The Power of Waste

A Study of Socio-Political Relations in Mexico City’s Waste Management System

Report from a Minor Field Study

by

Carina Frykman

Master Thesis in Cultural Anthropology (20 Swedish credits)
Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology
Uppsala University

Supervisor: Charlotta Widmark
January 2006
Title
The Power of Waste – A Study of Socio-Political Relations in Mexico City’s Waste Management System

Abstract
It is estimated that up to 2 percent of the population in Third World countries survives on waste in one way or another. In Mexico City alone there exist 15,000 garbage scavengers called Pepenadores. The poverty and marginalization they experience is utterly linked to their work, and while they do much of the hard work their socio-economic situation seems stagnant. This paper explores the complexity of the waste management system in Mexico City which keeps them in this position, and how the current system is a manifestation of the existing symbiosis between the formal and informal sectors of the city. The main characters in the maintenance of this system are the leaders of waste management associations. Their struggle to maintain their powerful positions influences both the system’s relationship to the public sector and determines the socio-economic situation of the Pepenadores. The paper also analyzes the effects of past efforts to change the system, and how policy changes always seem to work against the Pepenadores. Efforts to help the Pepenadores escape their vulnerable positions can be successful in the short-term, but the existing social structure in Mexico City make any permanent changes difficult to achieve.

Keywords
Pepenadores, waste management, social structure, waste scavenger, cacique, power, domination, patron-client relation, Mexico City.
## Contents

**Acknowledgements** ........................................................................................................... 4

Map of Mexico City................................................................................................................. 5

1. INTRODUCTION.............................................................................................................. 6
   1.1 The Field...................................................................................................................... 7
   1.2 Method & Theory......................................................................................................... 10
   1.3 Outline of the Paper..................................................................................................... 11

2. THE PEPENADORES....................................................................................................... 13
   2.1 Mariana and Guadalupe............................................................................................. 14
   2.2 Doña Anita.................................................................................................................. 18
   2.3 Irene............................................................................................................................. 19
   2.4 Carmen......................................................................................................................... 20
   2.5 Doctor Servando.......................................................................................................... 20

3. WASTE MANAGEMENT.................................................................................................... 22
   3.1 The Waste Management Problem................................................................................ 22
   3.2 History of Waste Management in Mexico City........................................................... 25
   3.3 Mode of Production in Waste Management................................................................. 27
   3.4 Actors in the Waste Management Chain......................................................................... 28

4. ASPECTS OF SOCIO-POLITICAL RELATIONS......................................................... 31
   4.1 Social Structure of Urban Mexico................................................................................ 32
   4.2 Marx and Political Economy......................................................................................... 34
   4.3 Power............................................................................................................................ 35
   4.4 Domination.................................................................................................................. 37
   4.5 Leadership.................................................................................................................... 39

5. THE LEADERS.................................................................................................................. 43
   5.1 Waste Management Associations................................................................................ 43
   5.2 Rafael Gutiérrez.......................................................................................................... 47
   5.3 Pablo Tellez.................................................................................................................. 51
   5.4 Luis Rojas...................................................................................................................... 57
   5.5 Norberto Fernando Reyes (Beto)................................................................................. 58

6. PROBLEMS AND CHANGES: PAST AND PRESENT.............................................. 60
   6.1 The State ..................................................................................................................... 60
   6.2 Environmentalism......................................................................................................... 64

7. ARE CHANGES POSSIBLE?........................................................................................ 67
   7.1 Buena Voluntad y Servicio Social, A. C................................................................. 67
   7.2 Success Stories............................................................................................................. 69
   7.3 Father Roberto and the FAE....................................................................................... 71

8. CONCLUSION..................................................................................................................... 73

*Bibliography* ......................................................................................................................... 76
Acknowledgements

The journey from simple idea to the final document of this thesis would not have been possible without all the help I received along the way. First of all, I would like to thank all my informants, especially the Pepenadores of Bordo Xochiaca, many of whom welcomed me and my curiosity with open arms. Also, I am greatly indebted to Father Roberto for inviting me to the Wednesday morning mass, visits that became vital to my study. The same goes for Señora Isabel for introducing me to the families and helping me fill in the many blanks I had in my notes. I express my greatest appreciation to the whole staff of the FAE. Furthermore in Mexico, I would like to thank Doctor Elena Azaola at CIESAS for being my field supervisor, and Doctor Héctor Castillo Berthier for the valuable contact information he gave me that started off my fieldwork.

In Sweden, I would like to thank my supervisor Charlotta Widmark for all the advice, suggestions, and patience in reading the pages over and over again. Moreover, this paper would not be what it is without the help of all those who read, proofread, and gave me suggestions on different parts of this paper. Thank you all.

This study would not have been possible without the Minor Field Scholarship I was granted by the Swedish International Development Agency, Sida.

The contents and possible flaws in this paper are solely my responsibility. Finally, I thank my family for all the confidence they have in me.

Uppsala, January 2006,
Carina Frykman
Map of Mexico City
1. INTRODUCTION
When I first saw pictures of the Mexican pepenadores in a Swedish newspaper I was captivated by their expressive faces and body language. I thought to myself that these people must have many stories to tell. Perhaps they would tell them to me.

I genuinely believed that I could collect many interesting and detailed biographies during my fieldwork that we could learn much from. Many were certainly open and eager to tell me about their lives when we met. However, to get there I first faced a long and rocky road. Nearly half of my three-month long fieldwork was spent on contacting the right people and getting around the system in order to be able to access this group I wanted to get to know. Having passed all the obstacles in the way, I started realizing that these obstacles are not just annoying problems making work difficult for me, but that they actually are characteristic of Mexico City’s waste management system and important manifestations of the reality the pepenadores live in.

“Pepenadores” are what garbage scavengers are called in Mexico. They make their living by picking out and selling reusable or recyclable material from garbage. Now to leave metaphors aside, the “obstacles” I faced along the way were bureaucratic rules and threats of different dangers that made it difficult for me to access the garbage dumps where the pepenadores worked. In my efforts to find a way around these obstacles my fieldwork ultimately became more concentrated on investigating the complex system in which the pepenadores make up an important part. I have chosen to tell some of their stories as a starting point in this paper in order to introduce to the reader their everyday reality and experiences.

The pepenadores today live and work inside a system in which they are trapped. Although they do a great bulk of the work in waste management, they receive the smallest piece of the cake. They are not formal employees and they do not enjoy any kind of guarantees or security. Any major changes to this situation does not seem to be underway anytime soon due to the rigidity of the existing system. The aim of this paper is to describe and analyze the complexity of the waste management system in Mexico City, in order to understand the intricate socio-political structure of which it is a manifestation. Understanding this structure, in which the formal and
informal sectors interplay, will reveal how and why the pepenadores are trapped in this system, and how they are affected by the economic and political processes that take place on a higher level seemingly out of their reach. My argument is that there is no easy way for the pepenadores to exit this trap, along with the poverty and absence of agency it entails, because no mechanisms for change fit into the current structure. A focus is placed on the leaders of waste management associations who are the ones with the greatest stake in the maintenance of this structure. A focus on how they use their power and influence on both the formal and informal sectors will reveal their central position in the waste management system. By analyzing their dominance and forms of leadership it is possible to understand why the existing structure is maintained and why it is their interest that the pepenadores remain trapped at the bottom of the structure.

Something that can bring permanent improvement to the lives of the pepenadores is a radical structural change; a change in the existing system in which the formal and informal sectors of the waste management system have developed a symbiosis. Immediate efforts to improve the situation of the pepenadores can benefit them in the short term, but I believe that such efforts inevitably entail strengthening the very system in which they are trapped.

1.1 The Field

Through the Minor Field Study program (MFS) sponsored by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) I was given the opportunity to conduct fieldwork in Mexico City for the period of three months, from February to April 2005. Already before going to Mexico I knew that it would not be easy to enter the dump to meet the garbage scavengers. So in my initial planning I had set aside quite a long period in the beginning to work on this problem. However this period proved to be even longer than I had anticipated. The lucrative business of waste in Mexico City is often referred to as mafia activity, which implies that controlling the business and keeping outsiders out of the way was not always done by legal means. Along the process I was more than once discouraged to continue my attempts.

While working on contacting the people who could help me in getting access to the waste dumps, I gathered information about the waste
management system from other sources. These included interviews and informal chats with experts, bureaucrats, and ex-politicians. During the first month of fieldwork the vastness of Mexico City was a source of desperation, since simple logistics such as moving around the city by public transportation was an utterly time-consuming activity. Dealing with bureaucrats was neither my favourite activity and on various occasions I spent hours waiting in vain only to face a long journey home with nothing in my notepad. This of course made dents in my initial excitement of being out in the field as an anthropologist for the first time. Not to get into a long discussion on doing fieldwork in a highly urbanized setting, my enthusiasm returned once I realized that the metropolis had a lot to offer. One valuable source was the library of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Mexico (UNAM), Mexico’s and Latin America’s largest university, where I was able to access a lot of written material on the subject.

The waste dump, now classified as a landfill, that I was trying to access was called Bordo Xochiaca and situated in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, a three-million city on its own but also part of the greater metropolitan area of Mexico City. Bordo Xochiaca is the only large landfill in the area that still resembles the traditional open-air waste dumps that have previously been the disposal sites of all garbage produced in Mexico City. All open-air dumps within the Federal District were closed in the late 80s and early 90s when they were replaced by separation plants that at a glance look a lot like factories. There, the waste is run on moving mechanical belts and recyclable material is picked out by workers. One of Mexico’s foremost experts on its waste management system and the author of numerous sociological works on the pepenadores, Héctor Castillo Berthier, was the key person for me in accessing this section of the waste management system. Thanks to his recommendations, I was allowed into a separation plant and was able to conduct interviews with one of the leaders of the pepenadores.

---

1 Separation plants are virtually impossible to access without personal contacts. One alternative way is to be granted access by the office of Urban Services. Such passes are granted mostly to companies or schools, and it is doubtful if I would have been given permission for my research purposes. Anyhow, getting permission from the authorities would have taken weeks, if not months, and was not an option for me due to the limited time of my fieldwork.
To access Bordo Xochiaca, I set out to contact a Jesuit priest who worked with the pepenadores there. Without any further information, I spent two days desperately searching for him by walking the streets that finally gave fruit. His name was Father Roberto Guevara Rubio (called Padre Roberto by everyone) and was the head of an organization called Fundación para la Asistencia Educativa (FAE). When I asked for his help in getting in touch with the pepenadores he invited me to attend the weekly Wednesday morning mass on the dumpsite in Bordo Xochiaca. From then on, my Wednesday mornings were spent on the dump, chatting with the pepenadores about their work and their families while observing how they work. I had arrived at a crucial and conflictive moment since the government had plans to closure this landfill as they had the others in the beginning of the 90s. Over the next month I also spent a significant amount of time in an area called Tlatel Xochitenco in Chimalhuacán, where the majority of the pepenadores working in Bordo Xochiaca lived after being relocated in 1992. In their homes I was able to conduct more interviews and observe how they live. Comparing my observations and data to their stories of how life on the dump was before the relocation gave me valuable insight to how political changes directly affect the lives of the pepenadores.

My fieldwork was thus divided into three parts. One part was meeting with the workers, chiefly the pepenadores but also truck drivers and volunteers. The accounts of these people who work directly with waste allowed me to see the waste management structure from the bottom. Another part was visiting the separation plants and meeting with the leaders of the waste management associations. This revealed the managerial parts of the system and the role of the leaders in the greater socio-political context. A third part was learning about the waste management system from the point of view of those who were not involved in the direct handling of waste, such as the government and activists. This allowed me to see the directly political aspects of the waste problem in Mexico, and also gave me an insight to the environmental aspects. These parts of my fieldwork combined with literature studies on how waste management in Mexico City has looked in the past illustrate the changes the system has undergone and is currently experiencing. Additionally, being in Mexico City at a time when the pepenadores of Bordo Xochiaca were facing the
threat of closure, I became an observer of the ongoing conflict between the state and the pepenadores.

1.2 Method & Theory
My interviews were mostly semi-structured. This was necessary since there were many aspects of the waste management system I was not familiar with. The informality and flexibility of the interviews also allowed for the informant to discuss the issues they believed were important. Some of my most valuable information also resulted from short casual chats with workers and through participant observation.

The large majority of the pepenadores I interviewed were women, as I had little freedom to pick and choose my informants. This was due to the fact that I could only conduct interviews with the people I was introduced to by Señora Isabel, who worked for the FAE. She introduced me to the people she knew well and those she knew would do their best in answering my questions--who were all women. I did feel, however, that the conversations opened up through a sense of woman-to-woman kind of trust. The few times when I did manage to speak to men during the visits to the dump, they were not nearly as open and willing to answer my questions as the women. My questions revolved around their opinions of working on the dump, how working there affected their lives, the changes and hardships they face, and their perceptions of the leader. I had been hoping to gather material on political issues through talking about their leader, but their minimal knowledge of the organizational aspects of their work and politics, and their unwillingness to talk critically about their leader left this section of my interviews empty of information. All in all, I informally interviewed, or “chatted,” with about fifteen women on the dump and conducted several-hours long interviews with four families. I have decided to share with the reader in the next chapter one extensive interview with two sisters, and three shorter interviews from the waste dump. I believe they are the most illustrative cases that depict different aspects of the lives of the pepenadores. How the pepenadores are vulnerable to decisions taken by others is also seen, and how difficult it is for them to influence their own socio-economic situation.

I was able to conduct two thorough interviews with one leader of a waste association thanks to recommendations made for me. This interview and
two shorter interviews with two other leaders make up the empirical base for my socio-political analysis. Literary research to learn about yet a fourth leader (no longer alive) was also crucial to my study. It is by analyzing these leaders that it possible to understand the shape of the socio-political sphere in Mexico City. To approach the socio-political sphere in theory, I have chosen power, dominance, and leadership as the main subjects in my theoretical discussions. By bringing out these aspects of the leaders, it is possible to see their influence on the system and on the lives of the pepenadores. I use an economic approach to power, with ideas of Marx and Eric Wolf, while using Weber’s theories in my section on domination. My theoretical analysis of leadership starts in the traditional anthropological distinction among episodic leaders, big men, and chiefs, going on to a more context specific analysis of the cacique. Furthermore, I have used Larissa Lomnitz ideas about the social structure of urban Mexico as a starting point before going on to different aspects of the leaders’ influence. Her theories on the symbiosis of the formal and informal sectors in Mexican society are vital in understanding the greater structure within which the actors in the waste management system, both leaders and workers, work. I will get back to these theories more in detail in chapter 4.

During my fieldwork Spanish was my sole working language and the fact that I had previously lived in Mexico for a year proved invaluable in understanding my informants speaking in the Mexican vernacular with an extensive usage of slang. All quotes from my informants in this paper are my own translations.

1.3 Outline of the Paper
The practice of waste management in Mexico City has a long history and can be traced back to before the colonial era\(^2\). Today, due to the immense population and the change of people’s habits, there are enormous amounts of waste produced in the city, making it a rapidly growing problem. However, before presenting the background and history of waste management in the city, I will in chapter 2 introduce a few of the pepenadores I met and tell some of their stories. It is my hopes that the

\(^2\) The Aztec city of Tenochtitlán was one of the world’s largest cities before the colonial era. An intricate division of labor in waste management existed there. It is discussed further in section 3.2
reader can put faces to the pepenadores and come closer to understanding their realities. The names of the characters are fictive.

After the background and history, I will also in chapter 3 present all the actors in the chain of work in the waste management system and this explains the pepenadores’ position in the hierarchy. Understanding the background to the problem and identifying the actors involved is important at an early stage in this paper since the following chapters refer back to different elements presented in chapter 3. This chapter will also highlight the political nature of the system.

Chapter 4 discusses concepts of power, leadership, and domination, and provides the theoretical basis for the analysis of the leaders in the following chapter. This chapter begins with the presentation of a theoretical model of the Mexican social structure in order to understand the system that enables the symbiosis of the formal and informal sectors.

Chapter 5 deals with the waste management associations that exist in Mexico City and their leaders. One important leader I will describe in this section is Rafael Gutierrez, deceased already in 1987. As will be evident, he is a key character in understanding the current waste management structure in Mexico City, as he was a driving force in shaping the system. This chapter will also reveal the role of the government in the system. In the following chapter I will elaborate on the problems and shortcomings of the government and also present other factors affecting the system.

The last chapter will first present a past example of an attempt to defy the system and why it ultimately failed to change it. Additionally I will compare it to a few examples from other countries where similar efforts have succeeded. During my fieldwork I became familiar with an organization currently working with the pepenadores and I end with a brief discussion of its efforts.

In the conclusion I will sum up my analysis of the existing structure of Mexico City’s waste management system. I will end with a discussion on how this analysis proves the pepenadores’ powerless position and the difficulties they face in changing their lives.
2. THE PEPENADORES
The term *pepenador* has its roots in the verb *pepenar*, a word used in Mexico and parts of Central America that has its origins in Naúhatl\(^3\), and refers to the act of grabbing or picking up something from the ground. Although called *pepenadores* in Mexico, garbage scavengers go under different names in other Latin American countries; for example *basuriegos* in Colombia (Medina 1997: 1). Pepenadores make their living by recovering recyclable or reusable material from what others throw away, occasionally on the street but mainly on the waste dumps. What they recover is sold to different buyers who pay them per kilogram for the different material collected. Waste scavenging is a common practice in many developing countries, but Mexico City especially caught my attention because of its immense size, both geographic and in population, and also because waste in Mexico City is a well-recognized multimillion business. Despite the huge profits that result from recovering material from waste, the people who do the “dirty work” remain poor and at the bottom of the social ladder. Some sources state that the pepenadores in some Mexican cities only receive 5.55% of the price the industry pays for recyclables (Medina 2000: 10).

In this chapter I will introduce a few of the pepenadores I met and their stories reveal different aspects of their reality. All of the pepenadores in this section are from the dump (or landfill) in Bordo Xochiaca. Unfortunately I was never granted permission to speak to any of the pepenadores who work in the separation plants in the Federal District. I did get to ask a few questions to one worker in the plant of San Juan de Aragón, but due to the presence of the leader nearby and the worker’s reluctance to answer my questions I have decided not to include him in this section. Instead I have a note of it under the section on Luis Rojas in chapter 5.

The following section about the sisters Mariana and Guadalupe is very extensive in length compared to the others that follow. This is due to the fact that they were the ones I came know the best, and I was on several occasions invited to their homes for chats. They, especially Mariana, were very verbal and I was able to learn much from her stories. The most

---

\(^3\) Most widely spoken group of Native American languages in Mexico, with 1.5 million speakers (Wikipedia, URI: http://www.wikipedia.org)
important subject in my interviews with them was the effect of the relocation in 1992 when their family, along with 800 others, was moved from the dump to an area called Tlatel Xochitenco. This is illustrative of how government policies affect the lives of pepenadores and how powerless they are on their own in resisting policy changes. Their section starts with an account of how my meeting with them turned out to be an amazing coincidence. Shorter stories of other pepenadores follow, and they reveal other aspects of their lives, such as health, education, and reasons for working on the dump.

2.1 Mariana and Guadalupe

Before coming to Bordo Xochiaca and Tlatel Xochitenco I was already indirectly acquainted with Guadalupe without knowing it myself. A few weeks earlier I had met with Rogelio Martinez, a sociologist and cinematographer who had made a documentary about Bordo Xochiaca in 1992. It was a film that showed the celebration of two girls turning fifteen\(^4\). The ceremony and the party took place right on the dump and in it appeared Father Roberto among others. It was a very illustrative example of how life had been on the dump. Shortly after the making of the documentary all the pepenadores were relocated to Chimalhucán about 5 km from the dump and each family was given patches of land measuring 120m\(^2\) (8m x 15m) on which to build houses. This area in Chimalhucán now called Tlatel Xochitenco houses the majority of the families working in Bordo Xochiaca along with others who were relocated there for different reasons. There I was introduced to a family and was invited into their home.

The house lacked a living room, so I was invited into a bedroom where Mariana, a cheerful 27-year old woman, started telling me about her family and how it was to live there. After a short while I had a strange feeling that I recognized her and I started thinking if it was possible that it was her that I had seen in Rogelio’s documentary. I asked her if her fifteenth birthday celebration had been filmed. She laughed and said that she had never celebrated her fifteenth birthday since she had already gotten together with

\(^4\) The 15\(^{th}\) birthday or quinceañera: A traditional rite of passage that symbolizes a girl reaching adulthood (turning into a woman) and sexual maturity. The celebrations are often as lavish as weddings.
her husband then and had her first child around that time. But, she told me, her sister had had her party there, and there had been people there filming it. Her sister had been sitting next to us all along but since she had not said much I had not looked at her yet too carefully. When I turned to her I knew for sure that it was her that I had seen, but now she was a grown and married woman with tiny wrinkles around her eyes. She smiled shyly and brought some old photo albums of her party with pictures of her in that silky blue dress that I remembered from the film. I felt like I had just discovered a lost treasure, awed that I, among the hundreds of pepenadores in Bordo Xochiaca, had managed to find that girl in the documentary filmed thirteen years ago. I realized at once that this was an amazing opportunity since it would allow me to trace the life of a family, from the dump to Tlatel Xochitenco. The girl in the film, now a mother of two, was Guadalupe, and the two sisters started telling me their stories.

For decades the pepenadores working in Bordo Xochiaca had lived right on the dump in houses or shacks made of material found on the dump, mostly wood, plastic, and cardboard. Many younger pepenadores had never lived outside the dump, and garbage was naturally incorporated into their everyday lives. The sisters’ memories from their days on the dump were mainly positive. The children could run around freely within the limits of the dump and it was safe. “It was never boring on the dump, we never lacked any playgrounds. There were always things to play with in the garbage,” Mariana told me. Furthermore, there was a sense of community and the families lived on the dump largely undisturbed by outsiders. People in the neighbourhood were scared of the dump and the pepenadores, and rarely attempted to enter it. Mariana commented that “it was good, because we didn’t have to be afraid of being attacked.” The pepenadores on the other hand were afraid of the outsiders because you never knew if they were threats. There were many reasons to why people ended up coming to the dump, and lack of family seemed to be a common one. Mariana continued:

---
5 The 15th birthday is less significant for females who have already had children or are pregnant. It is said that for such girls a wedding is appropriate in the place of the quinceañera.
My husband was abandoned by his parents when he was little. So he came to the dump and that’s where he found family. It turned out that one of his friends was his cousin. Before we met he did drugs like many of the other boys. But he wasn’t a troublemaker and didn’t get into fights like the other ones. We got together when I was fourteen and he was sixteen. We had our first baby when I was fifteen.

In 1992 the government decided to build Neza Deportiva, a sports complex, on the part of the dump where they lived. Mariana told me that they didn’t budge until they were guaranteed land somewhere else. Once they agreed to go, they were crammed, together with their belongings they could carry, into trucks and trailers and transported off to Chimalhucán. When they arrived, there was nothing there except grass and water. The ground was swampy since it was near a lake and because of the high level of salt in the water no trees grew there. They still don’t. The first days it rained and they had to sleep under sheets of plastic not to get wet. “It was like a lake,” Mariana said, and told me that they had to heave out water everyday to keep their things dry. They soon started building a house and now a large portion of their 120m² is under roof. There is a small open alley in the middle that is their corridor and yard. The household has sixteen, soon to be seventeen, members in total.

Mariana told me that having a real house of your own is good, but there are also more problems in this neighbourhood. Here they don’t want to let their children play outside on the streets because the cars and trucks passing by drive too fast and don’t bother to look out for children on the road. On the dump, they never experienced such dangers:

We were more united on the dump. We all helped each other. If there were a fire at someone’s house, everyone would come out and help put it out. And then everyone would chip in with whatever material they had so they could build a new house. We were really a community. Now we greet each other on the streets but we don’t invite people over to eat and chat like we used to on the dump. Now everyone has their own problems. They are busy with their own things. Here, if someone would
beat me up on the street, no one would defend me. Not even the police.

I knew of the efforts to encourage recycling in Mexico and was curious to know if the garbage coming to Bordo Xochiaca was different now from when they were small. They said that less garbage comes to the dump now. A lot of the garbage is taken to the separation plants and much of the organic waste is taken to the compost station. Guadalupe reminisced the past:

When we were small, and we were playing and got hungry, we used to run up to the top of the landfill where our mother was working and ask her for food. Mother would later come down with ham or sausages or yoghurt. There was always food to eat in the garbage. When the trucks from the markets came, we used to wait until it left and eat the leftover fruit. A lot of expired food from the stores was dumped there in the past. I heard that it is sold now in special markets for low prices.

This confirmed my suspicions that less garbage arrived at the dumps now compared to in the past. The reasons for this are analyzed in a later chapter. I wondered if they ever got sick from eating from the dump, but they told me that they were used to it and never got sick.

“‘I know that the dump is not going to last,’” Guadalupe told me. Both of Mariana and Guadalupe would like to work with something else but it is hard to get a job when you have no papers and little education. Currently, both of them are housewives while their husbands and mother work with garbage. Guadalupe has only completed the second year of secondary school and Mariana the first year. Today Guadalupe has two children, Mariana three, and all of them go to school. The sisters teach the children about the value of hard work and saving money. Mariana’s son who is eleven has already started helping his father who drives a collection cart, for pocket money. But he says that he would not like to do that when he grows up. I asked the sisters what they would most like to do if they could work with something else. Mariana told me she likes children and that it would be nice to work with them. But that without papers it is impossible to get that kind of job.
The sisters’ house, although crowded, had all the basic facilities: A basic bathroom (the toilet didn’t flush), a kitchen, a TV, VCR, and a washing machine. It struck me for a moment that maybe the poverty of the pepenadores that I had read about might not be so bad in reality. But then I remembered that this was the result of the collective effort of ten adults in the household, though not all of them working, and the large family shared merely three tiny bedrooms.

Bordo Xochiaca before relocation in 1992 (by Father Roberto Guevara)

2.2 Doña Anita

Doña Anita has worked on the dump for 12 years. Nowadays she came to work really early in the morning and stayed until 10AM. Then she came back at 6PM and worked until it got dark. This was because she could not work in the sun due to her condition. She had recently had herpes, colitis,
and gastritis, all at the same time. At least part of the reason that she got sick must have been the food she had eaten, but she told me happily that she eats everything even though it will make her sick. While laughing, she said, “if I die, at least I will die with a full stomach!” She told me that work is hard sometimes and bending over all the time to pick up things made her back ache.

Altogether, Doña Anita had eight children, nineteen grandchildren, and five great grandchildren. She herself was 55 years old and she had a 22 year-old daughter who also worked at the dump. Her husband had died two years ago and that same year one of her sons disappeared. One day he went to work on the dump and never came back. She told me that he had had some problems before and that he had been addicted to sniffing thinner (a common substance abuse among the poor youth). One of her daughters, sixteen years old, was currently pregnant and she was worried about her because she had gotten the chicken pox. But they had not been to a doctor. Later that day, when the doctor from the FAE arrived, we asked him if it was dangerous if a pregnant woman got the chicken pox. He said that it could be, especially in the early states of the pregnancy, but since she was already in her 8th month, there was most likely nothing to worry about.

2.3 Irene
Irene was a 27 year-old woman who had been working at the dump for a year and a half. She had three children, eleven, nine, and two years old. The oldest was in school and the nine year-old was at home with Irene’s mother. The younger boy had not been able to go to school this term because his father, who was supposed to register him for school, had died. But next term she would register him so he could go to school. On the dump with her were her youngest little boy and his father, Antonio. They worked together on the dump as a family. The first time I met Irene she wore a cloth mask from her nose down. When she took it off I saw that her face was covered with an ugly infected rash. She had bought some pomade in the pharmacy that she put on every day but it didn’t help much. I asked her how long she had had this rash and I was shocked by her answer. She had had it for four months yet had not seen a doctor. I wondered if many people got sick from working on the dump and she told me without
hesitating, “yes, and especially if they don’t clean themselves well after working at the dump every day.”

About a month later I met Irene again, although she claimed that it was better, the rash on her face was still there.

2.4 Carmen
Carmen was a stunningly beautiful lady of 47 years. It was after a Wednesday mass that I was introduced to her, and I was bewildered for a while because I could not tell if she was a worker or a FAE volunteer. She had an amazingly fit body for her age, wore make-up and several pieces of jewellery. If I had met her in another context I would have guessed that she would be a beautician or a hairdresser. The only thing that could give her away as a pepenador was the dirty spot on her white tank top.

Carmen had worked at Bordo Xochiaca for 23 years, half her life. She was originally from Chiapas in southern Mexico, but her family had given her away at the age of eight. She was taken to Mexico City and although she still knows her family in Chiapas she is not on good terms with them. She works at the dump from Wednesday to Sunday and when she goes home around 7PM, she told me with a smile, “My husband has the dinner ready.” “And he does the laundry too,” she added. The remaining days when she doesn’t work at the dump she sells make up at the local outdoor market.

Carmen has eight children, of which six were now living. She had nine grandchildren, a tenth on the way. All her children have gone or currently are in school, she made sure of that. She told me that her children must go to school and build better lives; that she herself had never had the chance. One of her sons was going into the army soon and had told her that when he starts he would get her out of the dump. He had told her that she would never have to pick garbage again. But she said with a smile, “I will never stop working here.” She now considered the people she worked with as her family, and added, “If I don’t work, I feel sick.”

2.5 Doctor Servando
As we can see from the above accounts of the pepenadores, many suffer from illnesses or infections. Lastly in this chapter I have decided to include information from an interview with Doctor Servando at the FAE about the
general health situation of the pepenadores. His accounts provide insights to the data I had previously acquired; that the average life expectancy of a Mexico City dumpsite scavenger is 39 years, compared to 67 of the general population (Medina 2000: 10). I believe that his explanations, although they are about the illnesses and diseases they risk, provide important information about larger problems. Doctor Servando is the doctor who usually attends to the pepenadores on Wednesday mornings from his van. The FAE also has a permanent clinic and pharmacy in Tlatel Xochitenco in Chimalhuacán.

According to the Doctor, the most common problems among the pepenadores are of several kinds:

- Respiratory problems due to the conditions they work in and breathing in a lot of dust
- Digestive problems due to the low quality of food they eat
- Skin rashes and infections due to contact with dangerous or irritable substances
- Eye infections due to touching their eyes with dirty hands
- Sexually transmitted diseases due to the lack of hygiene, which spreads easily due to the fact that many have multiple sexual partners.

The medicines they most need are antibiotics and medicine against diarrhoea, which many children but also adults suffer from.

To avoid contracting diseases and illnesses the most important thing they need is running water. Doctor Servando often tells his patients that it is important that they wash their hands between activities and handling food or eating, but the most frequent answer he gets in return is “we have no water.” In Tlatel Xochitenco where the clinic of the FAE is located, the pepenadores have better access to water than they did before when they lived on the dump. But is it not nearly enough to cover all their needs as the water pressure is low. Half the time no water comes out of the faucets.

I asked Doctor Servando if he thought that the living standards had improved for the pepenadores since they left the dump and moved to Tlatel Xochitenco. He answered, “A lot of them have gotten used to living dirty,” and that many still live the way they used to on the dump before 1992. He told me of a consultation he had had a few days earlier. A mother had taken her daughter to the FAE clinic and when he lifted the little girl’s shirt, fleas
were crawling and hopping all over her. Even if he tells them about the importance of hygiene and to not eat discarded food, many do not listen. It is difficult for them to change their habits.

The FAE clinic in Tlatel Xochitenco in Chimalhuacán employs four doctors, two dentists, and four nurses, and is open for consultations every day of the week. The pepenadores and others living in the area can consult a doctor for a symbolic fee of around ten pesos\(^6\) and also buy medicine for a symbolic cost from the their pharmaceutical stock. As apparent, the pepenadores can get cheap or free medical care though the FAE. What bewildered me was that even though they had this possibility, many I talked to did not seek help when they need it, like Irene who had had that rash on her face for four months already when I met her.

Some of the above stories have positive elements as well as negative. I have chosen to present these persons because I believe they represent well the past and present realities of the pepenadores. It is not my intention to depict them as a group living in utter misery. However, even if some may consider themselves happy individuals, they do not escape being affected directly or indirectly by the many problems that exist within their sphere: disease, drug-abuse, criminality, lack of education, security and protection, etc. Later in the paper I will discuss the structural aspect of the waste management system in which the pepenadores make up the base. But before that I will in the next chapter present a background to the waste problem to place the case of this paper into a larger global and historical context.

### 3. WASTE MANAGEMENT

#### 3.1 The Waste Management Problem

Waste, garbage, trash, rubbish. These are just a few of the terms we use to refer to what we throw away. A collective term for the kind of waste produced in a highly urban setting is “municipal solid waste,” and a more

\[^{6}\] 10 pesos = 1USD
A detailed definition is provided by the environmental studies professor Martin Medina (2003: 3):

Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) refers to the materials discarded in the urban areas for which municipalities are usually held responsible for collection, transport and final disposal. MSW encompasses household refuse, institutional wastes, street sweepings, commercial wastes, as well as construction and demolition debris. In developing countries, MSW also contains varying amounts of industrial waste from small industries, as well as dead animals, and fecal matter.

Municipal solid waste management is a serious problem in most developing countries where the urban population is growing, as it becomes both a heavy administrative and environmental burden. As the By 2015 it is estimated that the number of urban dwellers in the world will be twice the number it was in 1987, and nearly 90 percent of the growth will have taken place in developing countries (Medina 2003: 4). Mexico City, one of the largest cities in the world, hosts today more than 20 million inhabitants. This is an increase from 5.4 million in 1960 and 13 million in 1980 (Castillo 2004: 32). The rapid rate of urbanization results in increasing amounts of waste, and the development of public services in Third World cities often can not keep up with its pace. The trend in these cities is that the city management collects 50-80 percent of the waste generated and the rest is disposed of by the producers themselves, either by dumping or burning. Even when the waste is collected by the administration, the result is not always better. As much as 90 percent of the municipal solid waste collected in developing cities in Asia end up in open-air dumps, which are severe environmental hazards. These open-air dumps may be legal or illegal and it is today the most common method of waste disposal in developing countries (ibid.). However, there are increasing efforts to turn these uncontrolled open-air dumps into more controlled landfills7.

7 The difference between a landfill and a regular open dump is that there is a hole dug out in the ground into where the waste is deposited, and at regular intervals the waste is compacted by machines and covered by a layer of dirt. This prevents foul smell, and furthermore the pipes installed in the landfill prevent that the waste contaminates the ground water. There are also tubes which let out the methane gas produced in the...
While more people are producing waste in cities, each person is producing more waste as well. The economic factor plays an important role. The higher the income of a household, the more waste it produces. In Mexico City, low-income households generate an average of 2.6 kg of waste/day, while the upper-income households generate 3.7 kg/day. The composition of the waste is also different, as a larger portion of the waste from low-income households is organic waste and more of the upper-household waste consists of packaging in forms of plastic, glass, cans, and bottles (Medina 2003: 7).

Due to the inefficient and insufficient management of municipal solid waste, an informal sector has flourished around wastes. The World Bank estimates that up to 2 percent of the total population in Third World countries survives on waste (ibid.: 9). Waste scavenging can be in various different forms depending on the setting and type of waste available. Some workers operate vehicles and provide waste-collection services to households. During the trip from the households to the final disposal of the waste, the recyclable material is picked out and sold on the way. This is a common practice in countries such as Mexico, Colombia, Thailand and the Philippines. In countries like Egypt, these vehicle operators sell the organic waste to farmers who use it as fodder and fertilizer.

Another group of scavengers find their material in the streets and garbage bins, all public spaces being their work site. Others work on the municipal open dumps or landfills. These workers usually live on or nearby the dumps and go through the heaps of garbage brought by municipal or private vehicles. The salvaged material is sold later to different buyers. Large scavenging communities have developed around such sites, as many as 20,000 in Calcutta, 15,000 in Mexico City, and 12,000 in Manila (ibid.: 12). Garbage scavengers have different names in different countries, and as will be described in a later section there are even different names for the different specializations within waste scavenging. As mentioned previously, they are generally called *pepenadores* in Mexico and throughout this paper I use this term interchangeably with “waste scavengers” and “garbage workers.” Sometime I refer to them simply as “workers.”

decaying process, which could otherwise be explosive and cause fires (Deffis 1994: 102).
3.2 History of Waste Management in Mexico City

In the preface to Europe and the People Without History (1997), Eric Wolf states that we need to “search out the causes of the present in the past” (ibid.: XV). Maurice Godelier (1975), also an advocate of historical perspectives in anthropology, believes that a Marxist methodology enables the disappearance of the oppositions between anthropology and history. Although I will more specifically discuss Marxist ideas in the next chapter, I would first like to introduce the historical perspective in this paper. Although a deeper historical analysis of the waste management system in Mexico would provide crucial insights to explaining the present, the size and scope of this paper is limited. I would like to remind the reader that the time period in focus of this paper is only a small section of the entire history of the subject, but the following historical overview is important in setting the stage for the modern-day waste management discussed later.

The history of waste management in Mexico City goes back a long way. Before the arrival of the Spanish on the American continent, the Aztec city then called Tenochtitlán, which would come to be modern-day Mexico City, was one of the largest cities in the world with an impressive organization. As for handling the great amount of waste in this large city there was a clear hierarchy set up in order to make the waste management as efficient as possible. The *calpixque*\(^8\) were part of the imperial authorities and were in charge of organizing the clean-up of the streets. The *topiles*\(^9\) were to supervise the work of the *machehuales*\(^10\) who were citizens employed for heading the collective cleaning of the streets. Before the Spanish conquest of the city in 1521, there were a thousand people clearing the streets of garbage. Septic waste was used as fertilizer and much of the waste was burned and used to illuminate the city by night (AMCRESPAC 1993).

Between 1526 and 1600 the colonial authorities established special areas for disposing waste and set a fine of money or gold for those who disposed of waste on the streets. The authorities also contacted an entrepreneur who

---

8 Náuhatl word for tax collector (http://www.tamut.edu)
9 Náuhatl word for guard (ibid.)
10 Náuhatl word for head of family or household (ibid.)
proposed a system of clean up for the lowest cost. The authorities provided him with 24 natives to form a group of garbage pickers and also provided them with carts and mules for transporting waste. Using carts pulled by mules or horses is a practice that has survived into modern times and is still, nearly 5 centuries later, a common sight in the outskirts of Mexico City.

In 1790 the edict of Revillagigedo\textsuperscript{11} was published, and it contained 14 articles concerning measures for maintaining the hygiene of the city and the population. The same year, the waste transportation vehicles were further developed in order to be able to move more waste in less time (ibid.). In 1824 more specific government regulations were made under Melchor Múzquiz, an army colonel who was in charge of a section of the city. The system of domestic collection of waste was established, and collection routes were drawn up. The collection vehicles were numbered and the drivers started with the practice of ringing bells or chimes on their routes to notify the citizens when to come out with their waste. This is also a practice much alive today in many parts of the city (Castillo 1990: 31).

By the mid-1800s, the waste management system had deteriorated and heaps of waste was growing larger in the peripheries of the city. The phenomenon of waste scavenging became a common sight. The contractors of waste management were accused of poor service and exploiting the system for personal benefit. As the city was growing in size, the vehicles could no longer run the city with efficiency, especially in regard to the great distance to the dumps. Thirteen commissions were then created for the attention of the city, of which one was dedicated for waste management (AMCRESPAC 1993). It is estimated that by 1886, 700 tons of waste was collected daily (Castillo 1990: 32).

In 1925, modern trucks were introduced for waste transportation. 59 trucks collected waste in the center while 153 carts pulled by mules collected waste in the city periphery (AMCRESPAC 1993). This pattern is still seen today, where the traditional waste collection carts or carriages are only seen in the periphery of the metropolitan zone, such as in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl. In 1934, the Sindicato de Limpia y Transportes (Waste management and Transportation Syndicate) was formed with 1600

\textsuperscript{11} Revillagigedo was Viceroy of New Spain 1789-1794
(http://www.bookrags.com/biography-revillagigedo-conde-de/)
members (Castillo 1990: 33). This would later become Sección Uno del Sindicato Único de Trabajadores del Distrito Federal (Section One of the Syndicate of the Workers of the Federal District), which is known to be one of the most powerful syndicates in the country. By 1946 the waste management system counted on 2729 employees, and during the same year 36,150 violations of the waste management regulations were noted.

Starting in 1971, waste management was decentralized and came under the auspices of the 16 delegations that comprise Mexico City. The city was divided into 30 sections for waste collection and street cleaning. In 1975, there were 600 garbage trucks and 120 street-cleaning vehicles, and it is approximated that around 7,000 tons of waste was produced daily. This figure has increased to the current figure of over 11,000 tons per day.

The most significant change during the last decades has been the government’s efforts to close all the open dumps and turn it into controlled landfills. Bordo Xochiaca is the only landfill that still resembles an open dump where pepenadores are allowed to pick material freely. Since 1992-1994 all dumps and open landfills within the Federal District have been permanently closed and replaced with separation plants. This subject will be treated in chapter 5.

3.3 Mode of Production in Waste Management

Karl Marx theorized that it is the modes of production that determine how societies are organized. In his theories, production is not merely creating goods; it includes labour, technology, ownership, and transportation, which dictate social relations and thus the organization of society (Lewellen 1992: 162). Marxist ideas are largely applicable to this case in that it indeed dictates the social and economic organization of all the people and groups involved. Now the reader might be thinking “the production of what?”

Waste is thought of having its place at the extreme end of the chain production-distribution-consumption. However, the cycle goes on, or more correctly put, a new cycle is formed. This is what recycling is all about. Garbage or waste is the scavengers’ raw material. In the untouched state, garbage is just garbage. However, what they pick out from the heap and separate from the mass is not longer waste. As the architect and waste management expert Héctor Tregoning told me in an interview, “you have to remember that what they separate from the waste is no longer waste, it is
sub-products.” This idea can be interpreted with the help of Mary Douglas’ concept of dirt. She means that as long as different material is mixed and unidentified, it is just “dirt,” or simple rubbish. However, poking around in the refuse and picking things out revives identity to the things; garbage becomes objects with value. In *Purity and Danger* (1966) Douglas states that recovering identity to an object poses a threat and can be perceived as dangerous. Garbage turned sub-products may not be seen as something directly dangerous, but since value is bestowed upon it, it becomes something of potential. It becomes *something*, created from *nothing*; something worth fighting over. And it is this *something* that the whole business of waste in Mexico City is built upon; it is what makes some people rich and the quest to control it is the base of all conflicts. Castillo confirms that “when it is deposited in a bin the garbage is worth nothing, but when work is applied in collecting, transporting, storing, classifying, cleaning, selling and reusing, it then transforms it into a commodity of which the production generates a profit”\(^\text{12}\) (Castillo 2004: 10-11). In this sense, it can be considered “dangerous” because of its value and potential to generate profit.

3.4 Actors in the Waste Management Chain

In the chain of production in this capitalistic mode of production, there are many actors involved that are in charge of different segments of the waste management system. Identifying the different actors is necessary to further understand the chain of production and the relationships between the actors. It also reveals how the formal and informal sectors intersect on many levels. Since they are all part of the same chain, changes affecting one group of actors have effects on other groups. An example of a conflict between actors arising from policy changes will be discussed in chapter 6.

*Barrenderos*\(^\text{13}\): The barrenderos are street-sweepers who collect garbage from the streets and bins. In Mexico City there are approximately 8500 employed by the city. It is also estimated that there are 3000 voluntary street-sweepers who work with privately bought or rented equipment. Moreover, the barrenderos who are in charge of the main avenues of the

12 Author’s translation.
13 Comes from the Spanish word “barrer” which means ”to sweep”
city are contracted by private enterprises through the Department of Urban Services\textsuperscript{14}. The barrenderos often also collect waste from the households or smaller businesses that are located in their section of the street. Many households or smaller businesses give the barrenderos a small tip of a few pesos\textsuperscript{15} depending on the quantity of the garbage, since it saves them the walk to the garbage truck and the need to comply with the collection schedules. From the garbage collected, the barrendero selects material that can be sold, usually glass, aluminium, cardboard, and paper. Both because of the tip received by these households or businesses, and the composition of the waste, the daily income of the barrenderos depend highly on the socio-economic level of the neighbourhood they work in. The leftover waste is taken to designated areas where garbage trucks await them. To be able to deposit the garbage onto the trucks, the barrenderos must pay a fee of 5 to 20 pesos per \textit{tambo}\textsuperscript{16} to the truck driver. Usually a barrendero makes two trips a day with a full tambo to the truck (Wamsler 2000: 20).

\textit{Burreros}: “Burro” is the Spanish word for donkey. The burreros thus work with carts or carriages pulled by donkeys or mules. The carts usually have the capacity to transport 1m$^3$ of waste. After filling up their carts, the burrero takes the waste to the transference center, from where large trailers further transport the waste to the final disposal site. Similar to the burreros are the \textit{carretoneros}, and the only difference is their vehicle. Carretoneros use pushcarts instead of animal-pulled vehicles.

\textit{Ramperos}: Ramperos work at the transference centres. Mexico City is divided into 16 \textit{delegaciones}, which have their own transference centres. Garbage collection trucks in each delegation, and some burreros, dispose of their waste onto the ramps in the transference center, and from there the accumulated waste is taken to landfills by trailers.

\textit{Recolectores}: Those who work with waste collection trucks are the recolectores. The task of the garbage trucks is to collect waste from their designated routes and discharge it at the transference center in their

\textsuperscript{14} Dirección General de Servicios Urbanos
\textsuperscript{15} 1 peso= 0.1USD
\textsuperscript{16} tambo= the metal bins used in collecting waste
delegation. However, the trip from the households to the transference center is not always as straight as it is meant to be.

The primary recolector is the driver of the truck. The driver, along with one or two macheteros, is employed by the city. Mexico City employs today 2500 drivers and 3400 macheteros, or helpers. In addition, there are usually two or three voluntarios, who work directly for the driver (ibid.: 21). The composition of the work team on a truck is often based on family relations since this brings in more income to the same household. One truck team I spoke to referred to the driver as the jefe, the boss. One volunteer was a brother of the driver, the other a son, and the third a brother-in-law. Apart from collecting waste from the households and businesses on their collection routes, they receive waste from the tambos of the barrendero, burrero, and carretonero. Receiving waste from the tambos of the other workers is a time-consuming activity and makes the general collection slow and inefficient. However, charging the other workers for helping to lift and emptying their tambos onto the truck is an important source of income for the volunteers. The barrendero, the burrero, and the carretonero are in a forced position to pay the fee since they can not physically manage this procedure on their own. From each household they collect waste the driver receives a few pesos, and significantly more from businesses. From this side-income, the macheteros and voluntarios are given a part, though usually only 10-15% (Castillo 1990: 63).

On the truck, a process called pre-pepena takes place. While moving from one place to another, the helpers and volunteers pick out the material that can be sold or reused from the waste received, usually paper, cardboard, aluminium, mattresses, and furniture (Wamsler 2000). At the end of the collection route, before heading to the transference center, they pass by a “collection center,” usually referred to as a pesadero particular or centro de acopio where the material is weighed and bought per kilogram. Examples of the prices per kilogram at one such place are: glass= 0.1 pesos, paper= 0.5 pesos, hard tortilla= 1 peso, cardboard= 1.2 pesos, aluminium= 7 pesos (Castillo 1990: 65). It is estimated that there exists more than 2500 such centros de acopio in Mexico City, though most of them clandestine (Deffis 1994: 54). Also, some of the buyers work directly under a leader of a group of pepenadores. The practice of pre-pepena further makes the waste collection trips slower and longer since drivers
often take detours to sell the selected material. Sometimes, drivers also have agreements to drop off a certain kind of waste to someone who is willing to buy it, most often pig farmers who use dry tortilla and fruit and vegetable scraps to feed their pigs. Such agreements encourage drivers to go far off their collection routes (Castillo 1990). Because of this type of side-income, which is often more important than the official salary for the driver, it is difficult to make reforms in the waste collection system. Many attempts to improve collection routes and to work with collection schedules have failed.

_Pepenadores_: This term is used in two ways. All people who work with waste as their source of income are sometimes called pepenadores, since their work is _pepenar_, to pick out things from the garbage. However, in the production of sub-products, a specific group goes under the name pepenadores. These are the ones at the bottom of this waste-management hierarchy, and the characters presented in chapter 2 belong to this group. It is estimated that there are today around 15000 pepenadores in Mexico City (Medina 2003: 12). They work at the open dumps, municipal landfills, and since relatively recently at the separation plants. Most of them work under a leader, who is in control of the site they work at. Understanding the role of the leaders is vital in analyzing the waste management structure in Mexico, and this will be discussed in detail in chapter 5, after the following section that will provide the relevant theoretical tools.

4. ASPECTS OF SOCIO-POLITICAL RELATIONS
What is interesting when looking at the different activities and actors involved in the whole waste management system is that although they are links in the same chain, some of them belong to the formal sector while others to the informal. Also, as we have seen in the previous chapter, many actors that belong to the formal sector engage in informal activities. This is due to the symbiosis that has developed between the formal and the informal sectors in Mexico City’s waste management system. The establishment of this structure is largely due to the socio-political relations in which the leaders and the government engage in power struggles. The
first section in this chapter deals with a theoretical model that explains the symbiosis of the formal and informal sectors in Mexican society.

The leaders of the waste management associations in Mexico are the central characters in the current state of the waste management system in this formal-informal structure. They are powerful agents in shaping the system and/or maintaining the status quo, and their power is manifested in their domination. In this chapter I use Weber’s theories on domination in order to approach the power and influence of the leaders. Later, caciquismo, a specific type of leadership, is presented to bring us closer to the leaders in the context of this paper. These concepts provide the basis for understanding socio-political relations in Mexico City’s waste management system and their effects. A detailed context specific analysis of the power of leaders is the subject of chapter 5.

4.1 Social Structure of Urban Mexico

The anthropologist Larissa Lomnitz presents an understanding of social structures that is very useful in my study. She explains the specific case of the social structure in urban Mexico and provides us with the framework of understanding the existing symbiosis between the formal and informal sectors.

Marxists generally approach the analysis of social structures with a social class analysis. The principal alternative to this method is to look at the interactions between people within the power structure. Lomnitz uses this approach to look at the process of how an individual attains a certain position within the power system, and this shows that the power system in urban Mexico contains complex political and ideological relations between individuals and their positions (Lomnitz 1982: 52).

Lomnitz defines four sectors in the social structure of urban Mexico, shaped much like pyramids of hierarchy: (1) the public sector, including the administrative bureaucracy and state-owned industries; (2) the labour sector, which is the organized industrial proletariat; (3) the private sector, which includes the national bourgeoisie and private business, their clients and employees; (4) the informal or marginal sector, which includes all those not included in the first three sectors, such as the underemployed, self-employed, or those informally employed with no job stability, social benefits or guarantees (ibid.).
It is the flow of resources within the system that allows for the movement of an individual from one position to another. The resource exchanged can be capital, power, labour, information, or political loyalty. Logically, different pyramidal sectors own different kinds of resources. Furthermore, exchange can take place in a horizontal or vertical direction. Vertical exchange is the exchange between different hierarchical positions in a pyramid (or sector), while the horizontal exchange involves people at the same hierarchical level, within the same pyramid or across pyramids (ibid.: 54). The exchange of resources is also either formal or informal. It is not unusual that informal exchange networks exist within formal systems. For example, illicit economic activity in the state bureaucracy is often seen by those in this sector as something inevitable. They are not random and chaotic as one might think, but are based on informal networks, which follow principles of patronage, loyalty, and trust (Lomnitz 1988: 42).

The informal or marginal sector in urban Mexico can constitute up to 40% of the income-earning population (Lomnitz 1982: 52). The difference between the formal and informal sectors in urban Mexico is not so much the task of the activities carried out, but the access to security; that is, those without stable employment or steady income, no social security or public health insurance, no access to institutional loans or credit, etc. In its structural features however, the informal pyramid is not so different from the other three pyramidal sectors. Though characteristic of the informal sector, there exist in all sectors individuals looking to move up in the hierarchy. In order to do this, they expand their horizontal relations to widen their access to resources. These people can be called brokers, as they are dealing in resources through personal relationships. Horizontal social relations, including kinship, are the primary factors of mobility in Mexico as elsewhere in Latin America (ibid.: 54).

The informal sector in Mexico is vital to the other three sectors. The organized labour sector can enforce discipline of its workers and keep wages down since there are large masses of people in the informal sector willing to take any jobs for minimum wage. The private sector uses informal workers in construction and garment industries, and also as strikebreakers. The public sector uses informal workers to manipulate political support by calling on masses to participate in demonstrations or
other public events (ibid.: 64). Brokers assume the important role of arranging such events and activities.

These complex relationships within the social structure in urban Mexico, despite the enormous socio-economic inequalities and consequent problems, maintain stability (ibid.: 68). As we see, the symbiosis of the formal and the informal sectors is deeply rooted in Mexican society, making it the more difficult to deal with problems such as corruption. The waste management system in Mexico City is just one example where the public sector engages in informal exchanges with the informal sector. This will be further seen in the next chapter, and especially the section on Rafael Gutierrez will illustrate the power of excellent brokerage skills. Following is a short section on Marx’s ideas on political economy, which proves that discussions on economy and politics cannot be done separately in a case like the one treated in this paper. The rest of this chapter discusses the concepts of power, dominance and leadership, which are theoretical tools for the contextual analysis in the following chapters.

4.2 Marx and Political Economy
Kurtz stated that “politics is all about power” (2001: 21). Inversely, a discussion about power, with leadership and dominance being specific forms of it, is inevitably a discussion about politics. At this point, it is clear that the waste management system in Mexico City is an economic system, with its ultimate goal to generate profit. With the application of some fundamental Marxist ideas however, the seeming gap between economics and politics is bridged.

Karl Marx’s theories have a starting point in the material forces of production. According to him, it is the mode of production that makes humans social beings, because they need to enter into social relations in order to produce. These relations of production make up the economic structure of a society, which is its foundation. From this foundation the legal and political structures arise, and the mode of production of material life becomes the basis of all social, political, and intellectual processes (Marx 1970). Humans enter into this social, political, and intellectual life which is conditioned by a material force of production that is independent of their will, from which Marx concludes that “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that
determines their consciousness” (Marx 1859: preface, in Wood 1988: 135). He theorizes further that society is divided into classes, and that it is the struggle between classes that defines the social existence of humans. The classes struggle and compete for dominance and control, making politics a large part of their social lives. Politics is thus the aspect of social existence that is the “inevitable clash between classes defined by their economic interests” (Wilk 1996: 84). As Marx believed that classes determine consciousness, and because the relations in the mode of production of material life lead to class divisions, dominance and unequal distribution of power are also important concepts in his theories.

4.3 Power

Many anthropologists during the 1950s and early 60s stuck to a form of vulgar Marxism in which leader-supporter relations were explained by rules of reciprocity and redistribution. However, there was little emphasis on the creation and use of power in studying leader-supporter relations. In the 60s the Marxist (or Marxian, as Wolf prefers to call it) concept of modes of production became more popular among anthropologists as political economy became a frequent subject of research for anthropologists. In the paradigm of political economy the subject of power was discussed more directly, as it was seen as the result of control of or influence over a means of production. This power over the means of production is the source of political power and the means of acquiring more power for those already powerful. Eric Wolf differentiates the modes of production into three categories: the kinship, the tributary, and the capitalist (Wolf 1997). The focus of Marx’s studies on modes of productions was of course on the capitalistic type, and so it is in this paper. The capitalistic mode of production has three characteristics. First, the capitalists must maintain and defend their control of the means of production. Second, the workers on their own have no access to the means of production and must therefore bargain with the capitalists for permission to work for a wage. Third, surplus is maximized through either low wages or by high output of workers, and is accumulated to the wealth of the capitalist (ibid.: 78).

Further, Wolf distinguishes four modes of power. One mode is the power attributed to a person, his/her potency or capability. The second is Weber’s general definition of power; the ability to force one’s will upon another in
social action or interpersonal relations. The third form is the power that controls the settings in which a person expresses potentiality and capability. This mode is called tactical or organizational power by Wolf and calls attention to the instrumentalities of power. The fourth mode is the power that not only controls the setting in which it operates but also that organizes and orchestrates the setting itself. This mode of power is Michel Foucault’s idea of governance, in which power is able to organize the field of action of people. Wolf calls this structural power (Wolf 1990).

In the Marxist tradition it is common that power is viewed as something negative, which represses and exploits. What lies at the root of the existence and purpose of power is economy. Foucault however suggests a non-economic analysis of power (Foucault 1986: 89) and provides for a more positive discussion of power. He opposes the widely spread view of power that sees its functions as repressing, censoring, blocking, and repressing, exercising itself only in a negative way. Foucault instead believes that power can be positive (and this is why power is universally accepted); “it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse,” and should be seen as a productive network spread throughout the entire social body (ibid.: 59, 119). He further states:

[…]

(i) that power is co-extensive with the social body; there are no spaces of primal liberty between the meshes of its network; (ii) that relations of power are interwoven with other kinds of relations (production, kinship, family, sexuality) for which they play at once a conditioning and a conditioned role; (iii) that these relations don’t take the sole form of prohibition and punishment, but are of multiple forms; (iv) that their interconnections delineate general conditions of domination[…]; (v) that power relations do indeed ‘serve’, but not at all because they are ‘in the service of’ an economic interest taken as primary, rather because they are capable of being utilised in strategies; (vi) that there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are
formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power. It exists all the more by being in the same place as power; hence, like power, resistance is multiple and can be integrated in global strategies (Foucault 1986: 142).

According to Foucault power is present everywhere and it is impossible to be outside of it. However, this does not mean that one is stuck in an inescapable form of domination or that the dominated is ultimately condemned to defeat; an idea, which brings optimism when applied to the case of the pepenadores. Despite the above long passage on power, Foucault generally does not like to speak of power per se as an agent, but focuses instead on what it produces--social relations, knowledge, discourses, truth, reality, etc (Wilk 2001: 30).

### 4.4 Domination

Foucault stated that the interconnectedness of the relations of power delineate the general conditions of domination, which, according to Max Weber, is the right that a person has within an established order to issue commands to others and expect them to obey (Weber [1921] 1978: 53). A closer look on Weber’s theories of domination is helpful to understand the power relations between the leaders and the pepenadores in this paper.

Weber’s political writings focus on the historical development from the decline of the empire to the rise of the modern state. He believed that in the process leading to the modern bureaucratic state, the changes in political organization signified a change in forms and manifestations of power. He made a comparative analysis of different historical contexts in order to trace this development, and in this analysis Weber distinguishes three different types of domination; the charismatic, the traditional, and the rational-legal (Morrison 1995: 282-283).

Weber defined charisma as the extraordinary quality of an individual’s personality. It can be thought of as exceptional powers or something supernatural or superhuman. In charismatic domination, leaders legitimate their power and position through the belief that they must be followed for
their extraordinary powers of personal inspiration. Reversely, the followers feel a sense of duty to carry out the demands of the leader, believing in the rule of legitimacy. By carrying out this “duty,” the followers believe that the leader can resolve conflicts facing them and save them from their suffering. Charismatic leaders are careful not to show their “ordinary” side or to show that they are “vulnerable” since their legitimacy depends on being just the opposite. Charismatic domination has a tendency to undergo a transformation through a phenomenon that Weber calls “routinization of charisma” (Weber [1921] 1978: 246). The transformation is based on the fact that the leader must keep the focus on the ideal rather than the material. To separate the ideal from the material, the power is indoctrinated, often into texts. In this way, the legitimacy of the leader is no longer sought for in the person of the leader but commanded by the words and commands of the doctrine.

In what Weber defines as “traditional forms of domination” the leader inherits the right to power and is seen as legitimate in the light of tradition and custom. The followers of traditional leaders obey and comply not to the person, but with the office or the position of authority. Traditional domination has patrimonial or patriarchal forms of succession and administration, of which monarchy is a clear historical example (ibid. [1921] 1978).

Rational-legal domination is the third type of domination defined by Weber. Rational-legal domination is less personal than the other types of domination since the followers comply not to the personal authority of the leader but with an impersonal legal order commanded by rules and laws. In this type of domination, the leaders are as well subjects to the judicial rules and must comply with the rules and laws in their governing. The legitimacy lies in the legality of the rules and the belief that the leader has the right to command within the frameworks of the rationally determined judicial system. Since based on a system of legal rules, rational-legal domination tends to form an administrative bureaucracy of officials and staff to uphold that system (ibid.).

Although traits from all three types of domination by leaders can be found in Mexico City’s waste management system, the charismatic domination is especially strong as will be evident in the following chapter.
The leaders in the context of this paper can be defined as *caciques*, which will be discussed below.

### 4.5 Leadership

Political economists analyze foremost the political institutions and policies of a state formation. However, political anthropologists studying the political economy of a society are broader in scope and also include the political structures and practices of political agents (Wilk 1996: 14). Classical works of political anthropology have studied the role of chiefs and big men, and open up the way for my analysis of a specific type of leader, the *cacique*.

To start off the discussion again in Marx’s terms, an idea of a *base* and *superstructure* is helpful. The base consists of the instruments and relations of production. The base is thus the labour and skill of the workers and the tools and technologies involved in the production. The superstructure can be divided into two parts, the *juridico-political* and the *ideological*. The juridico-political superstructure is related to the legal and political system that orders and regulates society. The ideological superstructure concerns ideas that rationalize the economic system and “convinces both the haves and the have-nots that the way the society works is “natural” (ibid.: 86). In the waste management system of Mexico City, the garbage workers, mainly the pepenadores form the base, while the role of the *cacique* implies a great influence on the ideological superstructure. Existing in a modern capitalistic society, the juridico-political superstructure is logically the government, through its laws and policies.

The architect Christine Wamsler, in her observation of the effects of waste management in Mexico City, states that it is the *caciquismo* that maintains the pepenadores in deplorable conditions. The cacique is the articulation between two sectors of the society, the formal and the informal. The cacique on the one hand, together with the unconditional helpers, organizes the informal sector and benefits personally from the production of the workers. On the other hand the cacique represents the community in the official political arena, functioning as a speaker and the link between the group and the state (Wamsler 2000: 24). This observation, while in many ways correct, is unsupported without more careful analysis of the role of the cacique, which is the subject of the next chapter. Their role as
brokers dealing in resource flows between the formal and the informal sectors will also be apparent.

In the simplest sense, there exist strong and weak leaders. Strong leaders command while weak leaders merely ask their supporters that their wishes be followed. Strong leaders have followers that can be used as instruments, while weak leaders have allies. Strong leaders have ready access to political resources while the weaker do not, making the degree of their control a question of the size of their political resources measured against the political resources controlled by the supporters (Bailey 1969: 75). However the line dividing the two types of leaders is thin. The strong leader may not always be successful, and sometimes the weak leader may gain more influence by gathering more supporters. Moreover, in some political environments, many factors might allow the survival of only the weak leaders.

In anthropology, three types of leaders have been defined ethnographically: episodic leaders, big men, and chiefs. Episodic leaders have minimal power and authority, and are in no position to acquire power. They are allocated temporary authority over a specific task by their community. They are weak leaders since they can not command; they are to lead by example since the temporary power is only lent to them by the community. If the community is not happy about the leadership, it can easily transfer the authority to another person. The most clear ethnographic examples of this type of leadership are from societies of hunter-gatherers, in for example electing an episodic leader for a hunting project (Wilk 1996).

A big man is the leader that has a degree of authority and power but is working to build more. An important role of the big man is to resolve disputes in the community. Like for the episodic leaders, it is the community that allocates power to the big man and his/her foremost task is to maintain order. If a big man is skilled in managing communal activities, be it rituals or raids, and in resolving disputes, his/her power grows. Big men must be generous and are expected to lead by example. The majority of ethnographic data on big men is from Melanesia, New Guinea, and the surrounding region. The data show that big men have great importance in the economic sphere. They redistribute material goods, but also play an important role in persuading their supporters to produce the material goods
Different big men can have different amounts of power and some can be identified as weak leaders, others as strong leaders. One difference from episodic leaders is that the acquisition of power is not directly restrained by the community but largely depends on their personal skills.

Lastly, a factor that distinguishes chiefs from the other types of leaders is that they can transfer their power and authority to a successor. Chiefs in ethnography appear in societies that are organized by lineages or clans. The amount of power and authority a chief has also varies. In societies where the different clans and lineages are egalitarian, the leaders are prone to be weak and there are challenges to their office and succession. In a society where clans and lineages are ranked, the office is more absolute. “The highest-ranked lineage will provide the highest-ranked chief” (ibid. 1996: 50). In some chiefly polities there exists a bureaucratic system of lesser chiefs and leaders under one main chief. Chiefdom also contains ideologies and symbols of power and prestige, so chiefs tend to be wealthier than their supporters. Having power, chiefs are in a position to be able to acquire more power (ibid.).

Having defined the three types of leaders apparent in ethnography, I argue that the cacique has traits and qualities of both the big man and the chief. Considering the geographical and demographical factor, a cacique could be placed as a fourth type of leader. However, previous studies of caciquismo reveal that there exist many different types of caciques. Lomnitz-Adler for example argues that the phenomenon of caciquismo is so diverse in terms of the economic and ethnic characteristics of the cacique, their position in society, and the kinds of power relations involved, that the use of the term itself is doubtful (Nuijten 2003: 5). To escape the doubt in the label, I will instead place the cacique on the scale of big man-chief. Their similarities to big men and chiefs will be evident in the following chapter where I describe in detail the leaders in my field.

The sociologist Héctor Castillo (1990) provides a more specific definition of a cacique. According to him, a cacique17

1. emerges from his/her own community
2. wins power through personal imposition
3. has a group of unconditional followers

17 Author’s translations
4. maintains a relation of servitude with his/her workers
5. is autocratic, informal, is personalist and arbitrary
6. uses violence in addition to other forms of control
7. is recognized as the “leader” by the community as well as by the supralocal authorities
8. is the principal canal for the bestowal of material benefits to the community and followers
9. has attained power through methods including usury, rapine, and violence
10. legitimates his/her power before the community through being recognized officially by the state
11. legitimates his/her power before the state though immense economic power and the function as “leader” of the community
12. represents the interests of one sole individual or a small faction
13. forms an informal government within his/her organization

A cacique can also be seen as the patron in a patron-client relationship. According to Howard F. Stein, the patron mediates the social universe on behalf of his clients, and “offers protection in the face of danger, greater security in an insecure world, greater predictability for the powerless, more resources for the resource-starved or -deprived, reduction of stress, stability in the face of uncertainty, and reliability in an untrustworthy world” (1984: 31). The patron and the client have a seemingly symbiotic relationship in which a hierarchical superior/inferior or superordinate/subordinate structural relation masks an authoritarian one. The patron will mediate for you when you cannot act directly upon the bureaucracy or the state. The bureaucracy or the state, together with the patron and the client forms a triad, a three-way relationship, which is a tool of analysis presented by Stein to the traditional dyadic view of patron-client relationships. The patron uses the existence and threat of this “outside” party to emphasize for the client the need of patronage. Patrons legitimize their position by underlining their function in “bridging the gap” between the third party and their clients, but since it is the very existence of this gap that enables their being, they make sure that this gap is never bridged and can even further increase it. In sum, patronage is a structural relationship in which “the triad is implicit in the very existence of the dyad” and “an internalized relationship of reciprocal dependency which limits the
developmental and therefore adaptive capacities of role participants” (ibid.: 34). Many of the above points defining the *cacique* fit right into these theories and to the general ethnographical observations of a wealthy patron as opposed to a poor client.

Lomnitz-Adler provides a useful summary of the definitions in which caciques:

[…:]mediate between the needs of the national state (or private corporations) and the actual on-the-ground situations of peasants and workers, that they derive power from this relation of mediation, and that this power takes on very complex cultural qualities because of the diverse natures of the caciques’ mediating roles (Lomnitz-Adler 1992: 297).

The concepts discussed in this chapter are valuable in analysing the relationship of pepenadores of Mexico City and the leaders, since the relationship of control of the means of production as a source of power is so explicit. One aspect that cannot be directly applied to this case is the concept of wage. The pepenadores do not work for a fixed wage but are paid according to their personal output. Therefore, leaders never demand higher output, and this is also allowed by the fact that the leader (the capitalist) is never dependant on any specific employees, since there is a great pool of unemployed persons in Mexico City willing to take a job anytime. As will be discusses later, the pepenadores are not formal employees, and the number of people working in a dump fluctuates day by day. The next chapter presents the waste management associations that exist in Mexico City and their leaders.

5. THE LEADERS

5.1 Waste Management Associations

Today there exist three large organizations of pepenadores within the limits of the Federal District. Yet a fourth can be added when considering the greater metropolitan area of Mexico City. The organizations and their respective area of work are:
Bordo Poniente: “Frente Único de Pepenadores A.C.”
San Juan de Aragón: “Asociación de Selectores de Desechos Sólidos de la Metrópoli A.C.”
Santa Catarina: “Union de Pepenadores del DF Rafael Gutiérrez Moreno A.C.”
Bordo Xochiaca: “Union de Recolectores, Colonos del Sol y Ciudad Lago, A.C.”

The last of these is located in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl, just outside the limits of the Federal District. However, a great part of the waste received at this site comes from the Federal District.

Although these organizations appear to be civil associations, in reality they function more like companies. Not all of the workers are associates or members, and few of them are permanently employed. The organizations are rather informal private enterprises that neither pay taxes nor offer social benefit plans for its employees (GTZ & COMIA 2003).

The first three of these sites are separation plants, where the large trailers from the transference centres discharge their waste. Bordo Xochiaca has a different organization, why I will first describe the other three sites. As described earlier, Bordo Xochiaca is the only site of the four in which the pepenadores can pick material freely amidst the garbage on the landfill. The other three are strictly controlled separation plants since the early 1990s.

Most of my knowledge of the separation plants comes from my visits to Bordo Poniente, and one quick visit to San Juan de Aragón. In Bordo Poniente, Pablo Tellez Falcón, the leader, and one of his workers, explained how things work at the plant. Although the plants themselves are owned by the government of the Federal District, they are minimally involved in its organization. The parts of the plants where the pepenadores work resemble factories. The waste is run on moving belts and the pepenadores in their stationed position pick out the recyclable material. In Bordo Poniente there are approximately 800 pepenadores working on the moving belts, and around 100 who work with other tasks on the plant. In San Juan de Aragón, there are 650 pepenadores working on the belts, and another 450 workers with other tasks such as moving the waste and
operating vehicles. The refuse that is left after the selection is then taken to a final disposal site, a landfill, within the plant.

Today, there is only one final disposal site left in use in all of the Federal District since the volume limit has been reached in the other two. The one still in use is in Bordo Poniente, and thus after the final selection of sub-products, the refuse from both Santa Catarina and San Juan de Aragón, along with the refuse from Bordo Poniente itself is deposited in the landfill there. This poses a great problem for the Federal District since this last final disposal site is also quickly reaching its limit. The final disposal site in Bordo Poniente is managed by a private company contracted by the government and is totally separated from the section where the pepenadores work.

I also visited another section of Bordo Poniente where organic waste is composted. This is controlled directly by the government, under the management of a biologist. This section is fenced off from the area where the pepenadores work and is off limits to them since a few years back when a number of pepenadores came over and tried to take with them part of the various tons of clams and other seafood that had been deposited there. Although in the same complex, the different sections of Bordo Poniente, the selection plant, the compost, and the landfill, thus works independently of one another. Yet a fourth section can be identified there, and it is where the waste management vehicles in need of repair are stored under the management of the Department of Urban Services.
Bordo Xochiaca is a landfill which resembles more the traditional open dump. The leader of the largest section of this landfill is Norberto Reyes Fernandez, known as Beto. In his organization, Unión de Recolectores, Colonos del Sol y Ciudad Lago, A.C. there are around 1700 members. This is where I met my informants introduced in chapter 2. Here, the pepenadores must pay a monthly fee of 50 pesos for the right to work on the site. Working hours are flexible and the pepenadores can work as much or as little as they wish, anytime of the day. Due to the flexible working times, of the 1700 members of the organization, only 300-400 pepenadores are present on the dump at any point of the day.

One pepenador usually works with one material at a time, filling up large bags that reach my height when filled up. The prices fluctuate, and according to two elderly ladies, Doña Petra and Doña Blanca, both veterans in Bordo Xochiaca, the current prices per kilogram are: Cardboard= 1 peso, paper= 1 peso, steel= 0.8 peso, hard plastic= 0.8 peso, soft plastic= 0.8-1 peso. Glass is sold per bucket and each full bucket is worth 6 pesos. They commented that they were glad that the prices had gone up, and that a while ago they were only paid 0.3-0.4 pesos per kilogram for some material.

Each day a truck with a large scale comes into the dump to buy different material. They are either brothers or other relatives of Beto or “friends” who have special agreements with him. No other buyers are allowed past the guard at the entrance to the dump. The pepenadores load these large bags onto the scale and are paid according to its weight. It is the leaders and the buyers who set the prices with some consideration to the market prices outside the dump; however it is clear that the sub-products are worth many times more outside, once on the “real” market. Logically, it is strictly prohibited for pepenadores to take the material out of the dump and sell it to “outsiders.” In Bordo Xochiaca, there are children and elderly and also disabled or handicapped workers. One informant told me that it is not difficult to get permission to work here, you only need to ask. In this way, it is a much more flexible system than in the new separation plants where the majority of the workers are sturdy and healthy, no children, and not very old.

Currently there are plans to close the landfill in Bordo Xochiaca and use the terrain to build a residential complex. In compensation, the government
is willing to install a separation plant like the ones inside the Federal District. However, the proposed plant is smaller, with the capacity of employing perhaps 300 persons. This would mean that hundreds of workers would become unemployed, and only the young and healthy would be considered for employment. During the whole time I was in contact with the workers of Bordo Xochiaca, the leader was busy meeting with the authorities for negotiations.

I was unable to visit Santa Catarina, the third separation plant in the Federal District, and it seemed to me the plant that was the most difficult to get into. I contacted some people who I hoped would be able to help me but was unsuccessful in the end due to the limited time of my fieldwork. Santa Catarina is headed by Guillermina Gutierrez, the widow of Rafael Gutierrez.

5.2 Rafael Gutierrez
Rafael Gutierrez was born in 1942 in the Federal District of Mexico City. He was a garbage scavenger and a garbage truck driver who later came to build the biggest “garbage empire” ever known in Mexico. This section will illustrate his excellent brokerage skills in the resource flow between the formal and informal sectors. His wide horizontal network across sectors will also be apparent.

Rafael Gutierrez’s political activity started as early as 1957, when he participated in the politics of the waste and transport management of the delegation of Iztapalapa where he later became the secretary of trabajo y conflictos, ‘work and conflict.’ Before his death in 1987, he was widely known as “el zar de la basura,” the “garbage tsar.”

The source of his economic power was an area called Santa Cruz Meyehualco that served as a dump already in 1924. It was a large piece of land, 184 hectares in total, of which the dump itself covered 160 hectares. In 1960 there were 3181 persons working in the area, of which approximately 1500 lived there permanently. At this time, the dump was divided into four sections, each with a leader who was dueño de vidas y objetos of his section (Castillo 1990). It directly translates to ‘patron of lives and objects,’ which meant that he alone ruled over all workers and that all waste recovered within the section was considered his property. This control was enforced with terror and threats, through physical abuse.
and sometimes even murder. No one was allowed to take any objects out of the area, and even the physical movement of the workers in and out of the camp was restricted. Although the four leaders of the section acted as absolute leaders, they were mere foremen to Agustín Padilla who was the “real” leader of Santa Cruz Meyehualco. Ultimately, he was the sole buyer and distributor of all material produced. Additionally, he also held office as the Secretary General of the Syndicate of Pepenadores.

In 1962, a group of ladies with powerful political connections formed “Buena Voluntad y Servicio Social, A.C.,” an organization to help the exploited workers. This organization formed the Cooperativa de Pepenadores Libres del Distrito Federal\(^\text{18}\) that organized the workers against the leaders of the four sections. This act triggered many conflicts during the next two years including death threats and rumoured shootings involving the leader of the new Cooperative. However, this effort soon lost power due to the lack of support from the government. Nevertheless, it had created tumult and lead to several reorganizations within the dump of Santa Cruz Meyehualco. During this time, the head of the Office of Waste Management\(^\text{19}\) was a man named Benjamín Carpio who was also padrino\(^\text{20}\) to Rafael Gutierrez. In a quest for personal benefit, he used his political influence to authorize two leaders to manage the dump. Only one leader of the former four regained his post, and the other was Rafael Gutierrez. The sole distributor was still Agustín Padilla, but now he could only buy the material from the two leaders, Rafael Gutierrez being one of them, while in the past he had had direct claim of the material produced in the four sections through his foremen. The syndicate, of which he was chairman, tried to regain the control over the dump but with no success since Benjamín Carpio was in a more powerful position politically. Rafael Gutierrez, only 22 years old at the time, was ambitious and hungry for more power and desired control of this dump, which obviously had great economic potential. He struck a deal with his padrino, Benjamín Carpio, that if he were granted absolute control over Santa Cruz Meyehualco, they would split the profit 50-50. In 1965 all workers in the area were organized

\(^{18}\) Cooperative of Free Pepenadores of the Federal District

\(^{19}\) Jefe de la Oficina de Limpia

\(^{20}\) Padrino is most often translated to godfather. However, in this case it refers to padrino de boda, which in turn is translated as “best man.” In Mexico, a padrino de boda assumes an important role in a wedding, both morally and economically.
under Unión de Pepenadores de los Tiraderos del DDF, of which Rafael Gutierrez was named president, and Gutierrez claimed the position as the sole leader of the dump (Castillo 1990). However, soon thereafter in 1966, a new mayor took office in Mexico City who replaced most heads of department, including Benjamín Carpio. Gutierrez no longer had use of Carpio without his political influence, so he quickly broke off their deal. Now he was not only the sole leader of the dump, but he no longer needed to share a single dime of the profit generated. Before his death in 1987, his garbage empire was estimated to generate an equivalent of 70 000 USD daily (Castillo 2004: 4).

Although he no longer needed Carpio for his political services, Rafael Gutierrez still needed political connections in order to maintain his legitimacy. A wide horizontal network reaching far into the formal public sector was vital for him to remain on top of the informal waste management hierarchy. During the next few years he assumed many political offices, several times in institutions directly functioning under the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), which is the party that until the year 2000 basically governed Mexico as a one-party state. Because of his great political influence, his activities in and around the garbage dump went unchecked or overlooked. Those pepenadores who rejected his leadership were beaten and sometimes Gutierrez even used members of the police force to do the job. He was closely allied with several politicians, one of which was a member of parliament for whom he was said to have paid most of the cost of the election campaign. Apart from his economic power, something that attracted politicians to be his allies was his enormous labour resource. He could at any time gather thousands of votes for a certain candidate in an election or call the workers out to the streets for campaigns or protests with a simple snap of his fingers.

His political influence reached its peak in 1979 when he decided to run for deputy Member of Parliament. When his candidacy was to be announced, he presented himself at the national auditorium surrounded by six bodyguards and hundreds of pepenadores rooting for him carrying banners and placards and shouting his name and clapping as it were a soccer game. He was eventually elected as a deputy member together with Marcos Medina as the ordinary Member of Parliament. However, the
victory of Medina was overshadowed by the victory of Gutierrez due to his large fan club and “friends” in the press (Castillo 1990).

I have so far illustrated how Rafael Gutierrez has lived up to all characteristics that define a cacique except the last and eleventh point regarding the formation of an informal government within his organization. This last point he also fulfils through the creation of a strict hierarchy within the dump of Santa Cruz Meyehualco. The sociologist Héctor Castillo, during his fieldwork in the 80s on the dump, observed large signs that listed names of directors of the site, and below them the responsible persons for each type of sub-products. There were five directors and three persons responsible for materials; however, Rafael Gutierrez’s name was not listed. At first glance the organization seems complete, with its directors and sub-directors. What was not mentioned but hardly needed mentioning was the fact that the first name of the directors listed on that board, Evaristo Rodrigues Suarez, was Rafael Gutierrez right hand and managed all commerce surrounding the dump according to his wishes (ibid.: 92).

The total control of Rafael Gutierrez in Santa Cruz Meyehualco is obvious at this point. However, another important aspect of his control and more interesting and intriguing to me personally is his exertion of ideology. This was what Weber called “routinization of charisma,” a step further in the control of a charismatic leader. As stated before, a charismatic leader must keep the focus on the ideal rather than the material. This he did through encouraging social cohesion, “creating” a culture among the pepenadores within the dump itself. On every holiday he threw big parties and distributed gifts to the workers, and also constructed four soccer fields and organized 20 soccer teams to which he donated uniforms. He also sponsored vacation trips to Acapulco. This made him a “good patron” and created competition among the pepenadores to be known as an outstanding worker. In the residential area of the dump, he put up a large sign that read “Nosotros tambien somos Mexicanos,” meaning ‘We are also Mexicans’ (ibid.: 85). This created a sense of belonging within the group, but indirectly confirmed the stigmatization and marginalization of the group from the rest of Mexican society. Apart from creating this nationalism, he also institutionalized religion within the dump with the construction of a chapel. The excessive use of alcohol was also an important part of this
“pepenador culture” as well, being the prime leisure activity next to soccer, for adults as well as children (Castillo 2004: 3).

His leadership over approximately 18 000\(^{21}\) pepenadores came to an abrupt end in 1987 when he was assassinated. There are numerous theories on who had murdered him and why, considering the many enemies he had made during the building of his empire. However, the one who confessed to the murder was his own wife, and the reason was that he had brutally raped one of her sisters. To this fact it is relevant to mention that Rafael Gutierrez had formally married 20 times and had 45 recognized children. After his death, many more women came forth who had had children by him, and it is estimated that he fathered more than 100 children in total (ibid. 5). Some of his children have kept up their father’s tradition and have assumed powerful positions. One of his sons, Cuauhtémoc Gutierrez has previously been a member of the Mexican Parliament and another one of his children, Norma Gutierrez is a current Member of Parliament. The landfill in Santa Catarina is currently managed by his widow, Guillermmina Gutierrez.

5.3 Pablo Tellez

As a link from the era of Rafael Gutierrez’s garbage empire to the present, I will now present Pablo Tellez, formerly the leader of the pepenadores in Santa Fe, who is still active today within the new waste management model in Mexico City. I had the fortunate opportunity to meet with him during my field study.

Pablo Tellez’s father, Luis Tellez had been in charge of the dump in Santa Fe in the western side of Mexico City since 1950. There he set up a school where he made all the children of his workers attend, gave material and terrain to all families to set up houses, offered them electricity and water without charge, helped them in legal matters, and assisted with financial help in case of illness or death of a family member. He also threw big parties during holidays when all workers could party on his expense (Jarquin & Lozada 1988: 58). The dump in Santa Fe was clandestine until 1957 when it was finally recognized by the authorities and turned into a

\(^{21}\) However the figure varies according to the source.
landfill. However, as late as 1986 only 60m² functioned as a landfill and the rest of the 69 hectares was still an open-air dump.

As described in the previous section, Agustín Padilla was the most powerful leader in Mexico City until Rafael Gutierrez came into the scene. In the 1960s, Santa Fe was divided into two parts, one controlled by Luis Tellez and another controlled by Fernando Ríos Rayado, who worked for Agustín Padilla. During the next years, the leaders of the two parts of the dump engaged in civil relations until Luis Tellez started sharing the responsibilities with his son, Pablo. Ríos Rayado saw an opportunity to take over the entire dump during this time and started causing problems leading to animosity and further division between the two sections of the dump. Luis Tellez eventually decided to entirely hand over the control of his section to his son, Pablo Tellez, who had already been working as a garbage truck driver in Mexico City for 20 years. During this time, Pablo had built up good relations with the authorities and had a great support base of pepenadores in Santa Fe. Ríos Rayado saw the new leader as a threat to the control of his part of the dump and sent for him to be killed. However, he never succeeded in his intent as he himself was shortly thereafter killed in an accident (Jarquin & Lozada: 1988).

Until 1976, Pablo Tellez was the sole leader in Santa Fe and the head of the Frente Unico de Pepenadores A.C. However in 1976, Rafael Gutierrez sent a great number of pepenadores from Santa Cruz Meyehualco to work in the lower part of the hills of Santa Fe. This lead to a territorial expansion of the dump in Santa Fe and a division into an “upper part” controlled by Pablo Tellez, and a “lower part” controlled by Pedro Ruiz Aldana, working for Rafael Gutierrez. In the upper part of Santa Fe the pepenadores lived on the dump in houses of an average size of 10m². The houses were made of cardboard and plastic or metal laminas, and they were painted according to the section they belonged to, either in blue, green or white. There was no drainage since the required pipes would not support the weight of the passing garbage trucks. The government was of no help and they denied the area any kind of service insisting that the residences of the pepenadores were temporary, with ongoing threats to close off the area to turn it into a landfill.

To improve living conditions for his workers, Pablo Tellez succeeded in 1985 receiving a donation of terrain about 3 km from Santa Fe, which came
to be called El Cuervo. There, 211 houses were set up, with all basic services, and even a small patio. It was announced that the construction of each house had cost 2 million 800 thousand pesos, and that it would have to be paid back monthly over a span of ten years. However, there were many more than 211 families working in the upper part of Santa Fe and the ones who occupied the new houses were those close to Pablo Tellez. Some preferred to stay on the dumpsite since there they did not have to pay any bills. Others simply preferred to live close to where they worked so they could check that no one stole their working tools, and others simply feared leaving the dump since that was the only place they had ever lived (Jarquin & Lozada 1988.). About his efforts to create this residential area, Pablo Tellez told me in an interview that the worst thing is not having a place to live. “We went to the dumps because we didn’t have anywhere to go,” he said. He was himself born inside a dump.

Pablo Tellez’s father, Luis Tellez, was early on concerned about the education of his people and set up an open-air school inside the dump. Pablo Tellez carried on this preoccupation and the school he constructed enrolled 456 students in 1986 (Jarquin & Lozada 1988: 80). Pablo himself has only three years of formal schooling as he was expelled from school as a child for swearing at the director. “But I know the value of education,” he told me, and the first thing he did when he became the leader was to take all the children out of the dump and put them in school. Since 1994 he manages the separation plant in Bordo Poniente, and there I was allowed to visit a room where there were two social workers running a prepa-abierta, an open-school. There are only adults working at the plant, and anyone who is interested can get lessons from the social workers in order to receive a secondary school diploma free of charge.

As stated, Pablo Tellez and the pepenadores could no longer work in Santa Fe after 1994 when the government decided to close the dump. This was due to a project called “Plan Santa Fe,” which was to turn the area into an exclusive commercial center. Now, only a decade later, the area has indeed turned into the foremost commercial hub of Mexico City, hosting the offices of multinational corporations such as Coca-Cola, Microsoft, and Nestlé. Amidst the skyscrapers and wide avenues one might confuse the place with any other commercial center in a first-world city. The area has risen significantly in status and today the most exclusive residential houses
and the most expensive cars in Mexico are seen there. It is hard to imagine that only ten years ago all of this was a garbage dump.

*Santa Fe before 1994* (by Pablo Tellez)

Santa Fe, 2005 (homepage.mac.com)

I had read a great deal about how life had previously been in Santa Fe but I wanted Pablo Tellez’s own descriptions. He confirmed most of what I had read and understood, of how the dump was like its own little world with its own culture. Like in Gutierrez’s dump, reflecting Mexico society in general, sport and religion was of course central. I had also read of the
extreme machismo and alcoholism that existed among the pepenadores and he also confirmed my information that there had even been prostitution inside the dump. During my meetings with him he was not shy to tell me that he likes the “chupe,” the drink. One incident serves as an anecdote: At one occasion I was forced to reschedule a meeting with him. When I called him and tried to set up a morning meeting later that week, he told me that he is kind of busy in the mornings. So I asked him if he was less busy during the afternoons. “No, afternoons are worse!” he exclaimed on the telephone. We finally did manage to agree to a morning meeting. When I got to the separation plant the day of the meeting he confessed with a smile, “You see we’re busier in the afternoons because that’s when we start drinking!”

Talking about leadership during the interview, I mentioned Rafael Gutierrez and the fact that he had been powerful enough to be elected as a Member of Parliament. Pablo Tellez told me then that he himself had turned down three offers to run for Member of Parliament, while pointing at the framed photos of him and different politicians who had visited the plant. He explained:

I wasn’t born for it. First of all, I like to drink too much. When the politicians came looking for me, I was never there. That’s because I would be in the pulqueria drinking with my buddies! Secondly, as a Member of Parliament, you should at least know the constitution of your country. What we know is only the stuff that’s missing in it.

When the dump in Santa Fe was closed in 1994, the government set up the mechanical separation plant, Bordo Poniente, on the other side of the city for Pablo Tellez and his pepenadores. The separation plant now employs about 900 people that are about half the number of pepenadores who worked in Santa Fe. He was reluctant to tell me what had happened to those who did not get to continue working on the plant, just telling me that many of them had retired or quit. When I asked him if it had been a smooth transition, he told me that they obviously did not want to leave Santa Fe. According to him, the dump there still had 10 to 20 years more of life and

---

22 A bar where they serve *pulque*, a traditionally fermented alcoholic drink.
the business for various reasons was better back then. But the government was dead set on Plan Santa Fe, and the efforts of his negotiations had finally resulted in the setting up of a separation plant. “We go where the garbage is,” he said about the relocation. Bordo Poniente has currently the only functioning final disposal site in Mexico City and receives about 11,000 tons of waste each day.

I was curious to know if Pablo Tellez experienced marginalization and stigmatization of his people by the Mexican society. He was explicit in telling me that I was under no conditions allowed to take photos of the plant or the workers. He had had bad experiences with journalists who had infiltrated previously the dump, and now the plant. They had later spread false rumours, for example that the pepenadores look for dead dogs and rats in the garbage to eat. The pepenadores were painted as inhuman beings, which lacked culture and decency. He told me firmly:

Our women go to the market to buy bread and cheese just like other women. Mexicans are scared of the pepenadores, scared that they are contagious. Rich Mexicans don’t hesitate to criticize us but they don’t know anything about us. You know who is the worst enemy of the Mexicans? The Mexicans themselves.

It stood out to me the way he talked about “Mexicans” as though he and the pepenadores were not themselves part of the nation. He explained that the pepenadores are actually doing a lot for the city and the country. Waste collection creates lots of work for people and the material the pepenadores separate creates jobs in all different types of new productions. He also added an ecological perspective, and commented that the recycling of the pepenadores hinders overexploitation of raw material. “We work for the people and future generations,” he said.

Pablo Tellez’s leadership has many common characteristics to the rule of Rafael Gutierrez. His charismatic leadership maintained a scavenger culture within the dump in Santa Fe that in many ways still exists today. However, most of the data I gathered on his leadership illustrate less violence, and several first hand sources described him as a “great leader.” In this section it was also illustrated how the paths of Rafael Gutierrez and
the Tellezs crossed many times over the decades, directly or indirectly, proving the oligarchy and oligopoly that exists in the waste management sector of Mexico City.

5.4 Luis Rojas

Through some contacts at the Department of Urban Services I was accompanied into the separation plant in San Juan de Aragón for a quick view. This plant is located only a few kilometres from Bordo Poniente. I was lucky to find the leader there that day and although I sensed that he was not very welcoming I begged him for a few minutes of his time for some questions. This plant also opened in 1994 and it currently employs 650 pepenadores and another 450 workers with other chores. All workers there belong to the Asociación de Selectores de la Metrópoli, A.C., and Luis Rojas is its Secretary General. According to him this is the biggest plant of the three in the city. The plant runs 22 hours a day divided into 4 shifts, and the pepenadores work alongside mechanical belts that are 80m long and 65cm wide.

When I asked Luis Rojas about his workers, he told me that work is fair at this plant as they get paid according to how much they work. He seemed to signal to me that his workers were better off than any other pepenadores. He told me that they have access to three clinics where they get free medical consultations, and each year they also get to go on a vacation trip to Acapulco. When I asked him if I could interview some workers he gave me an abrupt “no,” but later called a passing worker over and said I could ask him a few questions. He also demanded that I ask how much money he makes. I was glad to have the permission to ask this question since it is a sensitive one, but the worker did not have an easy time answering it. He kept going around the question, but I insisted that he give me an approximation. After calculating for a while he told me that he made approximately 8000-9000 pesos a month. I could not help but be surprised at this figure, as it is about six times the Mexican minimum wage and two-three times a normal salary of a policeman or a teacher. Although I can not speculate on what this entails, it might be worth noting that during my short chat with the worker Luis Rojas, although turned away, stood only a few meters away from us.
Luis Rojas had come from a family of pepenadores, and one interesting fact was that he had previously been a worker for Rafael Gutierrez. During my chat with him, he often compared his plant to Santa Catarina. He told me that Santa Catarina is like a concentration camp, seemingly a harsh word choice, but I have actually read the exact same description of the place in various texts before. There, Rojas said, the pepenadores had to work all day long, had no vacation, and made barely the minimum wage. He said that Rafael Gutierrez had always exploited his workers and I asked him if he thought it had gotten better for the workers since Gutierrez’s death in 1987. But his opinion was that they were probably exploited even more now, forced to produce greater volumes. At this point, I noticed his patience run out and he simply said “enough.” I had come into the plant with an outsider and without his direct permission, so I sensed that I was on thin ice when I asked him very politely if it would be possible to also talk to a female worker. But again his answer was a firm “no, it’s enough.” With no further explanations he walked away into his office.

5.5 Norberto Fernando Reyes (Beto)
The landfill/dump of Bordo Xochiaca has not been replaced by a separation plant—at least not yet. Bordo Xochiaca is divided into the sections, Neza I, Neza II, Neza IIIa, Neza IIIb, Neza IIIc, Neza IIIId, Neza IV, and yet another part that is a rubble and gravel dump. Neza IIIId, Neza IV, and the gravel dump are not formally recognized by the government. Neza I and II are the largest sections of Bordo Xochiaca and they are controlled by Norberto Reyes Fernandez, making him the most powerful leader in Bordo Xochiaca. Norberto’s younger brother José has been placed in charge of Neza II which is a disposal site for garbage carts and carriages pulled by horses or donkeys. Neza I is the landfill that still looks more like the traditional open-dump, and the site I was able to access. Norberto also has two other younger brothers who help him manage the dump. They have inherited the control of the dump from their father, Celestino Reyes, which is a name still often mentioned on the dump. When I first entered the dump, the pepenadores told me their leader was Beto, as they affectionately call Norberto, and almost always mentioned that he is the son of Don Celestino.

One morning when I entered Bordo Xochiaca with Father Roberto to attend a Wednesday service I had been told that Beto would come and talk
to the pepenadores about the problems the dump was facing. Two cars eventually entered the dump and pulled up near the gathering. Beto exited the car and I was amazed at how young he was. No one got out of the other car and the dark windows made it impossible to see inside the car. I was later told that they were Beto’s bodyguards who followed him everywhere. Beto is only 33 years old but has already been the leader of Bordo Xochiaca for several years. He has assumed the formal responsibilities of the dump and is mostly in charge of contacts with authorities. He leaves the practical managing to his brothers and shows himself rarely on the dump.

When he came to talk to the pepenadores that day, Father Roberto, who has been coming to the dump every week for the last 20 years, did not even recognize him and he told me later that the last time he saw Beto was over ten years ago.

The reason for this meeting in morning of April 13 was to let the pepenadores know about the threats to close Neza I. The government of the State of Mexico had plans to turn the area into a residential or commercial zone and now the pepenadores there were in exactly the same situation that the pepenadores in Santa Fe were in before their relocation in 1994. Father Roberto told me that the government did not resort to fair methods, as they sent in outsiders to try to break up the solidarity among the pepenadores. That morning, there was a stranger with a briefcase walking around the site talking to people and Father Roberto quickly sent someone to check who he was. He told me that the government occasionally sent people who offer to buy the material from the pepenadores at a higher price than they received from their own buyers. It was of course against the rules to sell the material to any others than to the ones who had deals with Beto. According to Father Roberto the plan was to turn the pepenadores against their own leader to be able to take over the dump more easily. The guarantees of higher prices were most likely empty promises. During this time, Beto spent his days running from meeting to meeting negotiating with the authorities. His busy schedule and the fact that he needed bodyguards signalled to me that the situation was quite serious, although the pepenadores I talked to were generally unaware of what was happening. Most of them said that they leave it to Beto, that he was a good leader and

---

23 The State of Mexico borders the Federal District, but metropolitan zone of Mexico City reaches into the State and includes the whole area of Neza.
would take care of it. Beto assured that he was doing everything so they could keep their jobs and that “the important thing is to stay united to be able to fight.”

When I asked some pepenadores about their opinion of Beto and his leadership, no one wanted to get into details. All of them were generally very supportive of him and his brothers. Doña Anita, who has been working on the dump for 12 years, told me: “Beto is a good person, he is always understanding and he helps us a lot. It is good working here because Beto is very nice but also firm.” In the past she said that the material they left on the dump overnight was sometimes stolen. But now no one stole anything since Beto would punish those who did.

The analysis of the leaders and their leaderships in this chapter makes it difficult to depict them simply as exploiting totalitarian rulers. However, violent measures to control the workers have been widely used in the past, as illustrated in the section of Rafael Gutierrez. There exists an intricate system of patron-client relations, and the previous sections show that many workers view their leaders as good patrons who are working for their cause. Nevertheless, what is more important than trying to evaluate the leaders as good or bad, is understanding that the workers are dependant on their leaders on all levels. On a personal every-day level, they are dependant on the leaders for the permission and means to work in order to make a living. On a structural level, they are entirely dependant on the leaders’ relations to and negotiations with the authorities, which ultimately dictates their rights and opportunities. It is this dependency that traps the pepenadores in their current situations, with the poverty and lack of rights it entails. What is most significant is that this relation does not allow for any space where agency can arise and be exercised.

6. PROBLEMS AND CHANGES: PAST AND PRESENT

6.1 The State

For decades the state interfered little in the activities on the dump, leaving the leaders to organize and run their enterprise the way they pleased. However, considering the population increase and the fact that Mexico City
is running out of space for its waste, it is understandable that the state can not remain a quiet bystander much longer. Increasingly it has been recognized that waste management in Mexico City needs reform. Until now, a large portion of the handling of municipal waste has been done by the informal sector, keeping the costs low and responsibility of the state to a minimum. The ones who mediate between the sectors have been the leaders, and “this dependence by the Mexican state on the cacique is seen as a sign of the weakness of the Mexican state as it makes it impossible to implement government programmes without giving a central role to regional [or in this case sectoral] powerholders” (Nuijten 2003: 5). This signals that reforms may not be possible without some kind of cooperation by the leaders. The fact that corruption in the government has been a significant contributor to their accumulation of power, and that the state has on many aspects failed in the past to fulfil their direct responsibilities in waste management, make efforts to change the system an even harder challenge.

The part of the waste management system that has always been a direct responsibility of the state has had several problems. As of 1990, Castillo defined four fundamental problems: the lack of personnel, the lack of equipment, the lack of maintenance of equipment, and the lack of supervision of work. The first obvious cause of the lack of personnel was that a few years before a new law decreased the working week of the workers by a day but the state disregarded employing additional personnel (Castillo 1990). The street-sweeping vehicles posed another problem since meeting the need of the city requires that all vehicles work to its maximum capacity. However, the vehicles functioned for only about three years due to the lack of maintenance, when if properly taken care of should last six years. There also lacked mechanics that could do the maintenance work. Moreover, the parts to these machines had to imported, and the lack of a basic stock of spare parts left a broken machine stationary for up to a year. The system of collection routes and assigned disposal sites for the trucks were generally inefficient as well.

Today, due to the long waiting time for reparation of vehicles, some delegations of the city simply send their machines to private mechanics. This of course raises the cost of maintenance, but also foments corruption as “agreements” are often made between the delegation authorities and the
private repair-shops. I discovered yet another step in the problem of maintenance. Since the drivers of the garbage trucks can not work while their vehicles are being repaired, many even go around sending their trucks to the delegation. When I talked to a truck driver he told me that he repaired his truck with money out of his own pocket since it was the fastest way to do it. Also, he showed me how the garbage container on the truck had a metal edge which made it impossible to cleanly discharge of all the garbage when tipped. So he had had, on his own initiative, the edge removed. This allowed for more efficient discharge of waste that led to better business for him. When I asked him why he didn’t ask the delegation to fix it for him he said, “Here, if you want something done, you have to do it yourself.” He described further that his helpers and volunteers separated material on the truck during his collection routes, which they sold to certain shops. But the trips to these shops were off the official collection route so the gasoline allocated to the truck was not sufficient. Thus he personally paid for additional gasoline. In this way the lack of central management leads to many truck drivers handling the vehicles as their own. It creates a vicious cycle in which the drivers feel that the best way to go about working is to maintain their vehicles themselves, and the delegation and the central authorities overlook these practices since they can not offer a more efficient system. These shortcomings of the state in its responsibilities push waste management more and more to be handled through informal methods, and the result is that the government faces more difficulties when trying to intervene and introduce reforms.

In 1984, there existed ten recognized open dumps and many more clandestine in Mexico City. There were four transference centres to which all the trucks in the city came to discharge their waste, and from there the waste was taken in large trailers to the final disposal sites. The small number of transference centres created long queues of trucks waiting to discharge their waste. Due to this, and the general inefficiency of the maintenance system, the government of the Federal District presented the first Master Plan of Waste Management.24 This plan proposed the closing of the open dumps, improved maintenance, more transference centres to avoid queues and large distances travelled by trucks to discharge their

24 El primer Plan Maestro de Residuos Sólidos.
waste, the elimination of clandestine dumps, the construction of landfills, and plans for specific management of different types of waste (Castillo 2004). The plan was successful on many levels and eventually lead to the creation of transference centres in each delegation, increasing their number to sixteen, and the closing of the open dumps. However, it also created conflicts between the authorities and the waste management workers and pencadores.

Eric Wolf (1990: 586) states that we owe to social anthropology “the insight that the arrangements of a society become most visible when they are challenged by a crisis.” He states further that “the role of power also becomes most evident in instances where major organizational transformations put signification under challenge” (ibid.). With threats of the new Master Plan to close the dumps, the leaders, their activity, and organization of the dump they controlled, came to surface. Since this informal system had worked for decades without much interference it had become something simply ignored, overlooked, and in a way accepted. The leaders who had gotten used to this type of autonomy saw this Plan as an immediate threat to their power and control. Using Bailey’s terms (1969), the government’s attempts to reform the system made them rivals to the leaders since they impeded on the field of garbage which had long been in control of the leaders alone. In this political game, the state won the first round by closing the dumps, creating landfills, and sending the leaders and their workers off to separation plants. These conflicts however, could be seen as just a part of a foreseeable political process. Sooner or later the dumps would have reached its maximum capacity and such changes in the system could thus be seen as inevitable.

The most recent headache of the leaders and the pencadores posed by the state is a new law, Ley de Residuos Sólidos del Distrito Federal, the ‘Solid Waste Law of the Federal District,’ which came into effect only three months before I arrived in Mexico City. This is a law that obliges all citizens of Mexico City to separate their household waste into organic and inorganic products. Being such a large city that puts heavy focus on economic development, introducing such environmental efforts seems necessary. The next section will treat the environmental aspects to the problem more closely, and also define the problems this new law causes for the pencadores.
6.2 Environmentalism

Environmental efforts are urgent in many ways since Mexico City is suffering from major hazards. Lane Simonian describes the situation in Mexico City:

Mexico City is one of the few places in the world where it is possible to contract typhoid and hepatitis just by breathing the air. The Federal District of Mexico produces eleven thousand tons of garbage daily, fifteen hundred tons of which are not adequately disposed, providing another source for disease transmission (Simonian 1995: 204)

The new Solid Waste Law puts a global perspective on the issue of waste management and also introduces a new group of actors in the field, the environmentalists. What has traditionally been a problem to bury and forget, waste has since a few years been increasingly discussed by Mexican ecologists and environmentalists. Since economic development and industrialization during the last decades have rapidly increased the amount of waste produced in Mexico City, this law is an attempt to make the citizens more aware of the type and amount of waste they produce and the consequences of the production.

I met with Arnold Ricalde, an ecologist, ex-Member of Parliament, and one of the founders of the Mexican Green Party25. I could see that he was deeply engaged in enforcing this law and he is currently involved in setting up a compost station. He has contacts with many ecologists and green party members around the world and seemed to have many ideas on how to improve the situation in Mexico. Although barely 30 years of age he has already retired from politics and is now working through the private sector. I was impressed by his strong will and effort which seemed to have effect.

For example, I had noticed that there were enormous amounts of plastic bags in the waste and I asked if it would not be possible to start charging for plastic bags at supermarkets like they do in many other countries. He had already been in touch with the large supermarket chains and had

---

25 The Mexican Green Party suffered a corruption scandal a few years ago, and Ricalde has since cut ties with the party
presented the idea but it had not appealed to any of them. However, they had agreed that they would mark their bags with either different colours or prints as to encourage the consumers to use them for separating the waste in their homes. I was sceptic to these promises, but was pleasantly surprised about a month or so later when I went shopping at Comercial Mexicana (large supermarket chain of the type Walmart) and saw that the plastic bags were printed on with either “organic” or “inorganic” with bold, black letters.

However, the difficulty to break old patterns is obvious. Of all the households I visited during my entire stay in Mexico City, there were very few that separated their waste. As Simonian states, “the success of Mexican environmental efforts hinges upon the level of public support (or demand) for such efforts” (1995: 221). What was even worse was that the garbage workers themselves did not care much for the law. Even if the garbage bags they picked up contained separated waste, they threw the different bags together and mixed them up. There is currently an ongoing pilot project in the city testing a new type of collection truck. These trucks have a red and a green compartment in order to keep the waste separated during transport. I walked past one of these new trucks one day and stood by and watched the workers load the garbage bags and empty the bins onto the compartments. Disregarding the colour of the compartments or the contents of the garbage, one compartment was filled, and later the other, and the garbage was all compressed together with juice from the organic waste oozing out in both the red and green compartments. I could not help but feel that Mexico City still has a long way to go before waste separation is to function properly. Nevertheless the law is young and I believe there is place for optimism for the future.

Unfortunately there is a whole other side of the coin with this law. When I asked several pepenadores, and Pablo Tellez, about what they thought of the new law, they all expressed contempt. Tellez knew of Arnold Ricalde and his projects and called him “crazy,” and that he makes nothing better for the pepenadores. I learned throughout my fieldwork that the law of waste separation benefits the drivers, helpers, and the volunteers of the garbage trucks, but puts the pepenadores at a disadvantage. What happens when the waste is already separated on collection is that it is easier for the workers on the truck to select material during the pre-pepena. If it is not
mixed around with food scraps and other organic waste, it simplifies the process of picking out clean cardboard, paper, plastic, metals, and other material that they can sell along the way. When the waste finally reaches the pepenadores, most of the “good stuff” has already been picked out and they are left with the scraps. So from their point of view, the Solid Waste Law harms their business, as the “quality” of the waste that reaches them is lower.

This newly introduced idea of waste separation actually gives rise to an interesting discussion. It is “new” in the sense that it is the first time such an effort has been introduced as a law. However, what the pepenadores have been doing for as long as they can remember is exactly this: recycling. It is thanks to the work of the pepenadores that the final disposal sites in the Federal District have had such long life-spans. Although the pepenadores go about doing their work in order to make a living and are generally ignorant of any environmental or conservational connections, the ecological benefits of their work can not be denied. What the new law does now is moving the recycling practice up to an earlier level in the waste management chain. Starting already on the house-hold level, which results in easier extraction of recyclables before the garbage reaches the landfill or separation plant, the job of the pepenadores decreases. What has traditionally been their niche in Mexican society is to become a common activity, and this threatens their profession.

The Solid Waste Law can be seen as an attempt of the government to reclaim part of the responsibility given to the informal sector back into the formal sector. With the introduction of the environmentalists into the discussion, it makes the problem of the pepenadores a much more complex issue. Though they have been the ones carrying out the recycling work in the past, they are not given any credit for it, nor can they claim any rights over the activity. The role of the state is ambiguous in many ways. The law forces the responsibility of waste management from the informal to the formal sector, while their shortcomings, such as the inadequate maintenance of equipment, are forcing it in the opposite direction. Whichever way waste management is forced, the ones being pushed over are the pepenadores.
7. ARE CHANGES POSSIBLE?
There are no easy solutions to how the lives of pepenadores can be improved. Only radical reforms in the waste management system seem to be able to make permanent changes in their lives possible. However, this will not be a quick process and many people will become victims along the way. In this section, I will present a case in which there was a major effort to help the pepenadores, but which ultimately failed. I will also present some cases from other countries that have been more successful. As will be illustrated in the first case, big projects that aim at the structure face insurmountable difficulties in succeeding. However, there are efforts to help and improve the lives of the pepenadores that are successful. An example is Father Roberto’s Fundación para la Asistencia Educativa (FAE). Lastly in this chapter I will describe how such efforts are successful on a short-term needs basis, but that it inevitably supports the very structure that the pepenadores are trapped in.

7.1 Buena Voluntad y Servicio Social, A. C.
In the 1960s, a group of ladies of higher social class with important political connections formed an organization called “Buena Voluntad y Servicio Social, A.C.” to work for better conditions for the pepenadores of Santa Cruz Meyehualco. This group was briefly mentioned in the section on Rafael Gutierrez. The first action of the group was to propose the set-up of a health center. Meanwhile the organization arranged for the pepenadores who needed medical attention to be taken to the public health center in Iztapalapa where they could consult a doctor free of charge. This resulted in numerous clashes with the four leaders of the dump at the time, since they opposed the pepenadores freely leaving the dump (Castillo 1990).

Another effort was in the educational field. The organization tried to send the children of the pepenadores to schools in the nearby area, which proved to be difficult. The children were rejected by the other students and their parents, and sometimes even the teachers, since they smelled bad, were dirty, and had generally bad hygiene maintenance habits. The organization thus arranged for new clothes to be given to the children and negotiated with the city government to improve their water services that had been
highly inconsistent in the past. They also had to fight informal practices in the transportation of water; water was delivered by trucks and to the extent it was possible the organization saw to it that the drivers would not demand the usual tip. Through negotiations with the National Institute for the Protection of Children\textsuperscript{26} they managed to raise the donations of the \textit{desayunos escolares}, the breakfast money, to 20 cents for each child. However, this sometimes resulted in teachers in the schools making a business of this fee for private profit.

To empower the pepenadores, the organization promoted the formation of the Cooperative of Free Pepenadores of the Federal District\textsuperscript{27}. The organization of the cooperative was set up after five months of talks within the group of pepenadores, with the help and support of the director of the public health center in Iztapalapa and a lawyer who specialized in cooperative organization. 60 pepenadores attended the very first meeting of the Cooperative, 200 attended the second, and the third meeting scheduled only eight days later was attended by more than 650. The pepenadores started expressing their distress, which they never had dared to before. When they were beaten after disobeying the leaders they exited the dump without permission to go to the health center. They bought food and other things freely in the mobile store that was sent to the site every week, and they complained when the scales did not show the correct weight of their collected material\textsuperscript{28} Now, with the new confidence found in the Cooperative, they dared to say something about it even though they knew that it would probably result in a beating.

As described in the section on Rafael Gutierrez, Santa Cruz Meyehualco was formerly divided into four sections, each headed by a leader who worked for Agustín Padilla. The Cooperative named its own leaders in the four sections, and together with supportive politicians they soon drew up a constitution of the Cooperative. The most forceful decision of the Cooperative was to cease to sell material to the leaders of the four sections until they raised the prices of the sub-products. However, this act did not have the expected effect, as the Padilla’s leaders did not give in easily. The

\textsuperscript{26} Instituto Nacional de Protección a la Infancia (INPI)
\textsuperscript{27} Cooperativa de Pepenadores Libres del Distrito Federal
\textsuperscript{28} Meddling with the scale was a common trick of the leaders in order to pay the pepenadores less than what they actually had earned.
material started piling up and the pepenadores soon went hungry, lacking the small but stable income they had always relied on.

Having little luck inside the dump, the Cooperative started negotiating directly with factories and businesses on the market. It even invested in the purchase of three trucks to transport the material. During this time, the Cooperative was waiting for a formal approval by the government of the Federal District, without which they would not be a legitimate cooperative. The investments and the actions of the pepenadores were done in faith that the approval would soon arrive, but it never did. Without this approval, the Cooperative started losing power and confidence. The Padilla’s workers of course did everything to regain control of the dump. It was rumoured that Othón Rangel, one of the new leaders of the Cooperative had received death threats due to his leading role in the formation of the Cooperative and his initiatives to eliminate the middlemen in the sale of sub-products. Later, Rangel was accused of shooting a pepenador named J. Flores Valdés (Castillo: 1990). It was in this tumult that Rafael Gutierrez started his quest for control of Santa Cruz Meyehualco. J. Flores Valdés later became a foreman for Rafael Gutierrez, whatever this may imply.

This case demonstrates how difficult it is for the pepenadores to succeed in making this “their” business. They are the ones doing most of the work but the leaders, the bureaucracy and corruption are obstacles to any improvements. The lack of full support from the government was what ultimately brought down the Cooperative. Forty years have passed since this case, and we can hope that the government would be more supportive of such efforts if they were to be made today.

7.2 Success Stories
If the pepenadores are to improve their lives but remain in this profession, the crucial question is: How can they receive a bigger share of the profits that result from their own work? There are ways to achieve this as it has been proven in other parts of the world. I will below present a few successful examples.

In Colombia, a non-governmental organization (NGO) called Fundación Social has been encouraging and assisting scavenger cooperatives since 1986. The foundation provides legal, administrative, and business
assistance, and also helps the cooperatives by giving them grants and loans. Fundación Social started a national recycling program in which nearly 100 scavenger cooperatives are members. The aim of this Foundation is to improve living and working conditions for scavengers, but also to raise the awareness of the social, economic, and environmental benefits of recycling among Colombians in general. The greatest benefit for the member cooperatives is that they are able to sell their material at a higher price by accumulating their waste in greater volumes. The members of the Foundation have stated an improved standard of living since they started working in cooperatives (Medina 2003).

A second example is also from Colombia. In the city of Medellin, Cooperativa Recuperar was founded in 1983. Today it has a thousand members of which 60% are women. Members are able to get loans from the cooperative, as well as a scholarship for going to school if they opt to do so. It also provides the members with life and accident insurances. One distinction of this cooperative is that it has signed a formal contract with the authorities and is now legally in charge of the waste collection in the city of Guarne. This seems to be a win-win agreement since in 1996 the cooperative earned 30 million Colombian pesos through the collected material in Guarne, while the service saved the city 5 million pesos.\(^29\) It also has great environmental significance since approximately 5000 tons of material is recycled each year in the materials recovery facility they operate. In addition to the scavenging function, the cooperative also serves as a staffing pool from which companies and organizations can hire workers for different activities and functions.

Another interesting example is from Brazil. In many of the large cities there exist numerous scavenger cooperatives and in some places the cooperatives are incorporated into the municipal management of waste. What is special in Brazil is the existence of a non-profit industry association called CEMPRE. CEMPRE makes educational kits for scavengers and NGOs on how to form cooperatives and also works to raise awareness about waste and recycling through a monthly newsletter, a

\(^{29}\) 1USD = 1000 Colombian pesos
databank, and a hotline that answers the public’s questions about recycling. Coca-Cola, Mercedes-Benz, Nestlé, Pepsi-Cola, and Procter & Gamble are few of the companies that support CEMPRE financially. The success of CEMPRE has lead to an export of the idea to other countries as well, including Mexico (Medina 2000). Though such initiatives are not visible yet, it would be ironic to see the philanthropic efforts of these multi-national giants, the very companies of which the offices in Mexico City are built on top of a garbage dump.

Moving outside Latin America, there are examples of successful cooperatives in both the Philippines and Indonesia. In Manila, there are cooperatives in each of the 17 cities and towns within the metropolitan area. Through a program called the Linis Ganda, the cooperatives collect 4000 tons of recyclable material a month. There are currently 1500 scavengers called “eco-aides” and 897 middlemen, who collect and sell material. These workers are able to obtain loans from the Philippine Department of Trade and Industry, as well as from the Land Bank. However, these cooperatives only work with ready source-separated recyclables. Since source separation is a practice that countries like Mexico are only beginning to learn, it is probably not the type of cooperative that is suited to such places in the nearest future. Similarly to the Philippines, scavenger cooperatives in Indonesia are also supported by the government, and they are allowed loans from private banks (Medina 2003). As suggested above, success in one place does not guarantee success in another place. However, what we can learn from these cases is identifying what elements are missing in Mexico. Governmental support, possibilities for loans, and NGO initiatives are some.

7.3 Father Roberto and the FAE
Father Roberto is a Jesuit priest sent by the church to work with the pepenadores 20 years ago. He founded the Fundación para la Asistencia Educativa (FAE) that runs three pre-schools, one health clinic and a pharmacy. The foundation helps all people living in the areas Colonia del Sol in Neza, and in Tlatel Xochitenco in Chimalhuacán. Both areas in which FAE works lie right next to garbage dumps. On Wednesdays Father Roberto holds service on the dump for the pepenadores and a doctor comes
with a mobile clinic. By coincidence I was shown an illustrative example of their work the first day I got to visit the office and pre-school of the FAE in Chimalhucán. The night before, it been hailing hard and it had broken the roofs of many households. Everything in their houses had gotten wet and many children had been unable to go to school that day since their uniforms were soaked. There was a group of about 30 people waiting for Father Roberto as we arrived after the Wednesday mass at the dump. Later, more people signed up for help, and within about two weeks the FAE provided new laminas for the roofs of over 60 households. Half of the cost was covered by the FAE and the rest was put on a long-term payment plan.

In many ways, the pepenadores in Bordo Xochiaca are much closer to Father Roberto and the FAE than to the leader. He has always been engaged in the political debates regarding the dump and the workers there. Since it is their sole source of income he does everything in his power to help them to keep working there.

The government is also aware of his influence. For example in 1992 when the government relocated the pepenadores to Chimalhuacán, it was done while Father Roberto was out of town. It was a conscious timing by the authorities since they knew that he would have been capable of organizing a resistance.

The Wednesday morning on the dump when Beto came to visit, a large portion of Father Roberto’s sermon was about solidarity; how the pepenadores must stick together and fight the authorities and that it was the only way they could stay and work on the dump. The idea is simple: to maintain their right to work on the dump, which guarantees them income,
though small. They may not be able to afford expensive health care, but the FAE is there to help them in that regard. Also, in times of unexpected crisis, such as the case of the broken roofs, they can rely on the FAE. I believe that the FAE is a great organization that helps people in many ways. However, in order to help the pepenadores with their current problems, the organization does not attempt to change the structure of the system. Also, it is impossible to go against the leader if it is to have continued access to the dump. So, what remains in its power is to encourage the workers to work together with the leader in order to resist the governmental threats. This inevitably reinforces the structure itself in which the pepenadores are dependant on their leader.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has analyzed the informal character of Mexico City’s waste management system and the socio-political relations involved. The leaders of waste management associations exercise their power through charismatic domination and control over the economic resources. Not only do they control the means of production but their influence is so strong that their routinization of charisma has created a “pepenador culture,” which many pepenadores identify with but which also singles them out as a poor and marginalized group. The stories of the pepenadores in chapter 2 illustrate their battles against poverty and disease and their struggles for the right to education and work. The story of Mariana and Guadalupe especially depicts their situation in which the pepenadores have no say in processes and changes agreed upon by the state and the leaders. Today, most pepenadores lack the education required to attain formal employment in other sectors. However, many of my informants, like Mariana and Carmen, realize the value of education. They have started to look beyond the “pepenador culture” and strongly believe that their children will not have to inherit their work if they are well-educated. This, I believe, is a source of optimism.

The social structure in urban Mexico is largely shaped by the horizontal and vertical exchange of resources. The analysis of the leaders in this paper have showed their excellent skills in managing these exchanges, which on the one hand increases their personal economic power and on the other...
hand maintains the informal character of the waste management system. The great base of workers, complemented by their economic power is the main resource at the disposal of the leaders, while the state in exchange can offer political power, which in turn increases the leaders’ wealth. The analyses of Rafael Gutierrez and Pablo Tellez in chapter 5 have illustrated how this is done in practice by the exercise of their domination and leadership. The leaders especially play on their role as mediators between the state and their workers, and are eager to depict the presence of the state as a threat to the pepenadores. The fact that the patron-client relationship between the leader and worker exists within the triad (Stein 1984) of leader-worker-state induces the perception among the pepenadores that the leader is needed for the protection of their own interests. What they never question is the role of their leader as part of the very system that locks them into their vulnerable position.

The weakness of the state and the introduction of environmentalists pose other questions to this issue. Although many activists choose to work through the private sector because of the inefficiency and corruption in the public bureaucracy, the growing environmentalist movement is in a way forced to work with the state if their efforts are to have wide-spread effect. An example of such an effort was the Ley de Residuos Sólidos del Distrito Federal (the Solid Waste Law). In a global perspective such developments are needed and perhaps long overdue. But as we have seen in this paper, such efforts have so far not been compatible with the interests of the pepenadores. Also, the short-comings of the state in their immediate waste management responsibilities, and their past disinterest in waste management in general make such efforts in some ways seem contradictory. Foucault once wrote that “…power isn’t localized in the State apparatus and nothing in society will be changed if the mechanisms of power that function outside, below and alongside the State apparatuses, on a much more minute and everyday level, are not also changed (1980: 60). This statement points out that the State’s efforts in introducing new laws such as the Solid Waste Law may not have any effect if other mechanisms of power are also not changed. This could mean a change in what characterizes the current structure of the waste management system, and changes among the actors involved in the waste management chain.
Thus, introducing laws is not enough for reform; structural changes on several levels would be needed.

For two decades now, thanks to the activities of the Fundación para la Asistencia Educativa (FAE), the pepenadores in my study have had the possibility for adequate health care, education for the younger children and help in times of crisis. Father Roberto also provides a degree of protection against the state and is of great moral support. His goal is to help the pepenadores maintain their sole source of income, access to the dumpsite. To be able to help improve the immediate lives of the pepenadores this may be the only way to go about. However, this entails maintaining the current structure, which in turn entails continued dependency of the pepenadores on their leader. However welcomed the activities of the FAE are today, such efforts in the long run ultimately reproduce the very structure that keeps the pepenadores in their current situation.

The complexity of the situation makes the future of the pepenadores seem dark. However, the successful solutions in Colombia, Brazil, and other countries suggest that change is not impossible. This in no way guarantees that there will be similar outcomes in Mexico and they are not models which can be directly applied. We must consider the distinct and complex socio-political context, which we have seen in this paper, while viewing successful cases as sources of inspiration. In a rapidly globalizing world, it is my optimistic view that success in such matters in one part of the world can effectively spread to other parts, and hopefully soon to Mexico City.
Bibliography


**Internet Sources:**

  URI: http://www.tamut.edu/academics/mperr/ColAm/Spanish%20Terms.htm

  URI: http://www.bookrags.com/biography-revillagigedo-conde-de/)

  URI: http://www.wikipedia.org