself (same note as above). Time and technology will produce other transformations, until this dickensian or dostoevskian tale disappears.