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New forms of wage-labour and struggle in the informal sector: The Turkish case of waste pickers¹

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Abstract

In the absence of formal employment opportunities and increasing urban and rural poverty, the informal recycling sector has become a means for survival during the last two decades in Turkey. In the capital city, Ankara, the large majority of waste pickers constitute former dispossessed Kurdish farmers who migrated to the city with their families from the South Eastern regions as a result of forced migration and seasonal Kurdish workers who alternate between rural and urban employment. The introduction of new waste management regulations in 2004 made the recycling market a significant area of struggle between local authorities, recycling companies and waste pickers. Local authorities have used those regulations to force waste pickers to sell their waste for certain recycling companies at a price lower than the market price. Waste pickers have reclaimed their right to work in the streets against the violence executed by the municipal police. The paper investigates in what ways waste pickers should be considered as wage labourers and what kind of a moral discourse they used in making their demands vis-à-vis the local governments during the process of intense conflict and negotiation.

Keywords

Turkey; class; recycling; informal work; waste pickers; the state

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Labouring Waste in the Context of Neoliberalism

The day is turning slowly into night in İskitler, a former industrial zone on the outskirts of Ankara, the capital city of Turkey. İskitler had hosted small workshops before the metropolitan municipality evacuated the area as part of its urban regeneration plans. Since the plans are still pending, the empty warehouses found their new tenants in waste pickers who needed storage space for the waste plastic, paper and scrap metal that they collect from thousands of streets. Chaotic and deserted at first glance, the area consists of parallel streets cut by larger avenues, on both sides of which recycling warehouses of similar shape, with two floors are located. It is in one of those streets that Recep, a nineteen year-old seasonal migrant waste picker, who came to Ankara from the southeastern town of Siverek, Urfa with his brothers and cousins, is preparing to go to work. He puts on work clothes and gloves, to enable him to be immersed into all kinds of dirty garbage, makes sure that some pocket money and a packet of cigarettes are ready, and checks the solidity of his carrier. A key tool for the work of waste picker, the carrier is a kind of a manually used freight car, made up of two rollers and two handholds. A very large sack is sewed and fitted onto the metal carrier in order to enable the maximum use of space for gathering cardboard boxes and plastic bottles.

That day, I accompany Recep in his long walk to pick waste. Had he not come to Ankara that summer, he may have been on a farm in the Southern regions as a rural labourer to harvest cotton, thanks to a labour contractor from his village,² or employed as a textile worker in an informal sweatshop in İstanbul. İskitler is full of young waste pickers who alternate between available jobs in rural and urban labour markets.³ While we stop by the waste bins full of plastic bottles during our walk, Recep is quite confident: he knows which streets to enter, takes directions naturally, similar to a hunter who finds his way in the forest. When I offer help, he refuses by staring at me with shame and discomfort. At the end of the day, he will sort out and weigh the waste he brought to the warehouse on a scale, watch TV, download some new songs on his mobile phone, eat dinner cooked in a tiny

kitchenette and finally sleep on the upper floor together with other members of his extended family.



Figure 1: A waste picker in İskitler
Photo credit: Ali Saltan

While Recep and I start our long walk, Veysel, who is the same age as Recep, is taking his place at the corner of one of the busiest streets in Kızılay neighbourhood, the city centre of Ankara. This is a corner where he stores the waste cardboard, plastic and paper he collects from the busy shops, restaurants and other offices located nearby. Veysel has to build and maintain the network of good personal relations with individuals from those shops and offices, to ensure the regular provision of waste. He has to make several tours from late afternoon until midnight in order to collect the waste, which is put at different points in the area. He has to sort out the material properly in an out-of-the-way corner of the street to not pose problems to pedestrians or municipal police. The elder son of a Kurdish family, which left its village as a result of forced migration by the Turkish armed forces,⁴ Veysel came to Ankara as a child from the southeastern city of Hakkari in 1994. In the absence of job opportunities his father started waste picking like many other relatives from his village. After midnight, Veysel brings

the truck he owns to his corner to load the waste paper and plastic. From 2 AM until next morning he will try to take a deep sleep in the Türközü neighbourhood where he lives. The following day he will bring his truck and its contents to sell at one of the recycling factories around 3 PM. Then he will come back to Kızılay late afternoon to the same corner to recommence the same everyday routine until Sunday when he usually takes the day off. On one of those Sundays, we spend together some leisure time in the same area where he works. Being a customer in the café in front of which he takes the garbage in his working days gives him some temporary joy. He tells me how he feels ashamed and humiliated when some of his high school friends see him waste picking in the city centre and how pedestrians take him as a vagabond or a potential criminal.

When Veysel and Recep go to sleep Mustafa prepares to go to work. In his early thirties, Mustafa lives in a warehouse in Hamamönü, half an hour walking distance from the busy street where Veysel is working. Originally from the eastern city of Kars where his wife, two daughters and parents live, Mustafa spends most of the year in this warehouse in order to earn income for his family. He collects and/or steals valuable scrap metal in several places all around the city: machinery and cables the left outside private factories, public street lamps and waste bins which contain tin, iron, aluminium and zinc. In Hamamönü, an inner city slum, male workers who have criminal records and are refused work at formal workplaces, find a refuge.⁵ Unlike İskitler populated by Kurdish workers, most workers are Turkish. They are mostly single males who came as migrant workers from their home towns, including Çankırı and Yozgat in the periphery of Ankara in Central Anatolian region, and live in the warehouse.⁶ This warehouse is a remnant of an old shantytown building with two large rooms and an outside toilet. The entry room serves as a dormitory for the workers during the evening and when beds are tidied up it turns into a sitting room with sofas and a TV. The back room with its old armchairs acts as an office space for the warehouse owners. The L shape garden is rather quiet during the day time but gets very busy beginning from late afternoon with the visits of day labourers who occasionally sell their

waste, other waste pickers from nearby warehouses, and street kids. Our intimate conversations in this yard reveal how Mustafa is torn between the feeling of guilt for having to steal scrap metal and the awareness that there are few options for the poor and casual labourers; between the desire to be a good father for his children and the feeling of shame caused by his work.



*Figure 2: A family of waste pickers in a warehouse in Iskitler
Photo credit: Ali Saltan*

Despite differences between their communities, Recep, Veysel and Mustafa represent the common features of the growing precarious informal labour force in Turkey: high levels of labour market churning, limited access to health and education, low wages, inter-generational poverty, use of child labour, exposure to risk. The hardship they are exposed to is not simply economic, but also emotional. As Sayer puts it, “Sentiments such as pride, shame, envy, resentment, compassion and contempt are not just forms of ‘affect’ but are evaluative judgments of how people are being treated as regards what they value, that is things they consider to affect their well-being. They are forms of emotional reason.”⁷ Such emotions and values do not only give signals about the ways in which people evaluate their own

position with respect to others, but, when acquired certain patterns and commonalities as shared values and norms within a group of people, become integral components of being a class. In the specific case of waste pickers, the feeling of shame and humiliation uttered by the Recep, Veysel and Mustafa, has a special meaning: since their job is done in the public, especially in rich areas where there is higher quality garbage to find recyclable material, waste pickers face directly public gaze and the experience of shame and humiliation is the first, direct and unforgettable experience they have had before any other problem related to the job. Over time people are not subject to less humiliation but they get accustomed to or learn ways to cope with it. Waste picking is justified as a strategy, which they created on their own and thanks to which they stick to life. It generates economic and environmental value. That is how the very source of shame becomes also a source of pride: Without waste picking, they would find themselves in prostitution or criminal activities and it is them who, with their honour, chose to pick waste in order to support their families⁸. The economic and environmental value generated by waste picking, one of the main sources of waste for the recycling sector, is emphasised as an additional means to legitimise the work performed.

The livelihoods of waste pickers can be contextualised in a broader framework within the political economy of Turkish neoliberalism. It is well documented how neoliberal reforms have brought about unemployment, poverty, flexibility in labour markets and financial crises in the last three decades.⁹ In this context, the strength of the recycling economy lies in its flexible capacities to accommodate the social and economic organisation of workers' lives and their need for survival: First, the inability of the agricultural sector to sustain rural livelihoods forced many rural families to explore alternative or complementary sources of income.¹⁰ The recycling economy allows family members, who work together as seasonal rural labourers to temporally migrate and open a new or join an existing recycling warehouse. Second, in recycling, it is possible to join the labour market individually and easily, without significant barriers, by selling waste

independently to a warehouse owner as a wage-labourer. Third, the recycling market is developing so rapidly that, although prices of recyclable goods may change, there is sustained demand for waste, which guarantees fluctuating, yet continuing income for the workers. Fourth, the costs of setting and running a warehouse are relatively low: In some neighbourhoods individuals can even build their own small warehouses or use the garden of their squatted house for storage space. In areas such as İskitler and Hamamönü, old warehouses are cheap to rent (by the time of the fieldwork the monthly rent was approximately one third of the minimum wage), waste pickers sleep and pay for their own food in the warehouse.

The rural-urban migration among the Kurdish was not uncommon before the 1990s, but mass movements due to forced migration have altered the dynamics of urban labour markets. Kurdish groups were employed either in informal street work (porter, waste picker, vendor, shoe polisher) or low skilled jobs in informal enterprises (textile, carpet laundry, fast food shops).¹¹ Those families, who migrated to nearby towns rather than to metropolitan cities alternated seasonally between different jobs including waste picking, construction work and seasonal agricultural labour. The ones who were settled in big cities had to rent flats from the landlords who had benefited from the development amnesty laws of the 1980s and the transformation of squatter settlements into apartment blocks. As Işık and Pınarcıoğlu point out, the new generation of migrants were more likely to be trapped in structural poverty than the previous generation of migrants who could benefit from opportunities in terms of access to employment, housing and other assets.¹²

This description fits the argument that in forced migration in particular and rural-urban migration by the poor Kurdish workers in general, neoliberalism found a pool of cheap labour that was easy to exploit.¹³ Yet, this is only one side of the picture. Although further empirical research needs to be done for a more nuanced analysis, studies such as Yılmaz's for the case of Mersin and my own observations in Ankara and İstanbul suggest that there is a multiplicity of social layers within

migrant communities: The ones who are extremely poor and take informal jobs in the streets or textile workshops with payments below minimum wage, the ones who act as intermediaries, vendors in open air grocery markets, small scale producers hiring workers, and finally the ones who are able to accumulate in areas such as the construction industry.¹⁴ If we look at the recycling industry through this perspective, many warehouse owners in Ankara were themselves Kurdish, mobilising a large pool of kinship labour from their home town. Thus, one can observe not only a great exposure to economic and social risk for many, but also small and medium size opportunities for a number of individuals.

The relationship between ethnicity and labour markets suggests mixed findings. Certain studies give evidence on the discrimination made by employers towards the Kurdish workers in more formal jobs.¹⁵ However, this is not the case in sectors such as construction where labour market entry is easy, large labour supply is needed and the hiring process is informal, based on the consent of small subcontractors. In the case of recycling, as explained below, entry to the labour market is based on customary rights organised by workers themselves.



Figure 3: Two waste pickers in İskitler
Photo credit: Ali Saltan

Waste Pickers as Wage Labourers

After collecting waste, the waste picker sells it daily to a buyer (either an intermediary warehouse owner or a recycling factory directly). The money he receives for this sale is the daily (changing) market price for different categories of paper, plastic and scrap metal. The sale of the commodity as a waste on the basis of the market price and the fact that most waste pickers work individually in the streets with their carriers puts, at first glance, the waste picker into the category of self-employed individuals of the informal economy.¹⁶ In this picture, the commodity sold is a product (waste) not labour power; the transaction occurs between two independent parties. If the buyer sells the commodity of waste at a higher price, this can only be considered as an arbitrage opportunity he exploits. The waste picker has the freedom to sell to any warehouse or recycling factory, depending on the price they offer.

A closer look could reveal that what the waste picker sells is not only waste but also his labour-power. Walking long hours, finding the good quality waste by opening bin bags, organising it carefully into the carrier, driving the carrier in the streets and over the hills for at least eight or nine hours per day, building social networks to get additional waste from offices or shops, all constitute both physical and social labour spent to make waste ready for recycling. Storage in the warehouse, transport to the recycling factory, the process of recycling in the factory (namely the pressing of paper, the transformation of plastic into granules by large machinery or segregation of scrap metal products into their components by the artisans) will add further value to the commodity of waste. But the initial finding of waste, which has the capacity to be sold (i.e. to attract buyers) and making it ready for the warehouse and the factory is itself the result of the labour power of the waste picker. In fact, it is one of the least organised and most difficult parts of the overall labour process in recycling. It is thanks to the waste pickers that even the remote neighbourhoods become a new source of commodified waste for the recycling economy.

As empirical studies on the informal sector suggest, apparent self-employment may disguise forms of wage labour.¹⁷ The reason why wage-labour can escape the eye in the first place is the limitations of the formal understanding of wage labour which refers to work in registered companies, often within the confines of social security and labour law.¹⁸ Yet, in many countries, “classes of labour have to pursue their reproduction through insecure, oppressive and typically increasingly scarce wage-employment and/or a range of likewise precarious small-scale and insecure informal sector (survival) activity, including farming in some instances; in effect various and complex combinations of employment and self-employment.”¹⁹ Waste pickers illustrate Marx’s point that

self-employed workers may be dispossessed from the surplus-value which they produce without being totally separated from the juridical ownership of means of production. The capitalist buys labour power by buying their product. As long as self-employed

workers must exchange their labour in order to survive they come under the command of the capitalist and at the end even the illusion that they sold him products disappears. He (the capitalist) buys their labour and takes their property first in the form of the product, and soon after the instrument as well, or he leaves it to them as sham property in order to reduce his own production costs.²⁰

In one of the earliest studies of garbage pickers in the case of Colombia, Birkbeck makes a similar argument: they “are little more than casual industrial outworkers, yet with the illusion of being self-employed. They may be in a decision to decide when to work and when not to, but the critical factor is control over the prices of recuperated materials and that control very definitely lies with the industrial consumers. It is for this reason that I call the garbage pickers ‘self-employed proletarians’ thereby underlining the essentially contradictory nature of their class location. They are self-employed yet sell their labour power.”²¹

In the case of Tanzania, Rizzo and Wuyts show how the so-called ‘self-employed’ bus drivers work in fact for a class of bus owners who charge a daily rent to drivers. Workers do not receive a regular wage. Rather, the daily rent for the bus owner is deduced from the daily income together with costs (repair, petrol costs). Thus the business risks and costs are transferred to bus drivers.²² In the Turkish case, there is also a risk transfer but in a slightly different way. Similar to the Tanzanian bus owners, the warehouse owner and the recycling factory owner do not have to pay any regular wages to waste pickers. If there is not sufficient waste, they pay less since the payment is made on the basis of kilos; if prices fall, they can pay less (although they may not immediately shift price changes onto waste pickers in order to keep their labour supply). Moreover, since the money waste pickers earn depends on the quantity of waste, the waste picker has an incentive to bring the maximum amount of waste to increase his/her income, which is also to the benefit of the warehouse or the recycling factory owner. As compared to the Tanzanian bus driver, the waste picker has certain advantages: He/she can

increase daily income with more waste whereas the bus driver has to give the daily rent even if his income falls due to possible additional costs. He/she can also have higher wages when market prices increase. But in both cases workers depend on employers to whom they sell their labour power.

During the day-time, the waste picker works independently, without any external supervision as in a fixed workplace where the organisation of work is more hierarchical. Despite this independence, which waste pickers value compared to other sectors where some of them have previously worked (such as clothing factories), there is still a kind of supervision. The nature of the work shifts supervision and quality control to the moment of the actual sale of waste. Similar to piece rate labour regimes where the intermediary agent checks the quality of the products after they are submitted, warehouse or factory owners check the quality of waste paper by looking at whether it is wet or not, and whether it fits the quality categories of paper. When a problem is spotted, then a certain percentage of the total sale price is deducted from the waste picker's wage.

Following Banaji²³ one could argue that the crop shared between the farmer and sharecropper, the piece rate paid by the textile employer to the home-based worker, the direct cash paid as hourly/weekly/monthly wages to workers, the money the bus driver receives after paying the daily rent to the bus owner, and the sale price of waste given to the waste picker on the basis of quantity of waste can all be considered as forms of wage labour in capitalist society.²⁴ In fact, the diversity in remunerating, hiring, firing and controlling individual workers is a rule, rather than an exception.²⁵ Although most of those arrangements are different modes for the appropriation of surplus value by the capitalist, they may be the result of a number of contingent factors in their origins and development and some may be also preferable over others by workers for different reasons.²⁶ It may be then useful to differentiate between the individual reason behind the action of the capitalist and the worker, the aggregate function this action assumes in the total social capital (sometimes independent from the individual motive of the person),

and unintended consequences (becoming a norm or being unable to fulfil the intended purpose).

It is common practice for waste pickers to receive advance money from the warehouse owner, to be deducted later from the sale price of waste. The amount of money can be as little to buy a packet of cigarettes or any other need during the working day or large enough to cover some other debt or medical expenses of the waste picker's family. The deduction can be made daily or weekly or on a longer term, depending on the specific arrangement made between both parties, but it is informally agreed that until the repayment of the debt the waste picker will continue working for the same warehouse. According to Banaji, "Debt, that is, the depiction of wages as loans, is simply a device to control labour in conditions where the competition for labour is likely to drive up the bargaining power and wages of workers."²⁷ Depending on the relationship between the debtor and the lender, the meaning and function of advance money may change.

In the recycling sector, the following patterns are observed: Advance money can be used when warehouse owners or recycling factories compete for labour supply. In the case of the Türközü community, advance money was given to waste pickers to make them dependent on the recycling factory owner until their debt is repaid. Some warehouse owners pay the travel costs of waste pickers to come from the village to the city. Advance money can be requested by the waste picker himself from the warehouse owner when an emergency occurs (such as family sickness). Kinship can be thought to facilitate the provision of advance money as in the case of İskitler, although the research found that its provision is also widespread in warehouses where the waste picker is not related to the warehouse owner. Its provision depends on the paternalistic links between the warehouse owner and the waste picker. The warehouse owner is more likely to give advance money if he has kinship with the waste picker. When there is no kinship, it is easier to leave the warehouse without paying the debt, anticipating working for another warehouse in the future. But if he is generally happy with the warehouse owner and considers

the work as more regular, he would not take the risk of damaging the relationship and would pay his debt. In other words, the use of advance money is complex and depends on a variety of the ways in which the waste picker, warehouse owner and recycling factory owner relate to each other and strategically calculate (and sometimes miscalculate) the potential benefits of their actions.

Perceptions and behaviours of waste pickers reflect ambivalent and contradictory positions in labour relations. Had the whole waste management system been privatised, the territories over which waste pickers worked in the streets would also have been under the management of the companies and there would be a total subsumption of the waste picker to specific capitalists. As Gidwani and Reddy report,²⁸ when the bin space was privatised in certain regions in India, a salaried bin guide whose first allegiance was to his corporate employer maintained the bin space. Similarly, in Colombia Cali, there were six paper buyers, which acted together to control prices.²⁹ Yet, in Turkey, there were several recycling companies and the experience of the waste picker who could sell directly to the factory included *also* a market search for the best offer among the companies. Waste pickers used this relative autonomy in negotiating prices. In contrast to waste pickers who were dependent on a warehouse, they did behave *as if* they were traders. They made phone calls, compared prices, told some companies that others give better prices to try to have greater bargaining power. In other words, although the waste pickers who worked for a specific warehouse and the ones who sold directly to recycling factories were both in relations of dependency in the market, but the latter had higher bargaining power in terms of the sale price. These waste pickers were not only labourers who spent physical labour force during the working day, but also assumed the role of a small trader in a transaction relation with the factory owner. For those who worked directly for the warehouse owners, the relationship between the warehouse owner and the waste picker was based on paternalistic links. Although the waste picker considered himself as a worker, he perceived the warehouse owner as a provider of a job, shelter and support in times of urgent needs.



Figure 4: Waste pickers in İskitler
Photo credit: Demet Ş. Dinler

Customary Rights, Property Rights and the State: The Struggle of Waste Pickers

As compared to certain cases where privatisation of waste management makes waste pickers direct employees of companies, entry into the Turkish labour market in recycling is open to everyone without the need to register with a specific company: *Anyone* can pick waste. Yet, *where* one is entitled to pick waste has its own rules of inclusion and exclusion. While one needs only a carrier to start working as a waste picker, the urban territory in which he/she is allowed to pick up waste is determined according to ethnicity and kinship ties. Thus, there are differences and inequalities in terms of access to the location in which one can

work.³⁰ The terms and conditions of labour market entry in waste picking were initially determined by the Türközü community made up of families who migrated from Hakkari, including Veysel's family. The usual path in rural-urban migration is that some early migrants from the same village settle in the city, get jobs in the formal or informal sectors and the networks they build provide entry points to the labour market for late comers.³¹ But Kurdish migrants from the village of Kotranis came to Ankara in large groups of families in a relatively short time span, all belonging to the same tribe with little previous connection to the urban labour market. Waste picking was one of the few income generating options open to them. When one member of the community started doing this work, others followed him.

Before the arrival of the Türközü community in 1994, members of the gypsy community occupied some of the strategic and central places in the city center to collect waste. The Türközü community had a bargain with the municipal police. They forced the gypsy groups to leave the center in exchange for immunity from the intervention of the municipal police. Similar to the system of customary rights, which allowed Kurdish peasants to share spaces of grazing for sheep in villages,³² they shared the urban space to collect waste among the tribe members. On an axis from Sıhhiye, Kızılay to Çankaya, which constituted the main city center, different strategic locations to collect and store waste were assigned to families living in Türközü. Each family unit had one main point to store their waste and were allowed to take the waste of shops, restaurants, residential buildings and offices within the territory informally defined around this point. Approximately 120 families worked along this axis.

Waste pickers from Hakkari still had relatives in the Southern Eastern region, mainly the city of Van. Most of the elder sons married girls from the villages of Van. During the summer young students or villagers came from Van to do waste picking in Ankara. The Türközü community took those young waste pickers with them and showed them places where they could collect waste. The

accommodation of seasonal kinship labour was an important duty to the family and tribe. However, other waste pickers from different cities without kinship ties were not allowed to work on this Türközü community-controlled axis. Such inequalities within waste picking communities – on the basis of ethnicity, nationality, gender and age – were also revealed by Birkbeck who explains how in the dump at Cali young men called *voladores* paid truck drivers in order to get the best waste before the rest of waste pickers worked over them.³³ Those sectoral findings can also be located within the broader framework of informal economy in which ‘social regulation’ governs entry to labour markets. As Harriss-White argues “when states are unable to regulate markets, when social groups based upon identity supply the preconditions for engagement in markets and or entry in market, old discriminating forms of regulation can actually be expected to intensify as a solid basis for market order.”³⁴

Had the main space of work been a dump as in the case of Colombia and South Africa,³⁵ this situation could have led to potential conflicts. The fact that working space was urban streets, which could be expanded to several neighbourhoods by the entry of new labourers, alleviated possible tensions and restrained forms of exclusion to kinship differences. In fact, existing customary rights were quickly recognised by the new comers who were usually from the same ethnic (Kurdish) origin but from a different city (with different kinship and tribal ties). Those new comers started looking for new neighbourhoods to collect waste and did not enter the city centre where waste pickers from the Türközü community worked. The new streets they occupied became their de facto territories. Initial limitations were, therefore, not necessarily constraining. It was obvious that both practically and in terms of income too many waste pickers could not survive on picking in the city center. Expanding into new spaces in the city meant also exploiting new opportunities, although this required much more physical labour, because these waste pickers had to walk long hours in remote neighbourhoods in contrast to the ones who worked in the city centre where it was easy to find waste in greater quantities.

Waste pickers' (customary) right to collect waste did not remain unchallenged. The municipal government whose mayor was elected from the neoliberal Islamist party JDP³⁶ entered into conflict with the Kurdish waste pickers. The Kurdish waste pickers were stopped in the street, interrogated, asked for their identity cards (a type of harassment which was geared to check whether workers were from the cities in the Kurdish region, implying that they could be a potential 'threat'). Right after the local elections of 2004, the municipal police came to Türközü and delivered an official document to remove the warehouses of the waste pickers. This was clearly a discriminatory practice given that the warehouses of waste pickers of non-Kurdish origin were left untouched. The Türközü community reacted to this with an upsurge of spontaneous collective anger. Rather than seeing the police demolish the warehouses they built, they preferred burning their warehouses themselves. Having been deprived of a place to store their waste, they had to deliver their waste daily to the recycling factories with their trucks. Although the conflicts concentrated in Türközü at the beginning, they would spread to İskitler as well in the second half of the 2000s.

Waste pickers soon realised that the conflict had a broader economic dimension. In July 2004, four months after the elections, the By-Law on Packaging and Packaging Waste Control³⁷ was implemented as a requirement of European Union Directives on the Environment. *If* the By-Law were to be fully implemented the following picture would emerge: All municipal authorities would make a waste management plan to be submitted to the Ministry of Environment and Urban Planning. All companies operating in the collection, sorting, storage and recycling of waste would be required to receive a specific license or a temporary work permit from the same Ministry. The companies collecting waste would be involved in contractual relationships with the municipal authorities and any unauthorized third parties would be prevented from collecting waste from the public areas. The By-Law defined any company, whose operations generate waste and waste package in its own facilities, as a "waste producer". Those companies would be

responsible for sorting out their waste on site before delivering it to recycling companies, which would receive the license to collect and process waste in their facilities. The By-Law aimed at putting an end to the informal waste picking in the streets and informal warehouses, formalizing the recycling industry by bringing about license requirements and regulating the recycling sector under the partnership of municipal authorities and licensee companies.

Rarely do official state documents mirror fully real practices. They may be postponed, used selectively, contested, generate unintended consequences and reshaped as a result of conflicts between different social groups and state institutions.³⁸ In Turkey, not only were the waste management regulations rewritten three times³⁹ and delayed, but their local implementation opened up new sources of conflicts. For example, the Ankara Metropolitan Municipal Authority introduced a municipal By-Law on 10 August 2005. With this By-Law the metropolitan administration forced waste producer companies to give their waste package to the ITC company (Investing Trading and Consulting Limited Company), which had rented Mamak and Sincan recycling facilities for a period of 49 years. This discriminated against the existing recycling companies. By the time ITC entered the market and received a recycling license, most waste pickers were selling the waste they collected to various recycling companies. There existed some very old companies, which had regular relationships with waste pickers. Other relatively new entrants were trying to develop networks with warehouses to attract pickers. ITC, on the other hand, was a big company and it wanted to use its links with the municipal government to get access more quickly and cheaply to waste. The municipal police forced waste pickers to sell their waste to the ITC lower than the market price. Resistance increased and security forces started confiscating the carriers of waste pickers by force and unleashed violence on those who wanted to keep their carriers. The previous ethnic conflict had now turned into an overt class conflict mediated by the local state.

The intervention of a local municipal authority, Çankaya, complicated and escalated the tensions. This time the municipal police responsible for the area of Çankaya forced waste pickers to sell their waste to another new company in the recycling sector called SIMAT. Waste pickers did not know how to handle the conflict between SIMAT backed by the Çankaya municipality which was run by the Republican People's Party (RPP) on the one hand and ITC endorsed by Ankara Metropolitan municipality controlled by the Justice and Development Party (JDP) on the other, which had serious repercussions on their work. It was during this period of conflict that in Autumn 2006, an official from Ankara metropolitan municipality interpellated waste pickers as 'illegal waste hunters'. In a written public statement regarding waste pickers in the streets, Fatih Hatipoğlu, the head of the Directorate of Health Affairs claimed that his agency has started a war against illegal waste hunters who tear bin bags and create a threat to the environment. He added that some companies create incentives for street children to do this job and such companies will also be banned from doing business.⁴⁰ This interpellation resonated with the hunters depicted by E. P. Thompson in *Whigs and Hunters* in eighteenth-century England,⁴¹ where peasants' customary rights to hunt and forage on common forest land were banned. Since peasants protested those bans, The Black Act of 1723 applied the death penalty to rebellious acts such as deer stealing and tree cutting, because those peasants were not viewed "as rights-holders defending their property but were branded as criminals interfering with the property of others. For Thompson, however, they were defenders of the traditional legal and constitutional rights of freeborn Englishmen against unjust expropriation without compensation."⁴²

The By-Law of 2004 had aimed at replacing the customary rights with formalised private property rights in a similar way to this eighteenth century English legislation did. The 'illegal waste hunter' denoted that waste pickers were no longer permitted to collect, (hunt) waste. Waste pickers were criminals, interfering with the property rights of others, as was said for the English 'hunters'. But whose property is waste? Public property? The property of licensed recycling companies?

The irony lied in that neither local authorities nor recycling companies abided by the new legal requirements. The local authorities were not undertaking any efforts to build the necessary infrastructure to implement the waste management system as envisaged by the By-Law.⁴³ Recycling companies themselves were not willing to make the necessary investment for the privatisation of waste collection. Both actors were more interested in the perpetuation of the existing system as long as waste pickers collected waste according to the terms and conditions they set.

From 2006 to 2009 waste pickers challenged the discourse and violence of the local government by reclaiming their right to work in the street. One could argue that their claim for customary rights over urban waste in defined territories could be understood through the lenses of moral economy.⁴⁴ The concept of moral economy was first developed by Thompson to make sense of the protest actions in the eighteenth century (attacks on grain convoys and breadshops) by crowds, which were morally regulated activities expressing popular values about prices and subsistence.⁴⁵ The concept was then adapted by James Scott to think about the peasant movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. According to Scott, the peasants' ethic of subsistence implied that everybody in the community had the right to survive and elites had a duty to respect and protect this right.⁴⁶ Similarly, waste pickers put an emphasis on the state's obligations. Had the state not evacuated the villages, had the state provided jobs for waste pickers who were unemployed or who barely survived as rural labourers, most of them would not have done this job, waste pickers affirmed. When the right to work was under threat, then it was waste pickers' legitimate right to resist: "If someone plays with my bread, then I know what I will do. I have nothing to lose but my carrier."⁴⁷ This emphasis on the state's duties to the unemployed, poor and excluded resonates with Edelman's ⁴⁸ claim regarding the contemporary agrarian movements. According to Edelman, peasants expected 'just behaviour by the more powerful.' The element of morality could also be seen in waste pickers' attempt to legitimise themselves. They defined themselves as 'recycling workers' who were doing a legitimate job, contributing to the environment and economic growth. From their

view, recycling should be considered with dignity, because they were putting their hands into the garbage in order to earn their living rather than being a thief or criminal. “Our clothes may be dirty, but our hearts are cleaner than everyone else” said, Güven, an organiser of waste pickers, with pride, as an attempt to compensate economic inequality with moral superiority.⁴⁹

Nonetheless, waste pickers’ claims *regarding* and *within* the market were slightly different than other protests analysed through the lens of moral economy. Their demands differed in certain ways from contemporary agrarian movements defending state subsidies or a just price for agricultural products that was higher than the cost of production,⁵⁰ landless peasant movements claiming food sovereignty and full control over land,⁵¹ or eighteenth century crowds which were against non-customary prices. Waste pickers did not claim for a protective ‘just’ price in a competitive market. They defended the ‘market’ price against the interference of local government, because the local government was siding with some companies to reduce the price. In their own words, “we are not against competition in the market; but if there were to be a competition, let it be a fair one”.⁵² The enforcement of the municipal police to sell below the market price was an unfair impediment to the right of the waste picker to sell his/her waste to the company of his/her choice. It was not the rules of the market themselves, but the violation of those rules, which had outraged waste pickers.⁵³

The Waste Pickers’ Association in Ankara played a key role in this struggle, especially in bringing together waste pickers from different communities, including Türközü, İskitler and Hamamönü. Established by a small group of independent socialist activists who opened a recycling warehouse, the Association extended rapidly its membership due to the necessity for collective action against the violent attacks. It mobilised many demonstrations to make visible the cause of waste pickers. The Waste Pickers’ Association claimed that if the recycling market were to be restructured, then, as one of the major actors in the recycling sector, they should be allowed to participate in the decision-making process regarding the

future of the recycling market. The By-Law on Waste Management should be revised to accommodate the needs and demands of waste pickers.⁵⁴

Since Ankara Metropolitan Municipality refused to recognise the Waste Pickers' Association as a legitimate actor in the sector, it never talked to any picker representatives. But when violent measures did not subjugate waste pickers, ITC representatives developed certain tactics of accommodation. The company appointed a leading member of the Türközü community to a managerial position at their recycling facility, who then facilitated negotiations with waste pickers: Only during certain days of the week would they sell their waste to ITC. This compromise was also approved by the elderly members of the community who were seeking to find a peaceful solution to end violent conflict. Çankaya Municipality, on the other hand, despite the extreme violence exercised by its police, agreed to negotiate with waste pickers. At the beginning, the meetings between waste pickers' representatives and municipal officials were targeted at persuading waste pickers to reach an informal agreement with SIMAT. The failure of those negotiations and the tarnishing of the reputation of the municipal government in the media as a result of waste pickers' demonstrations led officials to make a different compromise. Çankaya recognized them as 'environment volunteers'⁵⁵ and provided them with working clothes and badges in orange, which would give them the right to work safely within the legal jurisdiction of Çankaya Municipality.⁵⁶

Conclusion

Waste pickers constitute an important part of the growing informal precarious labour force in Turkey. They justify Rigg's argument about the blurring distinctions between the urban and the rural employment in developing countries.⁵⁷ A waste picker can be a precarious worker who cannot find a job due to his previous criminal record, a worker who spends some part of the year on a rural farm and the rest in an urban warehouse, or a migrant who is settled in the city but had little employment opportunities.

Although there is a growing literature on the informal sector in Turkey,⁵⁸ there is not yet a sufficient attempt to conceptualise the informal street work and the relations of exploitation and dependency it incurs. The apparently self-employed workers may well be exposed to a number of hierarchies and pressures. For instance, in her analysis of street vendors in the city Bursa, Ulaş Ertuğrul discovered two types of street vendors: employers and dependents. Dependents do not have any say over the determination of location, type and price of product, working[?] time, and do not hold bargaining power. They are involved in a relationship of exploitation with the employer vendors and they are paid a percentage from the total amount of sale.⁵⁹ Although waste pickers have more autonomy in collecting waste and those who have their own trucks have higher bargaining power vis-à-vis the recycling factory owners, the ones who depend on a warehouse and/or intermediaries can not negotiate price, are obliged to accept a deduction of their wage when their carriers are confiscated and can simply survive with the amount of wage they receive. In large warehouses, the owner is able to accumulate thanks to the surplus he extracts from the waste picker. It is also plausible to argue that such an analysis could also contribute to further awareness, on the side of trade unions and workers' associations, about the need to organise these workers as part of a labour movement, although the more usual employer-employee relations are absent.

In Ankara, since waste pickers used the public bins as part of a sort of customary rights in the urban streets, waste management regulations to formalise and privatise the recycling sector became a threat to this right to work. Furthermore, collusion between local authorities and private companies opened up new areas of conflict in which waste pickers faced the violence of municipal police. Waste pickers responded to this violence mediating class conflict with collective action characterised by a strong discourse of morality.

On 20 January 2016, The Ministry of Environment and Urbanism has issued a

notification to recycling companies, which states that if they continue buying waste from waste pickers, they will be charged a fine up to 140,000 Turkish liras (47,000 US Dollars).⁶⁰ This is to show, for the first time, a concrete legal sanction to implement the By-Law on Waste Management, many clauses of which had not been fully enforced. This belated threat for sanction is not accompanied, however, by the building of an infrastructure in which municipal administrations and recycling companies will technically and financially share the burden to collect waste, which is currently collected and sorted by waste pickers, whose number has increased even more after the influx of Syrian migrant workers. Whether a full privatisation of public bins will be achieved by forcing waste pickers to work directly for the recycling companies in specific districts assigned by the municipal administrations or whether occasional sanctions will be executed to discriminate in the market a number of recycling companies from buying waste from waste pickers is yet to be seen. The Waste-pickers' Association has brought the issue to the attention of the National Assembly⁶¹ via a parliamentary question submitted by an MP from the main opposition party (Republican People's Party) and is currently discussing how to move forward in order to stop, once again, the assault against their customary rights to collect waste. This time, the struggle will need to be more national than local. The question of whether this new wave of attacks will be an impetus for collective action as happened at the beginning of their organising remains open-ended.

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Notes

¹ The data for this article were collected during ethnographic fieldwork which took place during May-October 2007, December 2007, June-October 2008. A shorter re-visit was made in the summer of 2009. The archival search covers the period from 2007 to 2014. Some key informants were re-interviewed during 2014 for an update. The sites where I conducted research included dozens of streets in which waste pickers worked in the city of Ankara. I concentrated mostly on the city center by spending long hours with waste pickers at their collection points, near their trucks, in their tea breaks, during their days off, but I also accompanied some workers who worked in the peripheral streets of the city. I accompanied organisers in their travel to warehouses, demonstrations, hospitals, and in their meetings with individuals from different professions who supported the organising work in various ways. Another site of research consisted of the three neighbourhoods where waste pickers lived, as depicted in the paper. The warehouse was a very important space where I could join dinners, breakfasts, tea breaks, group conversations, one-to-one talks during different time slots. I was also invited to house visits and weddings.

² For the conditions of seasonal agricultural labourers in the South East and South respectively, see Çınar, *Öteki Proleterya; Çalışkan, "Markets and Fields"*.

³ For an analysis of the transition between rural and urban labour in the case study of tourism, see Aykaç-Yanardağ, *Yeni İşler, Yeni İşçiler, Turizm Sektöründe Emek*.

⁴ Forced migration refers to the sudden and abrupt displacement of thousands of villagers in the Eastern and South Eastern regions of Turkey between the years of 1984 and 1999. The displacement was the outcome of the state and military's strategy to fight against Kurdish guerilla forces in their struggle for independence, by undermining their popular support base in villages. Not in all cases the support of villages to the guerilla forces was documented via evidence. For researches on the social consequences of displacement see Kurban et. al., *Zorunlu Göç ile Yüzleşmek*; Yolaçan et. al., *Türkiye'de Zorunlu Göç*. For the consequences of forced migration on labour see Yılmaz, "İstanbul'un Bir Kentiçi Mahallesinde Sosyal Dışlanma ve Mekansal Sürgün"; Yılmaz, "Türkiye'de Sınıfaltı"; Kaya, *Türkiye'de İç Göçler*.

⁵ For an analysis of the relationship between crime, space and class inequalities in squatter settlements in Ankara, see Ümit, *Mekandan İmkana*; Erman, "Çandarlı-Hıdırlıktepe (Altındağ, Ankara) Örneği Üzerinden Suç ve Mekan İlişkisi ve Mahalleli Deneyimleri".

⁶ It is common practice that groups of male migrant workers who come to large cities to work rent a room or flat and share rent and other expenses. In certain instances, workplaces (such as small restaurants or shops) may offer accommodation to the migrant worker(s). In the case of recycling, certain warehouses function as a living, eating and sleeping space.

⁷ See Sayer, "Class, Moral Worth and Recognition". See also Sayer, *Moral Significance of Class*.

⁸ For an analysis of how pride associated with work and bread-winning is a significant component of working class subjectivity, see Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men*.

⁹ For neoliberal market reforms in trade and finance see Şenses, "Turkey's Stabilisation and Structural Adjustment Program"; Eralp, Tünay and Yeşilada, *The Political and Socioeconomic Transformation of Turkey*; Öniş, "Organisation of Export-Oriented Industrialisation". For labour market flexibility, see Şenses, "Labour Market Response to Structural Adjustment and Institutional Pressures"; Şenses, "Structural Adjustment Policies and Employment in Turkey". For analyses of the informalisation see Özdemir and Yücesan Özdemir, "Living in Endemic Insecurity". For the negative effects of financial crises, see Cizre-Sakallıoğlu and Yeldan, "Politics, Society and Financial Liberalisation"; Akyüz and Boratav, "The Making of the Turkish Financial Crisis"; Cizre-Sakallıoğlu and Yeldan, "The Turkish Encounter with Neoliberalism"; Öniş, "Varieties and Crises of Neoliberal Globalisation".

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- ¹⁰ The capacity of the agricultural sector to sustain the livelihoods of farmers has decreased as a series of gradual reforms: sale of public facilities and factories in agricultural industries, the limiting of production in certain agricultural products including sugar and tobacco, liberalisation of agricultural imports and cattle, introduction of contract farming with the multinational companies for certain products, elimination of subsidies. For details, see Aydın, "Türkiye'de Tarım ve Gıda Üretimini Yeniden Yapılanması ve Uluslararasılaşması"; İslamoğlu, "IMF Kaynaklı Kurumsal Reformlar ve Tütün Yasası"; Özügürlü, *Küçük Köylülüğe Sermaye Kapanı*; Ulukan, *Türkiye Tarımında Yapısal Dönüşüm ve Sözleşmeli Çiftçilik*.
- ¹¹ See Yılmaz, *ibid.*; Kaya, *ibid.*; Ümit, *ibid.*; Dinler, "Gezi'nin Sınırları".
- ¹² Işık and Pınarcıoğlu, *Nöbetleşe Yoksulluk*.
- ¹³ Yörük, "Zorunlu Göç ve Türkiye'de Neoliberalizm".
- ¹⁴ See Yılmaz, "Mersin'de Mekansal Ayrışma ve Denge Siyaseti".
- ¹⁵ See Lordoğlu and Aslan, "Türkiye İşgücü Piyasalarında Etnik Bir Ayrımcılık".
- ¹⁶ De Soto, *Mystery of Capital*.
- ¹⁷ Harris-White and Gooptu, "Mapping India's World of Unorganised Labour"; Breman, *Footloose Labour*.
- ¹⁸ Castel, *Les Métamorphoses de la Question Sociale*.
- ¹⁹ Bernstein, "Capital and Labour from Centre to Margins".
- ²⁰ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 510, quoted by Chevalier, "There is Nothing Simple about Simple Commodity Production".
- ²¹ See Birkbeck, "Self-Employed Proletarians in an Informal Factory", p. 1174.
- ²² Rizzo and Wuyts, "The Invisibility of Wage Employment in Statistics on the Informal Economy in Africa".
- ²³ Banaji, "The Fictions of Free Labour".
- ²⁴ For the case of Africa, see Oya, "Stories of Rural Accumulation in Africa".
- ²⁵ Ortiz, "Labouring in the Factories and in the Fields".
- ²⁶ For the cultural origins of piece-rate labour regime in Gujarat, India, see Gidwani, "The Cultural Logic of Work".
- ²⁷ Banaji, *ibid.*, p.87. See also Brass, "Why Unfree Labour is not so-called, The Fictions of Jairus Banaji", for a critique. For an analysis, which examines bondage with respect to dependency and resistance see De Neve, "Asking for and Giving Baki".
- ²⁸ Gidwani and Reddy, "The Afterlives of Waste", p. 1637.
- ²⁹ Birkbeck, *ibid.*, p. 1177.
- ³⁰ For a detailed and invaluable discussion of how customary rights over land include levels of inequality on the basis of ethnicity, caste and class see Peters, "Inequality and Social Conflict Over Land in Africa".
- ³¹ Erder, *İstanbul'a Bir Kent Kondu*; Tezcan, *Gebze*; Yıldız ve Oda Projesi, *Kendi Sesinden Gülsuyu-Gülensu*.
- ³² For information about Kurdish peasants' use of grazing land in Hakkari see Yalçın-Heckmann, *Kürtlerde Aşiret ve Akrabalık İlişkileri*. For the case of India, see Axelby, "It Takes Two Hands to Clap".
- ³³ Birkbeck, *ibid.*, p. 1179.
- ³⁴ Harriss-White (2003), "Inequality at Work in the Informal Economy", p. 468.
- ³⁵ By the time the fieldwork started, the main dump area of Ankara had already been rented via a public auction by the metropolitan municipality to a company named ITC and ITC had turned the dump area into a recycling facility by hiring its own workers. There was no public access to the dump. *Zaman*, "Mamak Çöplüğünün Kokusu Duyulmuyor", 5 July 2006.
- ³⁶ For an analysis of the JDP, see Coşar and Yücesan-Özdemir, *İktidarın Şiddeti*.
- ³⁷ The By-Law was enacted in compliance with the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive 94/62/EC. By-Law on Package and Control of Waste Package, *Official Gazette*, no 25538, 30.07.2004. It was replaced by the By-Law on the Control of Waste Package, *Official Gazette*, no 25562, 24.06.2007, which ceded its place to the By-Law on the Management of Waste, *Official Gazette*, no 28035, 24.08.2011.
- ³⁸ For a discussion of how policy-making is a complex, contradictory and messy process, see Fernandez, "(En)gendering Poverty Policy in India".

³⁹ The By Law was amended in 2008, 2011 and most recently in 2014. Some of those changes reflected the conflicts of interest between different firms as accommodated by the state. But the main principles remained the same.

⁴⁰ "Ankara'da Çöp Savaşı", *Sabah*, 4 October 2006.

⁴¹ Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters*.

⁴² Cole, "An Unqualified Human Good", p. 180.

⁴³ See Court of Accounts, *Waste Management in Turkey*.

⁴⁴ For studies which use the concept in the context of struggles against neoliberalism see Auyero, "The Moral Politics of Argentine Crowds". For a critical and cautious approach to the over-extension of the concept to different contexts and historical periods, see Thompson, *Customs in Common*.

⁴⁵ Thompson, "Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century".

⁴⁶ Scott, *Moral Economy of the Peasant*.

⁴⁷ Interview with waste picker, Akdere, Mamak, 7 June 2007. "I have nothing to lose but my carrier" became a sentence widely circulated amongst waste pickers.

⁴⁸ Edelman, "Bringing the Moral Economy Back In..." p. 339.

⁴⁹ Waste picker Güven, 29 January 2007.

⁵⁰ Edelman, *ibid*.

⁵¹ See Wolford, "Agrarian Moral Economies and Neoliberalism in Brazil", pp. 254-55. According to Wolford, the landless peasants' claim for land via occupation was based on their belief that this was their right, that God did not sell land to anyone, that land was life itself and they also believed in food sovereignty, the local control over food from production to consumption.

⁵² Waste picker, *Katik*, the *Magazine of Recycling Workers*, Issue 4, 2007.

⁵³ Their demand about the price was more similar to some of the debates on medieval markets in which just price was equated with the market price itself without any external interference. According to this interpretation by the Scholastic thinkers, as long as there was no external intervention into the market place (be it hoarders, manipulators) the value of a commodity would be determined by natural factors and common estimation, which was the product of the total community (including buyers and sellers) through the impersonal working of the economy. See Kaye, *Economy and Nature in the Fourteenth Century*, p. 88-89 and 93. See also Monsalve, "Scholastic Just Price and Current Market Price", p. 8, for the equation of just price and market price as long as the price is determined according to "common estimation and judgement".

⁵⁴ Steinberg, "The Talk and Back Talk of Collective Action"

⁵⁵ See Kabeer et al. "Organising Women Workers in the Informal Economy", p. 254.

⁵⁶ The gains obtained by the Turkish waste pickers are, for the time being, limited as compared to the waste pickers organised in South America and South East Asia. In these regions, participation in the regulation and management of waste by waste pickers was made possible by the efforts and struggle of waste pickers' organisations: For the door-to-door collection system introduced by the cooperative of waste pickers on the basis of a user fee, as an alternative to privatisation in Puna, India, see Chikarmana, "Integrating Waste pickers into Municipal Solid Waste Management in Puna, India". For the legal success of National Association of Recyclers in getting the right to access, sort and recycle waste and enter public tenders of recycling in Colombia, see Ruiz-Restrepo and Barnes, *WIEGO Report*, p. 80. For the strategic alliance of the Mexican waste pickers' cooperative to win a tender in recycling, see Mahederia et. al, "New Practices of Waste Management", p. 17. For the recognition of Brazilian waste pickers as service providers in National Solid Waste Policy and the integration of waste pickers' association into the waste management regulations in Peru, see Dias, "Waste and Development-Perspectives from the Ground", p. 2.

⁵⁷ See Rigg, "Land, Farming, Livelihoods and Poverty".

⁵⁸ See Akdemir, *Taşeronlu Birikim*; Güler-Müftüoğlu, *Fason Ekonomisi*; Dedeoğlu, *Women Workers in Turkey*.

⁵⁹ Ulaş Ertuğrul, "İşportacılıkta Enformel İlişki Ağları ve Emek Sürecinin Eşitsiz Gelişmesi", pp. 132-134.

⁶⁰ Durmaz, "Bakanlık Kağıt İşçilerini İşsiz Bıraktı".

⁶¹ "Kağıt Toplama Cezası TBMM Gündeminde", *Hürriyet*, 26 January 2016.

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Appendix 1:

Figure 5: Map showing the cities of Ankara, Urfa, Kars and Hakkari.

