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Bénédicte Florin
Translation **John Angell**

In **Ethnologie française 2015/3 Vol. 45**, pages 487 to 498
Publisher **Presses Universitaires de France**

ISSN 0046-2616
ISBN 9782130634966
DOI 10.3917/ethn.153.0487
Uploaded: 08/18/2015

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Cités, territoires, environnement et sociétés

Translated from the French by John Angell

ABSTRACT

Cairo's rag pickers inhabit "garbage zones" located in the city's most remote outer regions, but they are further marginalized because of their practice of raising swine in a predominately Muslim country. The present article describes the effects of two attempts to reform how the city's waste stream is managed on these important that neglected these historically stigmatized urban residents. The 2002 reform outsourced waste collection to large European firms, effectively excluding the rag pickers' from their professional raw material. The second reform, in 2010, allowed them to continue to household waste collection on the condition that they signed sub-contracting agreements with private waste management firms. This study documents the rag pickers' battle against these imported waste management systems and their struggle to gain formal recognition as recyclers and entrepreneurs rather than mere urban garbage collectors.

Keywords: Cairo. Rag pickers. Informal sector. Marginalization. Outsourcing.

Bénédicte Florin
Université de Tours François-Rabelais
CITERES (CNRS, UMR 6173
Équipe Monde arabe et Méditerranée (EMAM)
33, allée Ferdinand-de-Lesseps
37204 Tours Cedex 03
benedicte.florin@univ-tours.fr

The rag pickers of Cairo inhabit "garbage zones" [Lhuilier et Cochin, 1999: 146] that occupy some of the deepest and least accessible recesses of the city's extensive outer fringes. Despite the fact that they have historically—and discretely—contributed enormously to the everyday functioning of the city since the 1930s, they are frequently threatened with expulsion because of their practice of raising pigs and because they live surrounded by piles of waste. As urban bottom-feeders who have historically been neglected by the authorities despite providing this crucial but unpaid public service, the rag picker community is nearly invisible in geographical, social, and professional terms.[1] Following an intricate system of territories, they collect household waste door-to-door from every floor of thousands of buildings, providing an otherwise nearly non-existent service that on a daily basis removes up to 9,000 tons of over 15,000 different waste products and achieves an unparalleled recycling rate of 80%.[2]

Surprisingly, the Mubarak administration, although averse to popular protest, especially by Christian trash recyclers, initiated reform of this historic informal system that ultimately forced the rag pickers out of the shadows and into the public eye. Inspired by an urbanization model that seeks modernization at any cost, the reforms outsourced waste collection to five Italian and Spanish firms, abruptly ending the rag pickers' livelihoods, which centered on hauling, scavenging, and recycling the capital's household waste. Under the new system, "modern" compacting trucks would collect household waste from "modern," street-level bins, theoretically criminalizing rag pickers' waste-collection activities because the waste stream had become the exclusive property of these foreign companies.

The present essay begins with a portrait of the rag pickers' way of life and working methods and a number of common misunderstandings surrounding their profession. It then questions the appropriateness of an "integrated waste management" approach based on public-private partnerships, was a model imported from Northern economies. More broadly, the article contextualizes waste management reform efforts in Cairo and a single-minded pursuit of modernization that ignored local practices, endangering

the livelihoods of over 100,000 Cairo residents whose livelihoods depend directly on waste. The second section of the article presents the reforms' paradoxical political consequences as well as the economic and human risks associated with them. Rather than permanently silencing the rag pickers, the reforms ultimately by drove them into the spotlight and "demarginalized" them, giving them a public voice for the first time. This new-found public visibility and their demands for labor rights began to remedy years of official neglect and impeded the transfer of their services to private waste management contractors.

Just as waste was the rag pickers' weapon in the battle against both foreign multinational firms and public officials, it is the raw material of their professional management of the urban waste stream, which is a far more elaborate resource than mere garbage. As one rag picker remarked, "We are not just garbage-men […] we're garbage businessmen!"[3] Although his boast does not capture the profound social and professional inequalities that persist inside the rag picker community, it nevertheless reflects a professionalizing trend among its more fortunate members. It also reflects a basic misunderstanding related to the "modernization" paradigm that blocks rag pickers who are not official sub-contractors from access to their livelihoods, whereas the city would be buried in garbage if not for the services of the rag pickers.

■ The Recyclers: The City's Dregs versus International Firms

The Double Bind: The Margins of the Margins

In dialectal Egyptian Arabic, "rag pickers" are called *zabbâlîn*—pronounced "zabbaline"—(sing. *zabbâl*), which is derived from the sometimes pejorative word *zibbâla*, meaning trash, filth, or garbage. *Zibbâla* is especially freighted with meaning because etymologically it refers both to waste and to the individual who collects it, the *zabbâl*. *Zabbâlîn* thus encompasses not only waste collectors' occupation, but also the professional rag picker community as a whole – the corporation[4] – and their living and working spaces, including the areas where they process waste and raise pigs. Their neighborhoods are referred to as *zarâyeb* (sing. *zerîba*), literally "pig-parlors," or *zarrâba*. Because they live and work surrounded by garbage and pigs—which Muslims consider impure—rag pickers are inevitably spurned by nearly all of their fellow citizens. The community long ago internalized this stigmatization, in turn shaping their traditional discretion and quasi-invisibility. As a result, they inhabit the city's interstices, despite the critical nature of their daily activities.

The interplay of layered identities–individual and collective, social and professional—represent both the basis of the rag-picker corporation that connects it to a specific history and urban geography, and their quiet, nearly invisible ways of carving out a living among city's most marginal areas. This does not suggest that their activities are not highly diverse. On the contrary, the *zabbâlîn*'s socio-professional status is considerably more complex and richer than generally believed inside and outside of Egypt.

The rag-picking trade is handed down from father to son, just as the techniques for sorting the waste that the men collect is transmitted from mother to daughter. The first Coptic rag pickers were destitute farmers who migrated to the capital in the 1930s and 1940s from two villages in Upper Egypt, Deir Tasa, and el Badâri.[5] This shared history binds them inside powerful networks of kinship and acquaintance. Few early migrants moved to the city alone, and the majority joined previously settled relatives—a brother, an uncle, or a cousin—who could provide housing and initiate them to the intricacies of the recycling trade.

The Copts were actually not Cairo's first informal waste managers, a distinction reserved for the *wâhiya*, Muslims who plied the trade after migrating to the city from oases in the desert in the late nineteenth century. Izzat Naïm, who followed in his father's and his grandfather's footsteps, describes this transition from the *wâhiya* to the Copts:

> [The *wâhiya*] […] didn't sort or recycle the waste. They just let it dry in the sun for about a month and a half and then sold it as fuel […]. In the café, my grandfather joined the discussion and asked questions. He told the men that they were originally from Upper Egypt and wanted to work with them […] and that they [he and his relatives and friends] would take over collecting waste. [The *wâhiya*] replied as though he was crazy and asked him what he planned to do with it. He told them that in his region, waste was used as animal feed and that they had goats and pigs[6] that would eat everything. They told him that there were enormous quantities of waste—as much as 10 tons per day. He answered that he would manage, and that he had many family members and friends who would bring their livestock and build temporary housing and paddocks for their animals, which

> would eat the organic waste. That is how the first rag pickers arrived in Cairo [quoted by Barthel and Monqid, 2011: 84-85].

Izzat Naïm's story resembles his peers' narratives, which typically recount how their fathers or grandfathers met the *wâhiya* in a café in Clot Bey Street, in the Bâb el-Bahr neighborhood, that served as their headquarters.[7] The early Coptic migrants were so poor that they were in no position to negotiate, so they proposed taking over waste collection but allowing the *wâhiya* to continue to charge a modest fee. Zones were strictly demarcated by street and district, each of which was controlled by a *wâhiya*. In more affluent areas whose household waste was more valuable, *zabbâlîn* even paid a fee for the right to collect waste. This highly organized professional organization, based on *'orf* or trust and word-of-mouth, in all likelihood because the *wâhiya* and *zabbâlîn* were traditionally illiterate, persists to this day. It was a point of honor never to infringe on a peer's territory by stealing his waste, the source of his livelihood and worldly wealth.

The rag picker narrative has been handed down for generations and is based on their shared origins the long, difficult voyage, and life in shantytowns that are under a constant threat of demolition, as well as the shared uncertainties of daily life. Their history is not the only element of their collective sense of social and professional identity, but it has clearly taught the community to strategically avoid the authorities and fellow city residents. It also explains why they occupy living and working quarters on the city's farthest-flung edges that are so discrete that they are difficult to find. Other poor Cairo neighborhoods have developed following the same steps, beginning with squatting with no running water or basic services, but the extreme degree of marginalization associated with the rag pickers' habitations stems the two-fold stigma of living surrounded by both garbage and pigs. Despite periodic expulsions, however, the government has historically tolerated them because they remove and manage nearly all of central and peri-urban Cairo's household waste. Indeed, their remarkably efficient processing of the city's waste stream, after recycling and feeding their pigs, produces a final residue of less than 20%. Before the 1990s, this residue was burned in their quarters, but they eventually gained access to official waste dumps located in the desert. The two-fold unhealthy stigma associated with their quarters, as well as the polluted air and water and hazardous conditions in which they live and work, results in occasional fires that have incinerated the district of Manchiat Nasser on several occasions.

Working in the Shadows

The rag pickers were driven to inhabit the urban borderlands to some extent involuntarily, although their marginalization appears to be partly deliberate and is an integral feature of their professional identity. Their discretion is thus closely tied to their social and spatial invisibility. Until the reforms in the 2000s, they made their waste-collecting rounds in the early morning, with younger boys ascending building staircases floor-by-floor to retrieve waste containers in front of every door. The resulting waste was then piled in voluminous bags in their pick-up trucks (and occasionally in donkey carts, officially banned after the 1980s). Working early in the morning enabled them to avoid traffic jams but also minimized the danger of having their donkeys confiscated by the police. The most important advantage, however, was being able to work quickly and discretely. This explains why, prior to the reforms, they could rarely be observed pre-sorting materials in the streets.

The overall volume of waste that is sorted and recycled by the rag pickers, primarily inside of the privacy of their quarters, grew significantly in the 1980s and 1990s. Outsiders consequently almost never witness these activities unless they have a specific reason to enter the neighborhoods, which are accessible primarily by taxi.[8] Indeed, few Cairenes have any idea where "their" *zabbâl* lives. The two passable streets that traverse Manchiat Nasser, a community of approximately 40,000 workers, carry an endless stream of carts and trucks. The Batn al-Baqara district lies in a low-lying *cul-de-sac*, where its activities remain largely invisible to outsiders despite a frenetic level of activity every day of the week except Sundays, when a deep calm descends over the district.

The tendency to cultivate an aura of invisibility is compounded by the fact that it was only in the 2000s that waste disposal became the subject of public discussion, although reforms beginning in the 1990s had been under official consideration. Rag pickers, who represent a population of at least 100,000 urban residents, nevertheless do not willingly take the floor in public or encourage the media to speak on their behalf. (No official census exists, and their districts are unmarked on maps). Indeed, their only connection

to the administration is a required waste-collection permit since the 1980s. Paradoxically, the rag pickers will only become fully visible and understood to be indispensible to the city's functioning if they are legally compelled to end their waste-collecting activities. In the interim, strikes, to which they have resorted several times in 2003 to demand the right to work, remain a useful tool that represented their first time "coming out" of the shadows and protesting publicly.

The Rhetoric of Modernization: The Reforms and the Problems Confronted by International Waste Management Firms

Since the 1970s, modernization has been a central feature of Egyptian urban policy, particularly in Cairo, which is not only the country's capital but represents an important tourist destination and is the Arab world's most populous city. In 1983, two agencies, one in Cairo and the other in Giza, were established with a mission to rationalize the urban waste stream. Their first move in 1987 was to compel the *zabbâlîn* to form companies and purchase permits. The second was to open the waste collection market up to private outside firms. Although they proliferated in the 1990s [Debout, 2012, 143], the "modernization" of waste management neglected to integrate these private firms into an overall waste collection system. More significantly, it failed to recognize the licensed *zabbâlîn* in such as way that they could earn social benefits. The new system also required companies to purchase trucks, which were well beyond the reach of any but the richest rag pickers. These measures exacerbated disparities between a network of rag picker "bosses" or overseers and subordinates who collect and sort the waste.

The 2000 reform ultimately triggered a crisis amid growing economic liberalization since the 1970s and pressure to privatize services from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The reforms delegated waste management to the private sector, a process called "privatization" in Egypt, and the market opened to competitive bids from international waste management firms. In 2001, a French firm named Veolia-Propreté was awarded the waste management contract for Alexandria, and in 2002 and 2003, five Italian and Spanish firms signed fifteen-year contracts to collect Greater Cairo's waste. The city's southern districts were reserved for public and private Egyptian firms [Debout et Florin, 2011: 41]. The Minister of the Environment at the time offered assurances that these changes involved a "cultural transfer" and that Egyptians needed to see firms such as Veolia as models and to learn their techniques so that they could create more competitive Egyptian firms [Florin, 2010: 116].

As Lise Debout has observed,[9] these changes were accompanied by demands for more "standardized solutions," "scientific planning," and "integrated, sustainable waste management." A 2001 presidential decree formally required an international bidding process for the household waste-management sector. Foreign firms were granted a five-year tax exemption in exchange for importing waste-management equipment [Debout, 2012].[10] It is important to note that foreign firms were entering a complex and difficult market, however, and that they were not necessarily welcomed by either the local administration, on whom the reforms had been imposed, or by Cairo residents, who resented both higher costs and having to dump their household waste in street-level bins. Many responded by demanding that "their *zabbâlîn*" come back. Technical problems relating to the intricate urban geography of the old city complicated waste collection, which led international firms to face penalties and fines. Further, outside firms' contracts contained specific stipulations, particularly governing recycling. In effect, however, no value was specified for recycled materials, except compost, with the result that the entire mass of urban waste was simply dumped by outside firms in the desert. Three international firms consequently abandoned their contracts, leaving only two firms—the Italian firm Ama Arab, which covers the northern and western sectors of the city, and the Spanish company Enser that covers part of the Governorate of Giza. The services provided by Veolia in Alexandria, at one time presented as the *nec plus ultra* of privatization, attracted considerable local criticism, and the company finally withdrew in 2011.[11]

European managers failed to recognize the importance of the *zabbâlîn*'s importance throughout the crisis, while also under-estimating the rag pickers' ability to undermine the reforms and engage in resistance. The *zabbâlîn* were not consulted or taken into consideration during the reform process, which in fact blamed them for a "sanitary disaster" [Debout, 2012: 205]. Indeed, the rag pickers only became aware of the fallout from these accusations when sanitation officials refused to renew their permits and told them that they were banned from any further waste collection activities! Once they realized the dire consequences of the reforms for their community, the rag pickers finally

began to express their rage against the international firms and the government's policies.

■ In the Spotlight: Waste, Labor Rights, and the Struggle for Recognition

Historically living on society's fringes with no labor rights has not prevented the *zabbâlîn* from developing intricately detailed knowledge of Cairo's inhabitants and how the city functions. Their collection routes and networks of formal and informal relationships link them to more extensive local, national, and international networks. In order to effectively manage the urban waste stream, they require continuous, uninterrupted access to household waste, which is their raw material and the foundation of their livelihoods. Until 2010, their urban and professional roots remained unacknowledged by the authorities, as restricting waste collection to officially licensed companies denied them access to their raw material, at least in theory. Depriving them of access threatened their basic human right to work provoked a sense of injustice that forced them into the spotlight. Waste was both a concrete instrument and the symbol of their demands to be recognized.

Access to Waste

A steady supply of raw household waste is required for the *zabbâlîn*'s recycling workshops and to feed their pigs. Their fine-grained knowledge of when and where they can circulate and the optimal times and places for high-quality waste often causes them to travel as far as Ramadan on the east bank of the Nile to collect "at the bottom" of Giza (on the West Bank), roughly fifteen kilometers from Batn al Baqara. Their extensive collection rounds require deep knowledge of individual apartment buildings and even apartments, but also of the social composition of the city's many districts, coupled with a detailed understanding of the city's social geography and networks of professional relationship, particularly with the *bawwabîn* (building supervisors). The *bawwabîn,* originally from Nubia guard building entrances, help residents, and keep owners—and sometimes the police—informed. According to Ahmad, the *wahiyya*, *zabbâlîn*, and *bawwabîn* have long been closely connected to each other: "We know the *bawwabîn*, who let us go upstairs, people know us and trust us!"[12] These working relationships enabled some rag pickers to continue their rounds despite the reforms by collecting waste before foreign-owned garbage trucks arrive; *bawwabîn* either save waste bins for the *zabbâlîn* in inner courtyards or pre-sort household waste for valuable materials, occasionally in exchange for a small fee.

For the *zabbâlîn*, these relationships based on trust often span several generations and endow their collection efforts with a degree of stability:

> Before the companies came, Ramadan explains, we worked with good intentions. If we found something valuable, we returned it to the residents. I found a gold ring once, and I've also found silver objects. If something is lost, the foreign companies don't give it back because they just throw everything in the dump! […] People are careful not to lose anything in their trashcans. If you lose something, who is going to return it to you? People used to welcome us into their homes, but now, we are arrested because we don't have the right to collect waste any more! We are harassed constantly...[13]

Bonds between residents also explain why since 2003 a large number of Cairenes have defended "their *zabbâl*" against "European companies," which they accuse of over-charging and replacing more convenient door-to-door pick-up practices. The media have abundantly reported accusations against foreign companies, fueling animated discussions about the *zabbâlîn*'s place in society and helping them leave the shadows to enter the spotlight. With the exception of a few "bosses" under contract to firms in the formal sector, collection theoretically remains illegal for all non-contractual rag pickers. This explains their anger, although in reality many of them continue to make rounds and are tolerated by the authorities because of the glaring inadequacies of the supposedly "modern" system.

Waste as Raw Material

Although occasionally evicted, the rag pickers have never been subjected to permanent expulsion because their activities remedy—at no cost—many shortcomings of formal waste management system. As a consequence, the *zabbâlîn* are convenient for the authorities because they camouflage problems associated with the supposed reforms. As their livelihoods have stabilized and their financial situations have gradually improved,[14] particularly in Manchiat Nasser, some rag pickers' shanties have been replaced by brick buildings, with a new floor added every year. The growing population density of Manchiat Nasser has also changed

the working environment, with ground floors increasingly reserved for sifting and storing pre-sorted materials and for housing pigs, as well as the approximately 1,000 recycling workshops.[15] Cleaner upper floors are used as living spaces, while terraces provide additional storage more durable materials.

Clearly, not every rag picker family can afford to build brick buildings or occupy large plots of land. The community's wealthier members specialize in recycling cardboard boxes and scavenged metals, which require more storage capacity, but plastic recyclers tend to occupy smaller workshops, using recycled materials to fabricate machine tools for processing recycled plastic or purchasing more expensive imported machines.

As recently as 2009, a family's wealth was based on the number of pigs they possessed.[16] Because they consumed 40% of the organic contents scavenged from garbage bins, pigs were also a crucial link in the waste chain. Pig excrement fetched a high price as fertilizer, as did the meat, which is distributed to Cairo's four pork butchers. Indeed, rather than being focused on specific waste materials, most rag pickers process a wide range of bi-products that are redistributed through a highly complex web of specialized networks.

These networks, which tend to take years to develop, are indicative of the highly refined negotiating skills of a community often treated as pariahs. Some ragpickers have even developed retail outlets to re-sell cardboard boxes and plastic drums, while others have negotiated for prized organic waste from the city's large hotels: "Normally, we don't sell organic material because when it comes from homes the quality is poor, but when it comes from a large hotel, we sell it to neighbors who need it to quickly fatten up his pigs. Before we butcher the pigs, we are even prepared to pay the hotels! […] Now, as I often tell people, they can eat their garbage themselves!"[17] Sales networks for pre-sorted or recycled materials have also proliferated and diversified. Wholesalers purchase manufactured goods from Manchiat Nasser, while compacted boxes and cans are sold to factories in the official sector, and plastic balls and palette-loads of compressed plastic bottles are distributed to factories owned by Chinese in the new cities and shipped to China. Distribution agreements between workshop bosses in Manchiat Nasser and rag pickers located in provincial cities or tourist sites have also increased, reflecting the community's an ability to maximize the yield of the capital's voluminous waste stream.

Increased economic activity and growing links to the official economy have occurred despite deep inequalities among the rag picker communities. Those who scavenge on foot or using pushcarts, and others such as women with poor working conditions occupy the lowest rung of the professional ladder. Women sort up to 450 kilograms of waste per day bare-handed and with astounding dexterity [Assaad, 2006: 200], first quickly and efficiently separating organic matter from recyclable materials before sorting recyclable materials into different categories. Some of these women work

Photo 1. One of the main streets of Manchiat Nasser. Photo by the author, 2012.

Photo 2. Loading a garbage truck in Manchiat Nasser. Photo by the author, 2012.

for their families while others work as day laborers for a *ma'allem* (boss), a few of whom specialize in sorting plastic according to material and color who can earn up to forty Egyptian pounds (2 euros in 2017) per day.[18]

Manchiat Nasser is the leading rag picker community in the capital's informal waste management sector, with its 1,000 workshops, 40,000 rag pickers, and numerous merchants. The growing demand for manual labor, the number of garbage and pick-up trucks, machines, and workshops, and its links to the formal economy further enhance the neighborhood's level of economic activity, which groups more heavily affected by the reforms, including residents of Batn el-Baqara, bitterly resent:

> There's no spirit of unity here. For example, in Manchiat Nasser, when someone talks, everyone hears. You hear these people because they know everything, they have influence, and they participate in every event. We are the first (*zabbâlîn*). We don't get along among ourselves, unfortunately […] We don't run after one among us who gets arrested, but in Manchiat Nasser, if somebody falls, they defend them because they all work together […] In Manchiat Nasser, they're smart, and they have lots of money and resources. They built factories. Everything that comes out of here goes over there. Here we pick up,

Photo 3. Waste Sorting in a courtyard in Manchiat Nasser.
Photo Florence Troin, 2010.

there they manufacture. We can't manage without each another...[19]

Sophisticated recycling techniques involving a range of materials, expertise in negotiation and sales, and collaboration with other industrial networks illustrate the rapid professionalization of the trade. Individuals who scavenged for scraps of food for their animals as children have been transformed into influential bosses in a decentralized system that has organically but steadily expanded. While a high degree of professionalization is not necessarily universal among the rag pickers, it has had a number of side-effects that include initiatives to educate children and improved housing in new apartment buildings, particularly since the revolution, as well as growing independence from the *wâhiya* and rising demands for labor rights. These positive developments have all been strictly dependent on continued access to household waste.

Waste: A Tool in the Struggle

Although the rag pickers have internalized their geographical and social marginalization, they do not experience this status as a hardship provided that they are able to pursue their livelihoods in relative "tranquility." Instead of adopting a fatalistic attitude, despite many years of expecting no official help, they survive and even flourish mostly through persistence and self-reliance. The arrival of the foreign waste management firms unleashed spontaneous episodes of resistance and a series of protests in 2003 that received little media attention and were quickly crushed by the police [Dollet, 2003; Florin, 2011]. It was above all the glaring inadequacies of the new waste collection services supposedly provided by foreign companies that first raised public awareness about the rag pickers' plight and attracted public support for their right to work. The leaders of Manchiat Nasser[20] expressed themselves in the media, emphasizing their professionalism and the fact that their services cost nothing and contributed to the city's cleanliness. Waste became the most important tool in this discursive struggle to call attention to their efficient collection services and their knowledge of the intricacies of recycling. They also proclaimed widely acknowledged ecological skills, which are arguably more prized abroad than in their own country because a number of them have been invited to participate in international conferences and lectures.

Waste helps the rag pickers' struggle more concretely when it accumulates during collection strikes, which cause particular problems in neighborhoods that are either under-served or not at all subject to official garbage collection. During a series of strikes in 2003, garbage piles that accumulated in the streets even in the more affluent neighborhoods spared during earlier crises were especially noticeable in high summer. Strikes by foreign firms' employees exacerbated the "public problem" caused by the suspending the rag pickers' access to waste.[21] Both the media and the public seized on these flaws in the city's sanitation infrastructure and noticed the *zabbâlîn* as though for the first time. Some rag pickers even spread waste in neighborhoods assigned to foreign firms, triggering large numbers of complaints and exposing the firms to fines for non-collection. City-dwellers also complained about the deterioration and disappearance of collection containers, particularly plastic bins, which that were stolen and recycled. A manager at the Italian firm Ama Arab remarked to Lise Debout:

> We've changed containers three times. At first they were plastic, but they didn't hold up under the heat and the weight of the waste, which is greater here than it in Europe […] The plastic containers were also stolen so they could be used as beverage basins. Their lifespan was supposed to be three to five years, but they didn't last more than a year. After that, we were forced to use galvanized steel containers on our routes, but the galvanized parts were stolen so they could be resold [quoted in Debout, 2012: 354].

Photo 4. A salvager digging a bucket of the company Ama Arab. Photo Pascal Garret, downtown, 2010.

Waste came to symbolize the *zabbâlîn*'s power in the 2000s, but it also reminded the population of the government's rampant negligence and corruption in importing a costly and mostly ineffective waste management system. The *zabbâlîn*'s struggle to be heard in the face of the regime's authoritarian, repressive tendencies successfully focused attention to the injustices inflicted on them by the reforms. This higher profile in turn prompted internal dissent among the *zabbâlîn* when those with higher professional status were awarded government contracts. As Lise Debout's research has demonstrated, Ama Arab had a clear economic interest in hiring sub-contractors, who cost only 12.5% of overall expenses, even as informal collection removed as much as 69% of total household waste in zones that the company ostensibly controlled. It should be noted that *zabbâlîn* sub-contractors were only interested in collecting waste in areas that had comfortable, middle-class populations, which relegated Ama Arab to areas with more impoverished waste [Debout, 2012: 366], additional evidence that the "garbage businessmen" are not necessarily interested in waste collection *per se*. Ultimately, they were actually not "garbage men," but scavengers and recyclers. The right to sign waste collection contracts was only relevant to a minority of the rag pickers, blurring the boundaries between traditional collection zones and infuriating the "smaller" rag pickers, particularly those who were no longer able to collect waste in the "smaller" districts where they had operated previously. This process also accentuated the disparities between high-profile "bosses" who could negotiate and sign contracts and other, less fortunate rag pickers.

In May 2009, a mass slaughter of the rag picker's pigs triggered a further large-scale waste management crisis. The *zabbâlîn* immediately suspended collection of organic waste, which they would otherwise have fed to their pigs. They continued to selectively sort recyclable waste *in situ* but left organic waste to rot in the streets. This crisis exacerbated the economic vulnerability of most of the community, as the informal waste industry slowed to a crawl and children stopped attending school. These actions were clearly targeted against the rag pickers, whose pigs were herded off of their properties or into the interiors of their homes before being summarily slaughtered. In the days and months that followed, public denunciations of this absurd and pointless slaughter multiplied as the city was filled with garbage piles, creating health hazards that were worsened by the efforts of some residents to incinerate the piles. Waste had become an unavoidable feature of the urban landscape and a perfect symbol of the dysfunctional authoritarian Egyptian state.

Beginning in the 2000s, the rag pickers joined the protests, and their cause was taken up as their systematic mistreatment by the government gained increasing visibility. The perverse effects of a modernization campaign that used management techniques imported from the Northern hemisphere drew sharp public criticism, particularly as it became clear that the reforms neglected the livelihoods of more than 100,000 of Cairo's citizens. Growing awareness of the *zabbâlîn*'s precarious livelihoods gave additional leverage to their ability to strike, negotiate, and protest, empowering them to demand to the right to work and access to urban waste. The 2010 reforms ultimately did provide for the participation of informal waste sub-contractors in the official waste management plan. The Egyptian government has more recently joined international financiers and bilateral organizations in recognizing the value of the informal sector. Despite the violence and injustice inflicted on the rag pickers, there has been a substantial trend towards increasing professionalization among the *zabbâlîn*. Their integration into official and informal recycling networks on the local, national, and international levels, combined with the proliferation of recycling workshops and the partial independence of certain districts such as 'Ard el Lewa (where recycling is primarily local rather than involving redistributing scavenged materials to workshops in Manchiat Nasser) illustrate the rise of an assertive new breed of "garbage businessmen." Far from the "dregs of the city," their accumulated economic and social capital gives them more power to resist than in the past.

The rag pickers of Cairo have to some extent successfully fought to gain recognition of their contributions to Egyptian society and to be treated fairly, a struggle that acquired a powerful political edge that matched that of the 2011 Egyptian revolution. ■

Notes

1. The author wishes to thank Madani Safar Zitoun for permission to use the term "*soutiers*" to refer to Cairo rag-pickers, which he used to describe scavengers in the Algiers garbage dump [Safar Zitoun, 2015].

2. In methodological terms, I have studied the rag pickers since 2007 primarily through qualitative interviews in 2007, 2009, 2010, and 2012 with the rag-pickers of 'Ard el-Lewa, Batn el-Baqara, and Manchiat Nasser, as well as observations of how they organized their living and working spaces.

3. Interview with Romani, a rag picker and recycler in Manchiat Nasser (09/02/2010). Romani had employed this expression before the interview [Dollet, 2003, 98], and Lise Debout has previously noted that the expression *â'mâl nazâfa* literally signifies "businessman of cleanliness," the term used by the more affluent rag pickers to describe themselves in order to avoid *zabbâlîn*, which they perceive as carrying a negative connotation [Debout, 2015].

4. By the term "corporation," I mean an organization with its own rules that unites rag pickers, although in an unequal and hierarchical way. They are represented to some extent by the Association of Garbage Collectors, which negotiates with the government.

5. Copts, who represent an approximately 10% of the population, are frequent targets of discrimination. The religious factor contributes significantly to a shared sense of identity that helps define the rag picker community and their relations with the Coptic middle class, which supports rag picker community through charity.

6. Most oral and written sources agree that pigs, which are considered impure by Muslims, are raised by Christian Copts for consumption by foreigners, especially British residents. It is worth noting that Muslim rag pickers also raise pigs [Florin, 2011].

7. In popular neighborhoods, employers in certain professions such as *arzuqi* or journeymen sometimes use cafés to hire manual laborers and specialized workers. Migrations often flow from residential and professional groupings, including tannery workers, who tend to migrate from the same Upper Egyptian villages and live and work in the same Cairo neighborhoods [Florin, 1999].

8. Using taxis is an extremely common practice in Cairo, despite the fact that public transportation is less expensive. Rag picker neighborhoods, including Manchiat Nasser, are far from the city center and poorly served by public transportation.

9. In her dissertation, Lise Debout described the political and ideological process of reform as well as the difficulties faced by European multinational companies attempting to develop their activities in Egypt [Debout, 2012].

10. This did not prevent Egyptian customs officials from blocking garbage collection trucks that belonged to the Spanish company when officials refused to enforce the law for several months in early 2003, causing the company to face significant customs fees and non-collection penalties [Dollet, 2003: 144; Debout, 2012: 162].

11. In February 2010, a Veolia manager in Paris explained to me the complications associated with the local situation, particularly the authorities, and stated that the company would never repeat the experience in Egypt.

12. Interview with Ahmad, a Muslim rag picker in Batn al Baqara (10/02/2010).

13. Interview with Ramadan, a Muslim rag picker in Batn al Baqara (10/02/2010).

14. Despite regularization in 1989, Manchiat Nasser is frequently threatened by real estate development [Fahmi, 2011]; the rag pickers in Batn al Baqara were seized by "large, heavily muscled men" who were employed by the real estate agency erecting apartment buildings in the district. They resisted when they were physically threatened, particularly after the revolution of 2011, proclaiming that, "from now on, they weren't afraid and would not be taken advantage of" (group interviews, November 2012).

15. According to a German study, the number of workshops in Muqattam makes it one of the world's largest informal recycling sites [GTZ, 2008: 17].

16. In May 2009, under pressure from the Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptian government brutally butchered 300,000 of the rag pickers' pigs. The AH1N1 flu outbreak, which was falsely labeled the "swine flu," triggered this scientifically unjustified and egregiously unfair decision.

17. Interview with Romani, February 14, 2014. The *zabbâlîn* collect organic waste to feed their pigs. In early 2014, Leïla Iskandar, Minister of the Environment and a long-term ally of the rag pickers, announced that raising pigs was again permitted. The pigs had been thoroughly eradicated, although a few animals were concealed in homes during the mass slaughter. Clearly, some time is required to restore the collective herd, and until that time, the collection of organic household waste will be limited. The rag pickers with whom I spoke maintained that there is not point otherwise in bringing organic waste back into their neighborhoods.

18. According to Romani: "A scavenger of boxes and drums, if he works well, can earn 100 Egyptian pounds (approximately 5 euros in 2017) per day. A normal collection will bring in 60 pounds per day. I pay the workers in my workshop, which recycle plastic, 70 pounds per day" (interview, February 14, 2014). The average Egyptian salary is 20 pounds (approximately 1 euro in 2017) per day. Since the 1990s, rag pickers earn more than their fellow citizens on average.

19. Group interview, Batn al Baqara, February 10, 2012.

20. This primarily involved the leaders of associations, particularly the president of the Association of Garbage Collectors, and a key spokesperson for the community at the time. Father Samaan, an influential spiritual leader in Manchiat Nasser, intervened to defend the *zabbâlîn* during the reform, but he clearly supported the government's decision at the time of the mass slaughter of the rag pickers' pigs (like those of Chenouda III, Patriarch of the Orthodox Copts, who died in 2012), particularly by advocating avoiding places where pigs were raised [Tadroz, 2010] which, take literally, implied the 40,000 *zabbâlîn* in Manchiat Nasser...

21. "Numerous studies have indeed shown how situations described as problematic became public problems [...] which then became part of the authorities' list of problems [...]. This type of approach was useful in showing that a problem that appeared with a certain degree of 'obviousness' was in fact the complex outcome of mobilization and collective action, and that when public institutions addressed the problem it involved highly specific logics" [Gilbert & Henry, 2012: 36]. I describe this process with respect to rag picker protests in an article entitled "Quand la question des déchets devient un problème public: réforme, crise, ajustements et malentendus entre acteurs. L'exemple du Caire (Égypte)" [Florin, 2015].

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RÉSUMÉ

Les chiffonniers du Caire. Soutiers de la ville ou businessmen des ordures ?

Au Caire, les chiffonniers habitent des « espaces-poubelles » qui se situent à la marge de la marge d'autant plus qu'ils élèvent des porcs en terre musulmane. Cet article analyse les effets de deux réformes de gestion des déchets, celle de 2002 qui attribue leur collecte à des multinationales européennes, en excluant les chiffonniers, puis celle de 2010 qui valide leur activité de collecte, par la sous-traitance au profit d'entreprises privées. Il décrit ainsi la lutte des chiffonniers contre le transfert de modèles de gestion du nord au sud et leurs efforts pour être reconnus avant tout non comme les « éboueurs » de la ville, mais comme des recycleurs et des commerçants.

Mots-clés : Le Caire. Chiffonniers. Secteur informel. Marginalisation. Délégation de service.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Lumpensammler von Kairo. Sklaven der Stadt oder Businessmänner des Mülls?

In Kairo wohnen die Lumpensammler in Mull-Gebieten, die sich am Rande des Randes befinden, zumal sie auf muslimischem Boden Schweine züchten. Dieser Artikel analysiert die Auswirkungen von zwei Reformen, die die Müllabfuhr betreffen: Eine Reform von 2002, die die Abfuhr den europäischen multinationalen Unternehmen zuteilt und die Lumpensammler somit ausschliesst, sowie die Reform von 2010, die ihre Müllsammlertätigkeit durch die Weitergabe von Aufträgen zu Gunsten von privaten Unternehmen anerkennt. Der Artikel beschreibt so den Kampf der Lumpensammler gegen eine Übertragung der Verwaltungsmodelle von Norden nach Süden und für eine Anerkennung ihres Status als Recycler und Händler und nicht als Müllmänner der Stadt.

Stichwörter: Kairo. Lumpensammler. Informeller Sektor. Marginalisierung. Privatisierung.

RÉSUMEN

Los traperos del Cairo ¿ Pañoleros de la ciudad o businessmen de los desperdicios ?

En El Cairo, los traperos viven en los "espacios-basuras" que se sitúan fuera del margen, y encima crían cerdos en una tierra musulmana. Este articulo analiza los efectos de dos reformas de la gestión de los desperdicios, la del 2002 que atribuye su recogida a unas multinacionales europeas, excluyendo a los traperos, y luego la del 2010 que valida la actividad de recogida de estos últimos, por la subcontratación en provecho de empresas privadas. Describe así la lucha de los traperos contra la transferencia de modelos de gestión del norte al sur, y sus esfuerzos por ser reconocidos ante todo no como los "basureros" de la ciudad, sino como recicladores y comerciantes.

Palabras-clave: El Cairo. Traperos. Sector informal. Marginalización. Delegación de servicio.