Refuse and the Revolution: Perceptions of Trash and Litter Among Urban Tunisians and the Value of Public Space

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Refuse and the Revolution: Perceptions of Trash and Litter Among Urban Tunisians and the Value of Public Space

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Abstract:

Within the current decade, refuse has secured a prominent presence in urban Tunisian streets. The evolution of this garbage issue has its origins in the late 20th century and early 21st century, reaching a watershed moment in the Jasmine Revolution (January 2011). After the Revolution, both altered municipal authority structures and changing norms of citizens’ behaviors led to an increase of litter and trash. The detritus in the streets brings many negative side-effects that influence health, aesthetic, and mental well-being. The focus of this paper is the urban Tunisian’s reactions of and behaviors on garbage and their effect on public space. The northern Tunis suburb of La Marsa was chosen as the area of focus of this research in order to narrow the complexities of the subject matter to a specific municipality. Interviews from La Marsa municipal officials, NGOs that focus on environment and political efforts, and a sample of 18 ordinary residents of La Marsa were completed to investigate the topic. Observations from around La Marsa were similarly gathered to support various claims. This exploration tries to map out the complex interplay between citizens awareness, government actors, businesses, community, civil society associations, and the general social and cultural environment that creates and controls public space.
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Outline

Introduction- Pg. 5

Discerning the Detritus: Theoretical Approaches and Observations- Pg. 7

A Beginning in Bourguiba/Ben Ali: Historical Context- Pg. 12

Revolution with Refuse: The Turning Point of the Jasmine Revolution- Pg. 14

Decentralization Disorder: Municipal Structure and Garbage Services- Pg. 16

Picking Up, Where Others Drop Off: Actions from the Community and NGOs- Pg. 20

The Realm of the Bey: Where Does Responsibility Lie?- Pg. 23

Waste, And What May Come: Conclusion and the Future- Pg. 26

Appendix A: Extended Methodology and Notes- Pg. 28

Appendix B: Sample Interview Questions- Pg. 29

Appendix C: List of Interview Subjects- Pg. 31

Works Cited- Pg. 33

Bibliography- Pg. 35
Introduction

Trash and litter’s presence in Tunisia has become unavoidable, not only because of the quantity, but because it engages nearly all the senses: the jumbled disarray, the contrasting plastic colors, the putrid smell, the sound of bottles scattering about the pavement. Whether the refuse comes from a mother taking out the day's trash or a child opening a snack-wrapper, much of it invariably ends up amassed and scattered on the streets, open to everyone. This example illustrates the simple differentiation between the two terms, trash and litter. Trash refers to the broader sense of refuse, often collected after a day’s time within a house or building, while litter is dropped by an individual on the street, mostly in the form of a single piece of refuse.

Nonetheless, this detritus of private consumption has become an all-consuming public entity. The garbage is strewn throughout the cities of the country, whether it is an avenue, a park, or a public square; it seems that no place is left untouched. It has slowly and creepily secured a stranglehold on the public space, and every day, as ordinary Tunisians navigate their cities, they must come in contact and comprehend the state of their streets.

There was a time when Tunisian streets were comparatively clean and tidy. Yet that was many years ago, under the strict authoritarian regime of Habib Bourguiba, who forcefully controlled and monitored all aspects of society. The government of Zinedine Ben Ali, the successor of Bourguiba, would face increasing demographic and financial constraints and in the final years of his reign, due to stagnation and indifference from the corrupt regime, the presence of refuse grew steadily. Then, the Jasmine Revolution would come and change all that had to do with trash.
During those days of political and social conflict, the streets piled with garbage as the state fell. The people rallied around the principles of freedom and liberty and engaged in a new democratic project, but what was perhaps overlooked was the unremarkable, tedium of the daily services provided by municipal governance. As parliaments, national political parties, and constitutions were being formed, city governments fell into disarray and were replaced by appointed, temporary officials. In addition, the behavior of many citizens changed as a misunderstanding of the newly acquired liberty often grew to mirror more of an absence of responsibility. With municipal elections planned in 2016, but continually postponed, one wonders if, and when, effective sanitation and environmental change will be enacted.

Garbage and revolution may at first appear to be antithetical: one, a mundane dirty thing, while the other, a glorious grandiose occurrence. All humans create waste, whether biologically or materially; they process objects and then deject the remnants of them. Since revolution is a collective human action, must it too create some form of waste? In Tunisia, the Revolution has drastically transformed the state's role within the public sphere of Tunisian streets and now they are seemingly filled with more waste. The relationship between these two developments will be explored thoroughly in this paper. Theoretical works on pollution, public space, and disorder will be introduced. An in-depth analysis of the trash services before, during, and after the Revolution will be provided, focusing on the changes of municipal governance. La Marsa, a northern suburb of Tunis of 93,000 residents was chosen as the site of this study, due to time and resource constraints. Relevant municipal officials of La Marsa and non-governmental organizations working in the area were contacted to provide official and informed information of the formalities of trash pickup and street cleaners. In addition, a series of interviews was given to 18
residents of the suburb concerning their perception and understanding of litter and trash in the public sphere within the post-Revolution context.

**Discerning the Detritus: Theoretical Approaches and Interview Observations**

A revised conception and specific formulation of pollution is necessary to begin this exploration. A layman’s definition of pollution interprets it as the intrusion of foreign matter into a natural environment, causing negative effects. But this definition is particular and only relates to connotations of nature and the natural. One must expand the definition of pollution to include all that is dirty, all that makes things unclean. Yet, “pollution is not simply the opposite of cleanliness.”1 It is defined through a process of ambiguity, a blurring of typical categorization. According to Mary Douglas, the pioneer of studies in pollution, dirt and dirty things are “matter out of place.”2 Nothing is inherently deemed dirty, only after a social delineation do sacred borders and taboos appears. In these ambiguities and social uncertainty is where confusion arrives. They arise in society immense questions of morality and scarcity and this analytic dichotomy provides insight to assess the Tunisian context.

In Tunisia, the dirt and dirtiness comes in the form of trash and litter. Both these terms consist mainly of the waste of consumer products and the leftover daily foodstuffs of Tunisians. Further, these two items share a presence in the public space of the city, that being the streets, parks, squares, and alleys, where almost no one is formally barred from entering. Since all can enter these spaces, the responsibility over them is diffused, meaning that often only the representative of the collective, the state, provides for its care. In a modern, well-functioning

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waste management system, the refuse of the city is collected and transported outside the city, typically to a dump or treatment plant. Yet, when trash and litter are not collected and disposed of, they accumulate and secure a public presence.

This public nature of the trash and litter lead to the ambiguities like those that Douglas noted, in this case specifically relating to the tension between private and communal space. The sense of ownership and direct responsibility of private space--of the buildings and land of Tunisian citizens and businesses--provide a sense of obligation for each person to tend to their property and remove unclean things. What is often the first reaction of private property owners is to push the refuse into the most convenient and accessible space: the blurred responsibility zone of the public. It is specifically the refuse that is personal and private that imposes its presence on the public sphere of the city. The boundaries of appropriate behaviors and ownership are thus crossed and challenged each day through the act of littering.

Almost all Tunisians interviewed were concerned with the litter and trash on the street, stating that it was an issue that left them disgusted. Many Tunisians in the sample accused a failure of responsibility in citizens to the increase in refuse. They see a complete denial of the well being of the combined citizenry and that a form of “laziness” has taken over. Time and time again, Tunisians would remark that their compatriots were unconcerned with the adverse effects of trash in the street. “When it’s night, people might feel lazy and just throw their trash on the street and not go all the way to the dump,” said Muhammad, 35, taxi driver. “It’s a lack of responsibility, people just don’t do the right thing, the good thing,” said Mahmoud, 21, business

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4 Quotes are used here to signify a term that I noted in the interviews from Tunisians, not one I support myself.
5 Quotes used in the paper, to the best of my ability, have not altered. Potential mistranslations from Arabic and French to English are perhaps only slight, but are present. Additions and clarifications beyond the words of the interviewee are made in brackets.
intern. The right thing Mahmoud makes reference to is an act of care for the streets, to think of the passerby and to properly dispose of trash. Nonetheless, many factors perpetuate this indifference beyond a simple character/psychological profile.

What often heightens dumping onto public space is the trash collection process itself. Trash receptacles that are used for daily drop-off and truck pick up in La Marsa, as in most Tunisian cities, are located on the corners of streets, parks, and schools. The rationale to place these receptacles at focal points of public movement is one of necessity. Many Tunisians cross these places out of necessity, as they drop their children off to school, as they pass by to their workplace, or run daily errands, and so they are often the most traversed and accessible areas to deposit trash. As well, as in many developed urban areas in the world, small trash bins, that are used to collect litter, are located throughout the city. The only issue in this case is how sparingly these trash receptacles and bins are placed.

Therefore, much of the garbage does not reach its designated destination, but is instead left on the street. The closest trash [receptacles] often “are 200-300 meters away, it’s far,” Ahmed, a 22 year old university student, notes. So, many residents, believing that a trash receptacle is not readily available, will simply drop the trash on the side of the street. Not knowing where the trash receptacle also contributes to potential litter and trash dumping. Mahmoud, 21, business intern, expressed a similar frustration, “You don’t know where a bin will be, you might expect them to be at the end of the street, but it may not be, and then people just drop it.” Both the observed infrequency of bins and receptacles and the lack of a standard location for them lead Tunisians to rationalize the dropping of litter and trash.

So if refuse on the streets can be viewed as “matter out of place,” this ambiguity may lead to certain alterations in perceptions of these spaces and behaviors within them. This potential to
alter behavior underlies the Broken Window Theory, an influential and contentious theory of criminology and public space. This theory posits that certain aesthetic characteristics of an urban space (litter, graffiti, run-down buildings) signal a degree of disorder. When people view this disorder, they lose their sense of responsibility, thereby becoming more likely to treat the space with further neglect. In this vicious cycle, signs of disorder beget more signs of disorder, eventually leading to an increase in general crime and aggression as people begin to feel that no authority holds control over the space.

Naturally there are prominent critiques to this theory. The existence of several confounding variables that explain both disorder and criminal/aggressive behavior has been noted, thereby potentially undercutting the validity of the Broken Window Theory. Structural economic issues and racism often lead to an increase in criminality among a population and also contribute to the degradation of neighborhoods. Yet it is often simply the perception of aggression that deters citizens from occupying public spaces, rather than criminal behavior. If citizens interpret litter and trash as aggression and a sign a disorder, they may be more wary to enter public spaces, thereby damaging the value of that space.

In the sample used, many interviewees remarked on the trash and litter as a source of discomfort and worry. What often is the most striking to residents is the smell, most notably that of rotting organic matter. According to a study in 2014, 68% of collected trash in Tunisian cities is organic matter, and its presence is unmistakable. Smell itself is a fascinating sense in the human body. The sense’s use developed as a tool to mark potentially inedible and noxious foods

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that should be avoided for consumption. Bad scents can cause nausea, which leads to repulsion, disgust, and disdain. Many participants singularly pointed to the smell of the trash as its single most upsetting feature. “I think it’s the smell, you might not even see the garbage, but you smell it. It disgusts me,” noted Skander, 29, insurance agent. Smell is the sense most connected to the brain center associated with memory, an adaption to remember what should and should not be eaten. The sense’s association with memory means that the refuse leaves an indelible mark in Tunisians’ minds. Public spaces then become connoted with a physical sense of repulsion, even if it is only slight. Yet this mental connection leads to harsher criticisms of the people who lived in these areas.

“The people who litter, I don’t like to be around them, they’re dirty uneducated,” said Maher, musician, 26. “I feel like the people [who litter] are dirty, idiots, I want to punch him [the one who litters] haha,” related Sarah, university student, 22. When asked if what he thought of the people who litter made him uncomfortable, “Yeah, because he doesn’t know, especially if he is a big boy,” stated Ahmed, 23, university student. The sample of Tunisians relayed a sense of fear or distrust of those who litter. As evinced by some of the quotes above, there was a common phenomenon of masculinizing the litterer or trash-dumper. By referring to the perpetrator as a “he” or “him,” the interviewee specifically taps into an archetype of aggression, power, and masculinity. This immediately reflects a sense of confrontation with litterers, who are often depicted as somewhat brutish. The litterer’s perceived power to impose their will over the public space further alienates those occupying the street through feelings of violence and anger.

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9 Koster, “Chapter 3: The Specific Characteristics of the Sense of Smell,” 32.
Clearly, the Tunisians represented through the sample consider the trash and litter on the street as a source of disgust, shame, and disorder. Most Tunisians recognize both personal and structural rationales for littering and trash dumping. They also create connotations and assumptions of dirty areas where people frequently litter and throw trash. But perhaps what is more arduous is the task of isolating the origins of these developments. Naturally, it would appear easy to assume that people have become lazy, but responses like these ignore the innumerable variables of Tunisian urban society. They gloss over the structural and ideological interplay among state and citizen, norms and reason, public versus private. Only by parsing through history may we comprehend the origins of the garbage issue.

**A Beginning in Bourguiba/Ben Ali: Historical Context**

Archetypically, the city often represents the chaos and disorder of humanity. Urban life is associated with crashing sounds, flashing lights, the moral corruption of the body, and, naturally, the detritus of human and economy.¹⁰ This schema is usually contrasted with that of the rural, the peaceful, serenity of nature, and its purity. But the city life and related forms of production are central tenets of modernism and authoritarian regimes across the world have championed the city as a center of progress and order.¹¹ Former President and Head of State (1957-1987) Habib Bourguiba’s policies of urbanization and modernist progress highlighted the virtues of rational, urban life, and he focused on increasing rural-urban migration.¹² Symbols of structure and planning, such as town statues, public squares, and municipal offices, were built across Tunisia

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¹¹ Ibid., 10.
to capture the essence of this movement. Parades and demonstrations were also organized to display the precision of the modern Tunisian society.

This modernist agenda extended to issues relating to refuse and street cleaning. The Tunisian state founded by Bourguiba kept streets cleaned and comparatively neat, framing this accomplishment as a triumph of the state over human irrationality. Economic production and consumption inherently produces wastes, but by creating an orderly system that quickly and efficiently handles the waste, it appears that progress comes with little cost, that all negative effects of modernism could be surmounted. Garbage then becomes an invisible item. In a modern economic system, where the means of production are complicated and obscured, where products are seemingly identical, it appears that they come from nowhere, that they in themselves contain a mystique that blinds the consumer. When combined with an orderly trash system, the products become even more transient.

Garbage collection was efficient and quick under the Bourguiba regime, as political adherence was demanded by the state. But during the last years of Bourguiba’s successor, President (1987-2011) Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the cracks in the waste disposal system began to show. Rural-to-urban migration increased the strains on urban waste management systems into the first decade of the 21st century. “It was cleaner with Bourguiba,” Lamya, a 51 year-old housewife and resident of La Marsa, laments, “but then... cars, and there were not enough trains, you know transportation. Especially people coming from the south, the Sahara.” Many municipalities soon found themselves in dire financial straits, unable to provide services

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effectively.\textsuperscript{15} Much like most systems of governance established by Bourguiba and Ben Ali, little thought was given to establishing a pluralistic system that effectively responded to citizens’ desires and concerns, increasingly dirty streets being among them.

Officially, the municipal authorities were, and still are, under the centralized hierarchy of the Ministry of the Interior, assuring dependence to the national government. For example, in the years before the Revolution, municipalities used approximately 4\% of public spending, while they only accrued 2\% of public revenues. Both of these numbers are below regional averages as well as averages in Western countries.\textsuperscript{16} This means that, even while the amount of spending by municipalities was below average for the region, they had to rely on approximately 50\% of their budget from the central government. Through the purse strings, the central state could enforce its preferences with mandates and regulations. Considerations were not given to the different contexts of each municipality; on the contrary on the contrary they followed a one-size-fits-all policy. Ultimately, many regions of Tunisia grew frustrated with over-dependence and central state dictation and that in part led to the coming Jasmine Revolution.

\textit{Revolution with Refuse: The Turning Point of the Jasmine Revolution}

The events of January 2011 saw perhaps the most dramatic political change in Tunisia since its Independence in 1956. Within the span of the twenty days which would soon be called the Jasmine Revolution, the authoritarian government of Ben Ali that had firmly ruled Tunisia with a single party (The Democratic Constitutional Rally or DRC) corporatist system for 34


years, was ousted by popular forces. The conflict originated in the economically alienated central regions of Sidi Bouzid and Gafsa, demanding economic reform and regional autonomy. But as the fires of discontent spread, the coastal regions refocused the dialogue to focus on freedom, dignity, and liberty. Still, these two currents shared one common goal: to displace the status quo. The Jasmine Revolution proved extremely successful in this. Almost no one, whether media sources, foreign governments, or Ben Ali himself, saw these revolutionary political currents forming, but seemingly overnight, the authoritarian regime had retracted and Ben Ali quickly fled to Saudi Arabia. The stage was set to produce a new energetic, representative government.

During this animated period of political change, trash would play a prominent role. Naturally, as the political shake up occurred, services were put on hold and daily trash piled up on the street. Areas of protest, such as the Kasbah Square where many national government offices are located, started to fill with debris, graffiti, and litter as daily demonstrations left behind their waste. But it was a passive relationship to litter, protesters and citizens directly attacked trash collection systems. “Close to 60% of municipal government trash equipment was burned or destroyed during the Revolution,” stated the then Minister of the Environment of Tunisia Mounir Madjoub in an interview in 2014. Many Tunisians spoke of trash piling in the streets the months immediately after the Revolution. Frustrations over the top-down administration boiled over as protesters shut down garbage dumps, workers struck for higher pay, and garbage piled in the streets.

Naturally, the reconstruction of a government is the more complicated and fraught part of any revolution, the Jasmine Revolution being no exception. Eyes remained fixed on the macro-

19 Ibid.
picture of governance (the Parliament, Executive Offices, Interior Ministry), while the
decentralized, local governments were often thrown into disarray. In the months after the
Revolution, municipal officials across the country connected to the DRC would either resign or
be forced out of their positions. The municipalities were then governed on an ad-hoc basis,
occasionally being vacant. Garbage still piled in the streets of many cities as the administrations
faced turmoil. Some municipalities were able to appoint satisfactory officials who could operate
services and settle strikes among garbage collectors and trash dump workers. Only then did
anything comparable to garbage collection services resume. Yet those solutions seemed only like
band-aids to a larger structural problem.

Decentralization Disorder: Municipal Structure and Garbage Services

One of the intended goals of the municipal government restructuring was an attempted
regionally autonomous system, more responsive to the people and malleable to geographic and
demographic differences. Decentralization was a key aim of the revolutionary forces and they
hoped to form a government that is not essentially formulaic for all municipalities. It is an effort
to engage citizens as opposed to a government that dictates to citizens. Yet, five years after the
Revolution, the promised legislation to provide for altered revenue collection and responsive
services has not been drafted. The national priorities concentrated on filling the national void of
Ben Ali by creating a new national parliament and drafting a new constitution. The law that
structures the municipality system has remained unchanged since the 1950’s and authority over
municipalities is still maintained by the Interior Ministry. The promised decentralization
legislation will hopefully be accompanied by official elections for municipality positions, yet it

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20 This paragraph draws heavily from an interview with Khalil Aziz from the government watch-dog Al Bawsala, November 27, 2015.
has been continually postponed since the Revolution. As of the winter of 2015, the elections are planned to take place in fall of 2016, but that is not a definitive date as delays are frequent.

The committees that replaced the municipal governance are seemingly dominated by temporality. They are not intended to last and are simply a stopgap measure until representative elections occur. The people who occupy these spots know full well that these appointments are transient and are often treated with little vigor. To many interviewed Tunisians, these positions seemed to be filled simply for the sake of avoiding vacant spots on paper. “These positions were filled so they weren’t empty,” Aziz, 41, a NGO volunteer, remarked, “[the officials] have no impetus to change, to innovate.” Without formal mechanisms for accountability and with no pressure from popular elections, these positions continue to work outside the realm of public engagement. It is counterintuitive to the very Revolution that placed them in these positions.

The services of trash collection and urban cleanliness are governed by a wide-ranging set of regulations and oversight is given not only by these municipal authorities, but also by many national ministries. The agency most central to coordinating garbage related action on the national scale is the National Agency of Trash Disposal (L’Agence Nationale de Gestions des Dechets or ANGed). Created in 2005 by Ben Ali administration, ANGed is responsible for creating and implementing regulations relating to the disposal of trash. This agency often provides donations and subsidies for trash collection, but officially La Marsa receives none. In addition, the Agency for the Protection of the Environment monitors all legislation relating to waste management in Tunisia. The Ministry of Interior has direct supervisory and budgetary authority over urban centers and regional areas and is the ultimate authority on services. The
Ministry of Finance as well helps administrate budget concerns for each municipality.\(^{21}\) This complex web of supervisory and funding orchestrates all matters relating to garbage collection in each municipality.

In Tunisia, there are no taxes that are directly sourced to fund trash services.\(^{22}\) Although taxes are paid for the use of such services, all collections go to one central fund that the municipality distributes as it sees fit. All municipal budgets come from two sources, local taxes and the national state. Municipalities collect four specific taxes to pay for services: taxes on built buildings, land, business, and hotels. The rates of taxes must comply within a set national range of a range of a few percentage points, but municipalities ultimately choose the rate of taxes to suit their needs. Based on 3-year averages, municipalities formulate an estimation of tax returns for the city to submit to the Ministry of Finance. Yet, there are issues with exaggeration and enforcement for these taxes. Municipalities can receive advance funds from the state based on their project collections: the larger the collection, the larger the advance. This usually pressures officials to overstate their capabilities. But eventually these advances must be paid back and thus a cycle of debt is created. Further, especially after the Revolution, a rash of illegal building occurred, and tax assessors found it difficult to account for these buildings for tax collection purposes. Issues like these lead to cash-strapped municipalities unable to buy new equipment, provide wages for trash cleaners, or increase the number of bins and receptacles.


\(^{22}\) This paragraph draws mainly from an interview with Mounir Mekki, the La Marsa Municipal Tax Assessor, November 24, 2015.
The garbage collection services are in a sense “classical,” as noted by Chief Engineer of the La Marsa municipality Lamine Amri. The official system remains more or less unchanged since many years before the Revolution and the structure is not capable of processing most recyclables separately. In La Marsa, teams of three—two garbage collectors and one driver—navigate the streets, with pickup times at night. All trash is delivered to a dump outside the city center, not to an incinerator or recycling center. The system is very much laden with a heavy administration of 12 supervisor and only 24 garbage collectors. The work of garbage collectors is often the source of complaints, with wages often below the official minimum wage. There are no official requirements to be a garbage worker and hiring positions are characterized by transiency with workers often coming and going after a few months. Four labor strikes have occurred within the last five years that have stalled trash collection, creating in citizens an expectation of inconsistency.

Trash collection varies from house to house, and from neighborhood to neighborhood. Collection is not dictated by a door-to-door policy, but if residents leave their trash in front of their doors in a designated area, the crew will collect it. But this technique is not uniform, and many blocks of residents simply throw their trash together in a pile or trash bin at the corner of the street. Naturally, when residents bring their trash to a central point, small particles of trash are invariably spilled or dumped. As well, when one sees a large pile, they are more likely to litter an uncontained piece of trash next to the pile, as they assume that their part is only small compared to the whole and that the pile may be cleaned. These piles become areas that attract attention, anger, and cats, which tear at bags to find food to eat.

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23 This paragraphs draws on an interview from Lamine Amri, Chief Engineer of the La Marsa Municipality, November 24, 2015.
The built environment itself poses an obstacle to these teams. Trash collectors must navigate the various winding lanes of habitation in order to collect the bags and piles and empty the bins. But many narrow alleyways and streets are not made accessible for the often large and cumbersome trash trucks. These streets were often identified as the dirtiest places in cities, as many see them as outlets for discreet littering. The teams of garbage collectors rely on two types of trucks, one a more technically outfitted larger truck that can compact the trash it collects with an apparatus, and a smaller outfitted Chevy-truck that navigates the smaller streets and is not necessarily constructed to accommodate car traffic. Yet still, there are many streets unable to be accessed by trash vehicles and are subsequently bypassed.

The Tunisian municipal police play a more supervisory and authoritative role by monitoring the streets and protecting them from trash dumping. These officials, who are similarly under the purview of the Interior Ministry, focus primarily on enforcing low-level crimes, such as property disputes and littering. Similarly to other municipal institutions, the municipal police come under criticism from many Tunisians for falling under disrepair and stagnancy. This office still remains under the authority of the Interior Ministry and subsequently stays in line with their current agenda. In an interview in 2014, Mayor of La Marsa Sofiane Bouslemi stated, “We have no one to sanction those citizens who throw their trash into the public roads. It would be helpful to fine them, but who will give these fines?”24 The municipal officials contacted for this research also expressed a similar desire to use the municipal police as a tool to enforce cleanliness regulations, but acknowledged their inability to use political action to secure control of the police. In the municipal police’s absence, citizens can litter without fear of fines or castigation.

Picking Up, Where Others Drop Off: Actions from the Community and NGOs

Since the Revolution, many Tunisians believe that their municipal and national government have fallen short in combatting the environmental and health issues of trash and litter. Through a variety of methods, and truly a variety of motivations, these organizations and individuals have attempted to provide actions in lieu of formal policy reform. Some of these organizations are purely volunteer oriented NGOs, depending on the dedication of individuals and public funding, others with a more capitalist tint, relying on payment to secure a reliable source of funding. Some are very well connected to the state, working in coordination, and many are disengaged from it, providing extra-governmental services. Nonetheless, they all provide an interesting and vital aspect to the garbage collection issue.

Although official forms of decentralization have not been passed on a national scale, there exist some attempts to achieve these goals. In La Marsa, a neighborhood committee has been established with representation from 5 distinct districts of the municipality.25 This organization was initiated in January 2014, predating the new Tunisian Constitution. Each district nominates an adult, a woman, and a young adult to represent their area and these delegates communicate with the municipality of La Marsa on various projects. One of these priorities is attempting to introduce recycling and sorting of trash throughout the city. Various collection bins are distributed and can be seen in La Marsa. But these few bins are located sparingly so many residents must travel far to drop off recyclables, often making the task labor some. They also focus on environmental sensitization campaigns and advertise through ads in newspapers and on posters throughout the city. This organization exists completely in coordination with the official municipality and symbolizes a potential hope for future progress.

25 This paragraph draws mainly from an interview with Mongi Ben Salem, a member of the community committee from Sidi Drif, given on November 24, 2015.
Nonetheless, the committee is relatively new and the sample of La Marsa residents had very limited knowledge of the organization.

Tunisie Recyclage represents another organization working towards a cleaner Tunisia.26 This homegrown volunteer organization collects plastic, metal, and paper in La Marsa and Sidi Bou Said to sort, recycle, and sell off the materials to businesses to cover expenses. “[The organization] started as a movement to help organize events to help change the consciousness of the people,” said Aziz Kaloul, president of Tunisie Recyclage, “and then people started to ask us what to do with recyclables.” The system works on a sign-up basis: citizens can go online and check in their location to ask for a pickup on the day that the truck passes by that section of La Marsa. The service itself is not free and requires an annual 30 TD (~15$) fee to cover costs. “We used to have free bags from ANGed, they gave us around 800 bags a month to help sort. It made it easier to sort,” stated Kaloul, “[Our collaboration with local or national government] is very limited… they themselves were unreliable, many budget concerns prevented them from helping out.” Tunisie Recyclage found it easier to sell recyclables to private, middlemen who are more responsive. The organization feels that the inevitable goal will be to coordinate recycling collection with the officially sanctioned trash cleanup.

In addition, international organizations have observed the change in the state of the streets and contributed time and money to aiding the environmental change. The Dutch organization CILG-VNG, which concentrates on decentralized governance reform in the Middle East-North African (MENA) Region, spearheads a separate organization called Casques Vert Tunisie that focuses on urban environmental efforts. Casques Verts Tunisie is established

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26 This paragraph draws mainly from an interview of Aziz Kaloul, President of Tunisie Recyclage, November 20, 2015.
throughout Tunisia, with multiple branches present in many cities such as La Marsa.\textsuperscript{27} In order to increase environmental awareness and responsible governance, Casque Verts partners with local Tunisians organizations to provide mainly financial, educational, and technical support to those groups, and in the case of La Marsa, the collaboration is with the Association of Development and the Protection of the Environment. This partnership started in early 2014 and is funded primarily by the Embassy of the Netherlands in Tunisia as a goodwill mission. The main on-the-ground activities revolve around finding “black points” (specific focal points of litter), reporting the location of the black points to municipalities, and formulating appropriate response strategies. The primary goal of these actions are to both sensitize and engage citizens in garbage collection, as well as prepare municipalities for coming decentralization efforts. On the part of the municipality, the workers of Casques Verts foresee a long road ahead to prepare them for engaged participatory action. Often, the officials they work with have been in place for 20-30 years, and are unfamiliar with the culture of civic engagement. “It’s not only the law that needs to change, it’s a culture change, and I don’t think we’ll be truly prepared for [decentralization reform] for another four to five years,” notes Houcine Toukabri, manager at VNG International.

These organizations have all expressed similar hopes. They do not simply wish to exist as they do, as simply extra-governmental organizations. They all desire to one day be completely congruent with municipalities, altering both official policies and officials’ and citizens’ mentalities. In this way, both the formal political structure and culture will be accepting and engaging of each other. And in this engagement, these movements wish to change the concept of citizenry and environmental activism across Tunisia.

\textsuperscript{27} This paragraph draws from an interview with Houcine Tabarki from the VLNG-CIG International and Insaf Brahmi from Casques Verts Tunisie completed on December 1, 2015.
The Realm of the Bey: Where Does Responsibility Lie?

There is a word in Tuni, the local spoken Arabic dialect that expresses a relevant understanding of public space: beylik. The word originally referred to the property of the Bey, a regional political ruler that originated from the former Ottoman administrative structure. The beylik was all property of the government, the woods and fields owned by the state, and the various other facets of state government. Yet, since the times of the Ottomans, the word has undergone a colossal metamorphosis. Now, in modernity, the word beylik refers to a place that one does not own so no care should be taken. The transition of this word illustrates an issue of economics termed the Tragedy of the Commons. Property held in common, in this lesson, is subject to individual human behaviors that are contrary to the wellness of the whole group. In the case of the urban Tunisia, people litter in the streets and are not personally held responsible for that action, since the group, the public, owns them and cleans them, not the individual. The litter and trash damages the whole group, but the cost of throwing the trash for the individual is minimal. Many actors and factors have contributed to this augmentation and only by dissecting them conceptually can one move past the rhetoric and figures.

The flowering of democracy in Tunisia brought with it many unintended consequences. The package of liberty and democracy was advertised and advocated to the people, but often it appears many may misunderstood its message. The state of Ben Ali enforced participation and cooperation by fear of the Interior Ministry and the larger corporatist government. To many, the new founded freedom and liberty simply equated to a society with no institution of punishment or enforcement. This feeling then mirrors a principle of anarchy, as people now feel the ability to act as they like, with no consideration for the state. Yes, the people are able to express themselves in newfound ways, but many feel that they can do whatever they want with no one in

28 Hardin, “Tragedy of the Commons,” 1244.
control or anyone held responsible. The norms of liberty freed Tunisia from the iron hand of the Ben Ali government, but many simply viewed liberty as an absence this strict authority. Litterers thus rationalize their littering of the street. These misunderstanding norms of freedom have thus permitted people to feel guiltless of the accumulated refuse.29

The interviewees explained this perceived anarchy through several factors. Much frustration was given to the municipalities and national government, mostly citing a noted lack in enforcement and general lack of care. The subjects noted that awareness campaigns had been made and were very much publicized, especially in La Marsa. But what most in the sample saw as the flaw in official services was apathetic execution of regulation. Many interview subjects complained of the trash workers for not completing their job with diligence or the authorities for clamping down on infractions. To many in the sample, this led to Tunisians at large to feel no guilt for littering. “[Those who litter] feel like they can do whatever they want,” Maher, 26, notes, “Everyone does it, and there are no sanctions.” In this vein, the municipal police’s role in fighting littering and trash dumping was heavily criticized for losing focus on litter.

The recollection of these “lawless” behaviors always seemed to evoke a sense of nostalgia for the authoritarian days of Bourguiba and Ben Ali. “It was different, those days, they took care of the streets,” said Oumaima, housewife, 65. In various conversations unrelated to the formal interviews, Tunisians often casually remark that at least the regimes could handle the cleanliness of the streets. “To see this, it’s a tragedy for Tunisia, Bourguiba would cry,” said an older Tunisian woman who did not wish to be identified. Many see the issues as one of a decay of general morality and structure, perpetuated by this idea of liberty.

Many La Marsa residents also pointed to wider demographic and structural characteristics of those who litter. Many simply noted a lack of education on the issue: “I can explain it only from… a lack of responsibility, they don’t understand the consequences of littering” (Hanine, high school student, 18). Others of poverty specifically: “you know, La Marsa is high class, high society, so it’s cleaner than poorer areas who don’t take care” (Khalil, Taxi Driver, 45). Yet most indicated a broader habitual mindset, crossing education and class boundaries: “Some people with PhDs, you see them throwing from the window. It’s how you are raised” (Sarah, 22). It is this sense that everyone is susceptible to littering and trash dumping that many Tunisians view as dangerous.

Many Tunisians talked eagerly about campaigns to increase environmental awareness and to stem pollution, but they still observe littering in the streets. It demonstrates that perhaps sensitization campaigns are not as effective as they hoped. The negative effects of littering are purported to be widely known; yet the combined interactions of the qualities of public space, political failures, public misconceptions, and perpetuation of disorder have interacted to create a seemingly conflicted psyche. This hypocrisy, between what people say and state to believe and what they do in the streets, is a central aspect in the dialogue of responsibility. It is a product of these factors and represents the conundrum at hand.

Waste, And What May Come: Conclusion and the Future

The case of La Marsa, by no means a random or average representation of greater Tunisia, nonetheless provides a snapshot into the conflicts of garbage that arose from the Revolution in the streets. This physical city contains the many actors that contribute to define the area: municipal authorities, national agencies, NGOs, businesses, and ordinary citizens. They all
interplay together to create a society, to create a distinct human collective. This collective lives, works, plays, and produces waste like any other. La Marsa, like all urban centers, must everyday get its hands dirty and deal with its detritus. Yet most Tunisians interviewed believe the system is broken, and they are forced to see that every time they leave their homes. When asked to reflect on the issues, a complex set of perceptions and understandings are given, and as it was this paper’s aim to examine and analyze appropriately structural changes and views of perception in regard to littering and trash dumping.

The failed promises of decentralization and plurality continue to be delayed. Officials and authorities still tend to be stale and unresponsive. A sense of apathy and anarchy in the state of the streets is discernible to the sample population. Ingrained attitudes of environmental degradation are often perpetuated. And perhaps most dangerously, there is widespread acknowledgement of denial, in the sense of doing one thing and saying another. These are the challenges of littering and trash dumping, its ingrained and conflicted psychology. With a feeling of cognitive dissonance, the public realm of the city is left to become an area of repulsion with an appearance of disorder. As the Jasmine Revolution demonstrated, the power of the public space is vital to engage in democracy and to act out one’s role as a citizen. The continued degradation of such spaces poses a serious concern for the future of Tunisia.

Certainly, there are organizations and citizens who are engaged and passionate for a clean environment and healthy public space. Whether they are formalized NGOs, social businesses, or emboldened average citizens, they all have ideas and hopes for the streets that as of now seem to only be just emerging. But perhaps the greatest hope for Tunisian streets is the promised reforms of decentralization and plurality in municipalities. These changes will not only alter political structures; they hope to make citizen participation and specialization not only mandatory but
encouraged. Yet it is not just the laws and policies that require changing, but a mental attitude of engagement, acceptance, and cooperation that must development to make any decentralized reality possible. And by shaping both state structure and local wants and needs, urban Tunisians, litterer and environmental activist alike, can more fully act out the desires of the Revolution and value their role in the state and their actions in the streets.

Appendix A: Extended Methodology and Notes

Due to constraints of time, the northern suburb of Tunis, La Marsa, was chosen to be the focus of this research. The community of La Marsa is not an exemplary representation of greater Tunisians, as it is populated largely by those with higher education degrees, middle class to upper class jobs, and a relatively high proportion of expatriates and foreigners. Nonetheless, due to my residence in the city and my numerous established connections, I chose La Marsa as my primary area of study. The interviews of the general public were completed in two different segments. The first drew on interviews with the Tunisian family that I lived with and from other families in the neighborhood. Next, I expanded my research to a broader area of La Marsa. I took
to the streets and approached those occupying the locations in question and a number of taxi drivers traveling through La Marsa. Approximately 18 residents of La Marsa were interviewed to collect information and perceptions on the state of trash.

There were a few other actors that I wished to interview, but I was unable to access due to time constraints, security concerns, and language barriers. ANGed, the national agency governing trash regulation was unavailable for interview. I would have loved to interview trash collectors themselves, but when I inquired about the possibility, concerns from bureaucratic officials prevented me from gaining access. Further, GIZ, a German development organization that has partnerships in Tunisia was able to provide documents, was unavailable for interview.

Appendix B: Sample List of Interview Questions

For the questions I have listed, I tried to write them in order of how I asked them in the interview and how I responded to different answers to important questions. Of course, depending on whom I talked to, I changed the format of the interview, but the questions below were primarily aimed at those in the general public.

Who in your household takes care of issues relating to trash?

Do you think that public spaces in Tunisia (Streets, parks) are kept clean?

In the past 10 years, have you noticed an increase in litter and trash in the streets?
If you have noticed an increase,

When do you believe you first noticed it?

To what (such as a political/social trend) do you attribute this increase to?

Who (such as a specific demographic group) do you believe is contributing to the litter?

What do you feel emotionally/mentally when you see this trash and litter in public?

Are some places in Tunisia kept particularly clean?

Do you feel that services for street cleaning should be expanded/more heavily enforced?

Do you hold those in political power responsible for the current situation?

Do you feel that people share your frustration?

If you haven’t noticed an increase,

How do feel about level of trash and litter? Is it an issues? Or is it negligible?

If it is an issue, is it an issue that the post-revolutionary government has talked about?

If so, why haven’t they been successful in alleviating the issue?

If not, why hasn’t the government brought it up?

If it is not an issue, do you feel completely comfortable with the state of streets and public spaces in Tunisia?

Do you think that public spaces in Tunisia (Streets, parks) are kept safe?

Are you afraid or unsure about the behavior of people in the streets?

Has people’s behavior in public changed after the Revolution?
On an average day, how often do you walk around the city?

How often do you spend time in public spaces (parks, street cafes, squares)?

Appendix C: List of Interview Subjects

Listed below are the names and associated organizations of those officials well versed in various areas of the issues, including the direct trash collection process and municipal governance.

Amri, Lamine. Chief Engineer of La Marsa Municipality. Interview with Author. La Marsa, Tunisia, November 24, 2015.


Mekki, Mounir. La Marsa Tax Assessor. Interview with Author. La Marsa, Tunisia, November 24, 2015.


All interviewees from the general public were assigned pseudonyms. All subjects were interviewed in La Marsa, Tunisia. Listed below are a few descriptive statistics of those interviewed, including age, if known, and occupation.


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