Reviving Refuse: Individual Agency in Meknes, Morocco’s Waste Management Services

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Reviving Refuse: Individual Agency in Meknes, Morocco’s Waste Management Services

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Asian & Middle Eastern Studies from
The College of William & Mary

By

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Accepted for Highest Honors
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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Williamsburg, VA
April 30, 2020
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Acknowledgements

My honors thesis would not have materialized without the generous support of my friends and colleagues, both at William & Mary and in Morocco. I am endlessly thankful for Dr. Andrea Wright’s guidance and motivation throughout the research process as my advisor. Her optimism, encouragement, and pointed feedback on earlier versions of this thesis have been enormously helpful. I also thank Dr. Negar Razavi and Dr. Stephen Sheehi for all of their input and agreeing to sit on my thesis committee. They have been more than generous with their time throughout my research and writing process. My professors amaze me with their support and enthusiasm. They challenge me to go further in my research and deepen my understanding of the world. Thank you to my dear friends (CMD, SER, ARS) for supporting me throughout this process, watching mock presentations and traveling with me to present an early version of this thesis at Virginia Commonwealth University. I am very lucky to have all of you in my life.

I owe Dr. Driss Cherkaoui a special thank you for his support over the last four years. As my first Arabic language professor when I arrived at William & Mary, Driss was a driving factor in my interest in the Middle East-North Africa region. He encouraged me to study at the Arab-American Language Institute in Morocco (AALIM) in the summer of 2018, a decision which ultimately catalyzed this honors thesis. When I told him that I planned to return to Morocco to study the waste and recycling habits I had observed while studying abroad, he generously invited me to return to AALIM and connect me with people in the industry. I owe further thank-yous to Selwa Cherkaoui, Ahmed Ben-Taj, and Taha Tabaa, three individuals who generously assisted with my research efforts while I was in Morocco and made it feel like I had never left. Thank you to Abdellatif Hajjioui, who also assisted me with transcribing the interviews in this thesis.

A special thank you is owed to Zineb El Hilali. My former Arabic teacher at AALIM and forever friend, Zineb was a tremendous help in navigating Meknes and communicating in the Moroccan Arabic dialect. She was a generous host who welcomed me back to Meknes with open arms, even hosting me at her family home for Eid lKbir and treating me like a sister.

I want to thank all of my interlocutors who spoke honestly with me about their lives. After our interviews, many of them thanked me for speaking with them—their stories are rarely, if ever, highlighted. Some individuals shared with me hopes that my work would bring about positive change for their living and working conditions. Their courage to open up to someone they had just met—a young, foreign woman, no less—was such a privilege. I hope that my work here honors their stories and fulfills the hopes that many of them saw in it.

Finally, I am sincerely grateful to the Charles Center at William & Mary and all of the individuals who donated to my Honors Fellowship funding campaign. The opportunity to conduct self-driven research in Morocco is a rare fortune for an undergraduate and I feel incredibly privileged. Completing this project over the last year has made me a more confident and well-versed scholar. Writing my thesis pushed the limits of my own knowledge unlike any other project I undertook while at William & Mary, yet it also produced the greatest reward.

AMG
List of Arabic Terms

Al-Nidhafa min al-Iman (Arabic: النظافة من الإيمان): An idiom considered to be Islamic Hadith (a saying attributed to the Prophet Mohammed) by many Moroccans. Its meaning translates to ‘cleanliness comes from faith.’ This phrase was frequently cited by waste management personnel when describing their work.¹

Meknassi (Arabic: مكناسي): Adjective used to describe one who is from Meknes.²

Mikhala (Arabic: ميخالة): A colloquial term to describe self-employed individuals who scavenge for used items that can then be resold at the local market in Meknes, located on a street in the old city called Bab al-Jdid (باب الجديد). In other parts of Morocco, mikhala are known as joutiya (جوطية) or éboueurs in French.

Muzbil (Arabic: مزبل): Sanitation workers who are formally employed by waste management companies. The literal translation for muzbil means ‘garbage man,’ or ‘one who works with garbage.’³

¹ Established literature on this idiom is inaccessible online. Other idioms ending in ‘min al-Iman’ have been invented for nationalist purposes, including ‘hub al-watan min al-Iman’ (love of the homeland comes from faith), which emerged in the twilight years of the Ottoman Empire to inspire pan-Islamist opposition to European colonialism. Because of the lack of information accessible to me on al-nidhafa min al-Iman specifically, I cannot validate the claim that this particular saying is, in fact, Hadith. Instead, I demonstrate in this thesis how Moroccans employ this phrase as if it were Hadith, carrying a religious significance that becomes translated into a cultural value. For more on the ‘hub al-watan’ idiom, see Alexander J. Motyl, Encyclopedia of Nationalism (San Diego: Academic Press, 2001), 399.

² I pluralize Meknassi as ‘Meknassis,’ using the English plural ending ‘s.’ My choice differs from the Arabic grammatical rules for pluralization. I decided to employ an English plural to in order to treat Meknassi as an adjective that fits in with the text of this thesis, which is written in English.

³ Note on translation: To simplify translations for a primarily English speaking audience, I use mikhala and muzbil to refer to both the singular and plural forms of the words. It should be noted, however, that this differs from the Arabic: there are, in fact, singular and plural forms of these words that are used in Morocco.
Preface

In June of 2018, I arrived in Meknes, Morocco for a two month-long Arabic language study program. Aside from running into a former classmate who, coincidentally, was seated in the row next to mine on the airplane, I came completely alone, unsure of what to expect or how the experience would impact the trajectory of my college career. My summer in Morocco gave me two of the fullest months of my entire life. Outside of the classroom, I had the opportunity to explore Meknes, learn about life through the eyes of my host family, and travel throughout the country with newfound friends.

On my second weekend in Morocco, my friends and I traveled to the quiet seaside town of Asilah on the country’s northern coast. I was astounded by the beauty of the white and blue stucco buildings that overlooked the water. However, I also had come to notice something else about the city: an accumulation of trash. Trash was not unique to Asilah, but struck me particularly hard on this weekend trip, given the otherwise pristine beauty of the town. On our second day in Asilah, while taking a taxi *kbir*—a large taxi meant for five people—to a secluded beach, we passed an open field filled with litter, comprised mostly of single-use plastic bottles and food wrappers. In an unconfident, garbled mess of French and Arabic, I asked the taxi driver what kind of recycling programs existed in Morocco. He replied that all recycling throughout the country occurred in Casablanca, Morocco’s capital city. I was surprised to hear this, given the proliferation of recycling programs that existed back home in the United States. This brief interaction with my taxi driver stuck with me throughout my summer in Morocco. I begrudgingly threw 1.5-liter water bottles into trash cans simply because there were no such recycling bins. On my walks to and from class every day, I would pass pungent, decomposing

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4 I later learned that recyclable materials are sorted from waste before it goes to the landfill, but I do not know what percentage of these thrown away items actually get recycled.
piles of food on the streets and often noticed trash being carried by the wind—even plastic shopping bags, which had supposedly been outlawed since 2016. I wanted to know more about how Morocco handled its trash, but I sadly did not have the time, nor the resources, to do so during my intensive two month-long study abroad program.

Almost a year later, I had the opportunity to design a research project for my senior Honors Thesis in Middle Eastern Studies. I thought back to the waste and recycling issues I had observed in Morocco, but hesitated to consider it for my thesis. I initially thought that ‘garbage’ was an inappropriate and inadequate object of analysis—in hindsight, I realize that my mindset on the subject was in part conditioned by how we, as a society, have come to distance ourselves from our refuse. These same forces stigmatize waste management workers, which I will discuss in depth throughout this thesis. Upon some initial research, I came across the world of Discard Studies, a fascinating sub-discipline that explores human-waste relationships. I set out to return to Meknes with this new knowledge in tow and learn about waste management and the personnel who carry out its functions.

With the help of my former language institute, I set up interviews with formally employed sanitation workers, known as muzbil, which literally means ‘garbage man.’ These interviews brought me to the realization that cleanliness, waste, and recycling are issues that surpass the duties and abilities of muzbil. I came across Bab al-Jdid, a winding street in the old medina of Meknes, where vendors, called mikhala, sell used items. Many of these vendors acquire these goods through independent scavenging. Others purchase them at a daily auction at the landfill, where items found by muzbil are available for a small price. Although mikhala do not consider themselves active participants in waste management, the act of collection and resale is a form of recycling in itself. Muzbil’s formalized collection duties and mikhala’s informal
scavenging work are two channels through which waste is collected, disposed of, and recycled in Meknes. The personal accounts of *muzbil, mikhala,* and their supervisors illustrate the ‘incomplete completeness’ of the waste management sector. They told me stories of their work, the hardships they face, and how they fit into the larger society. These narratives help us to better understand labor, society, and the state in the context of Meknes, Morocco.5

To provide brief context on the city itself, the most recent official population statistics from the municipality of Meknes, dating back to the 2014 census, show that there is a population of 520,428 individuals. More than 519,000 of these residents are Moroccan nationals.6 In the Fez-Meknes administrative region of Morocco, the recorded unemployment rate is 13.8%, which is nearly five points higher than the national average of 8.9% unemployment.7 Agriculture is one of the most prominent sectors in the Fez-Meknes district, accounting for 15 percent of the country’s overall agricultural area. Grapes, olives, and grains are some of the largest exports from the Meknes region.8 More than 1.7 million workers are employed in the sector.9 Other important regional sectors include manufacturing and tourism.10

The interviews for this thesis were all conducted in the span of three weeks in August 2019.11 To my knowledge, no similar interviews have taken place in Meknes, an important and

5 Although I discuss nationwide and global phenomena that impact Meknes, I only aim to explain how these processes work within the city and not elsewhere. Waste management infrastructures vary from place to place. Even within the prefecture of Meknes, rural communities do not have any form of waste management services and resort to dumping their waste in communal areas. I observed this firsthand in a village near the town of M’haya, about 45 minutes outside of Meknes. Thus, I only attempt to explain the workings of the city of Meknes in this thesis.
9 Ministère de l'Intérieur Direction Générale des Collectivités Locales, *La Région,* 44.
10 Ministère de l'Intérieur Direction Générale des Collectivités Locales, *La Région,* 56.
11 All participants and companies have been designated pseudonyms to protect their identities and respect their privacy in accordance with my Institutional Review Board protocol.
economically productive city in Morocco due to its fertile agricultural lands and cultural gems that attract tourists. These interviews add critical insight to this thesis by illuminating the human dimension of waste management. As marginalized groups supporting a vital public service, the opinions and perspectives of *mikhala* and *muzbil* are critical to understanding how waste management and recycling programs operate within the state, and how global processes influence them.
Introduction

“More than a symptom of culture, waste is a material that has effects in the world, including local and global political disputes, liberal and illiberal forms of governance, competing assessments of economic and moral value, and concerns about environmental pollution and crisis.”


I sat with Yassine at a quiet table in the language institute in Meknes where I had formerly been a student, sipping tea and sharing stories away from the scorching August sun. This was our second meeting—in our first, he had told me in blunt terms the discrimination he faced as a muzbil (garbage man) in the Hamria district of Meknes. Yassine’s honesty on topics, ranging from the waste management company’s treatment of workers to how the beloved King Mohammed VI had begun to neglect Meknes, astounded me. He had just recounted a particularly harrowing tale of witnessing a drunk driver smash into his garbage truck, crushing his coworker’s legs in the process. Even though it had occurred more than four years prior, Yassine was still visibly shaken by the incident that left his coworker lame and without compensation from his employer. Hearing this story made me wonder whether muzbil felt respected at all by their fellow citizens. I voiced my question and he launched into an impassioned reply:

“In Morocco, they do not [respect us]. They name us with rude words such as ‘trash,’ ‘dirty,’ and ‘garbage men.’ I really do not know why they call us those words; we are those who clean their dirtiness, not those who generate it. However, few people admire and respect us. I hope that citizens, along with the government, will treat garbage men better by showing us the respect we deserve. You feel relief when you walk in clean places, is it not true? People, sometimes, while we are working, they close their noses as a sign of disgust; they hate the smell of the dirt. Therewith we turn a blind eye and continue our work. Another thing – our work is similar to that of the policemen and soldiers; we all serve the same duty, which is protecting our country. We, sometimes, meet good people who really appreciate what we do and support us with good words. On the other hand, there are other people who insult us and call us disrespectful names.”
Yassine’s remarks represent the clear duality between the ways in which muzbil understand public perceptions of their work, versus the identity of pride they construct for themselves. He and the other muzbil I met throughout Meknes shared a sense of duty in their work. They understood themselves to be guardians of their city, whereas much of the public viewed them no differently than the trash that they collect. Nevertheless, the sense of personal duty shared among muzbil is noteworthy, especially when compared to the more negative self-perceptions of a group of informal waste management workers known as mikhala.

Mikhala are self-employed workers who obtain used goods through scavenging activities and sale from other individuals. In Meknes, mikhala congregate on Bab al-Jdid, a street on the outskirts of the old medina. On most days, one can find vendors lined up along the entire length of the road, crouching behind their items for sale. I observed the wide range of goods offered: some sold used mechanical parts, others had used clothing and children’s toys, and some had more peculiar items, ranging from single fondue forks to boxes of heart medication. One of the mikhala I encountered, Omar, was an energetic, middle-aged man, bouncing from vendor to vendor. He approached my friend, Zineb, and I, curious as to why we—two young women who stuck out from the older crowd—had come to Bab al-Jdid. Once we told him more about my research, he eagerly began to share the circumstances that led him to this work. He recounted a difficult life, born into a poor family that could not afford to give him an education. As an illiterate 38-year-old selling what many people consider trash, Omar fully understood the harsh circumstances that exist for people like him:

“Here, we spend our days searching in the garbage bins. We sometimes earn 15 dirhams per day [approximately $1.50 USD in 2019], some days, we earn 20 dirhams [approximately $2.00 USD]. There are no other job opportunities. Now, it’s been twenty years. I have experienced different jobs. I worked in construction. I always got kicked off after three or four days of work. We got frustrated and hopeless. Therefore, we started doing this job. The garbage bin is more merciful to us than this country.”
While both *muzbil* and *mikhala* are two groups contributing to the waste industry, their activities, duties, and perceptions—both self and by others—are quite different. *Muzbil* generally construct a sense of pride in their formal employment, perceiving their work no differently than that of the military or police in terms of how they protect their city. They also generally attempt to distance themselves from *mikhala*, preferring not to associate with this highly stigmatized form of work. *Mikhala* understand that these negative perceptions of their work are prominent. Omar’s embittered remark about the merciful nature of the garbage can reflects the effect of economic hardship on his social standing. The public thinks that this group of workers is too lazy to find formal employment, instead turning to the streets, selling scrap materials to make money with relative ease. Clearly a victim to this stereotype, Omar delivered a powerful statement against it:

“For us, our only source of a living is the garbage where we collect things—not only for us but also many other people. If these people had better jobs, they wouldn’t work here. Some people believe that we are too lazy to search for other jobs, but we aren’t. No one would refuse a good job, except for those spoiled young people who have everything provided for them…We are used to working hard from childhood. We have to work here until we find a better job or die.”

Omar made sure to note the difficulty of finding formal work. The limited employment opportunities in Meknes have given rise to a prominent informal sector. Although many *Meknassis* perceive this type of work as ‘easy’ given that anyone can collect and resell goods, Omar’s comments point to the social and economic hardships that uniquely impact workers in his position.

*Muzbil* and *mikhala* face varying degrees of stigma since they work with garbage in formal and informal channels. This social stigma exists despite their importance in maintaining the city’s waste and recycling infrastructure. *Muzbil* collect trash from the streets in three shifts of workers per day. They empty garbage bins and also clean public spaces, such as squares and parks. There is no separate recycling system that parallels trash collection in Meknes. Instead, all
waste is collected, sorted at a nearby facility, and then brought to the landfill. The sorted recyclable items are trucked to Casablanca, where they are then turned into new products. Additionally, there is a daily auction in which waste management companies allow mikhala to bid on some of these items. They then take their winnings to Bab al-Jdid for resale to the public. On top of this method of collecting used goods, mikhala independently rummage through trash containers where they can find goods for free, albeit illegally. Sometimes, mikhala sell the scrap materials that they find to middle-men, who also bring these items to Casablanca for recycling, independent of official recycling channels.

While often seen as piecemeal, in this thesis, I demonstrate that the interconnected processes of waste management and recycling between the formal and informal sectors constitute a relatively whole sanitation service. In order to understand the social and political aspects of sanitation, this thesis examines the practices of mikhala and muzbil workers and considers how social hierarchies impact the perceived success of trash collection and recycling in Meknes, Morocco. Mainstream discourse in Morocco highlights the role of the formal sanitation sector—that is, work legally contracted by the government—in providing municipal waste collection and recycling, often to the exclusion of informal labor. However, examining the practices of self-employed mikhala, who re-sell what is thought of as “trash,” elucidates that their work is also integral to Meknes’ ability to control its solid waste. Their work is especially important in light of the public apathy towards waste management—an apathy that undermines the ability of mikhala and muzbil alike to keep the city clean. Popular sentiments about the delivery of waste management services are informed by Western sanitation systems and the swell of neoliberalism throughout Morocco, which has bred a consumer culture generating more waste than ever. In the face of the social stigma and precarious work conditions that they face, muzbil and mikhala form
a relatively complete waste and recycling program in a city with fragmented collection infrastructures.

**Informing the Present: Precolonial, Protectorate, and Postcolonial Meknes**

Meknes is an inland central Moroccan city located between the Rif Mountains to the north and Atlas Mountains to the south. The first recorded group to settle in Meknes was an Amazigh tribe in the 9th century. The city was established as a military stronghold in the 11th century under the Almoravid Dynasty. It later became the capital of Morocco in the 17th century under the sultan Moulay Ismail, who built the palace, mosques, and nine ornamental gates that Meknes is known for today. Meknes fell from prominence after Moulay Ismail’s death, when the capital was moved to Marrakech and many of the ornate architectural features of the city were destroyed.

No discussion of Moroccan history is complete without demonstrating the lasting impact of French colonialism on local politics, social practices, and the economy. By 1847, France was in control of Algeria and desired to spread its influence over neighboring Morocco in order to dominate the greater Maghreb region. It finally achieved this goal in 1912 under the Treaty of Fez after the weakened Sultan ‘Abd al-Hafiz became unable to retain power on his own. From 1912 until 1956, France enacted a military protectorate over Morocco. The French promised that the sultan would retain power over the populace, but this was only nominal in reality—

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French-appointed resident general had true authority and was not afraid to coopt Moroccan leadership when it disagreed with his rule.\textsuperscript{15}  

French colonial methods centered mainly around enculturating natives to become more like them.\textsuperscript{16} By inculcating Moroccans in French ways of life, administrators were confident that their control over the protectorate was secure. The French education system was implemented in order to alter existing cultural patterns and correct what they perceived to be ‘Arab decadence’ spawned by Islam.\textsuperscript{17} The French were particularly interested in \textit{le Maroc utile}, what they saw as the economically useful part of the country, comprised of northwestern cities including Casablanca, Fez, Rabat, and Meknes.\textsuperscript{18} The creation of a ‘useful’ Morocco entailed the implementation of modern territorial state-building methods and a complete reconfiguration of space. Hubert Lyautey, the French Resident-General in Morocco, began to carve cities into two distinct parts: the ‘native’ ancient medinas and the European ‘\textit{villes nouvelles}’ (‘new cities’).\textsuperscript{19} Meknes is one such city whose colonial geography is highly apparent in the present day, with distinctions between the \textit{medina qdima} (old city) and three newer districts, Hamria, Ismailia, and Azzitouna. The spatial dislocation of the population, consigned to their respective districts, bred economic and social inequality. Further, oft-ignored rural populations migrated to cities in larger numbers seeking economic opportunity, in turn putting an even greater strain on resources.

Moroccans actively resisted French colonialism. The socioeconomic changes that the French implemented stimulated nationalist sentiments that the protectorate administration never

\textsuperscript{15} Barbour et al., "Morocco - Decline," Encyclopedia Brittanica.  
\textsuperscript{17} Gordon, \textit{North Africa's}, 9.  
\textsuperscript{18} It is worth noting that Spain maintained control over northern Morocco, with Tangier maintained as an international zone. Northern Morocco was an important trading point for the Spanish as it was the closest gateway to Europe.  
anticipated encountering. Riots erupted periodically, with notable clashes in 1937 and 1947, resulting in hundreds of Moroccan casualties that further empowered nationalist sentiments. By the 1950s, independence movements became more common under the Istiqlal (Independence) Party. The French ultimately deemed the heightened number of clashes in Morocco not worth the value of the territory. At the same time that Moroccans revolted against them, France faced an independence war in its more prized colony of Algeria. To better devote their time and resources, France conceded the Moroccan protectorate in 1956 to King Mohammed V, who returned from exile in Madagascar to widespread acclaim.

**Post-Protectorate Legacies**

While French colonial authority in Morocco officially ended in 1956, France’s legacy in the country persisted beyond this date. In their wake, the French left unworkable institutions that had primarily benefitted French settlers, who no longer resided in the country. King Mohammed V’s reign was cut short by his death in 1961, and his son, Hassan II, ascended to the throne. King Hassan relied more heavily on the same repressive tactics used by the French in order to maintain order and stability. On the economic development front, King Hassan II began the process of structural adjustment loans from the international community by opening up his country to foreign investment in the 1980s. He turned to France for economic assistance, changing Morocco from a primarily rural country into a developing nation with a widespread urban poverty problem. King Hassan’s program for development was unrelenting in its

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methods. Dissidents, who saw the king’s reforms as imperialist constructions that only benefitted a handful of people, were frequently imprisoned. Another stabilizing tactic used by the king was to send Moroccan workers abroad to France, reducing the potential number of dissenters while also enabling them to earn incomes they could not otherwise earn domestically. This move also enabled King Hassan II to uphold a strong relationship with Morocco’s former colonial overseer. Moroccan émigrés in France were ineligible for French citizenship, ensuring their dependency on their homeland. France was Morocco’s key to credibility on the international stage, and the king’s authoritarian campaign involving torture, imprisonment, and sending Moroccan workers to France were all tools to preserve his own stability.24

Upon Hassan II’s death in 1999, his son, Mohammed VI, took to the throne. King Mohammed portrayed himself differently from his predecessors, giving the impression that Morocco was moving toward Western-style democracy.25 He called himself ‘le roi des pauvres’ (the King of the Poor), making regular visits throughout Morocco. These trips included Meknes’ prized annual International Agricultural Fair, according to my interlocutors. The King’s attendance at this event fostered a sense of pride among Meknassis, who felt valued for their contribution to Morocco’s economy. King Mohammed’s unforeseen style of rule gave the impression that Morocco was undergoing an awakening, termed nayda, with economic and cultural reforms that appealed to the West.26 However, the changes associated with nayda continued to primarily benefit the elite, not ordinary Moroccans.27 In the Arab Spring of 2011 that sent waves across the Arab world, some Moroccans reacted against the perceived

24 Ibid.
27 Hussey, The French, 331.
Westernized corruption of the state and called for reform. Unemployment—particularly among young university graduates—was high, while morale was low. Moroccan leadership deftly retained its control throughout the Arab Spring, enacting limited constitutional reforms to appease the population. Yet, nearly ten years since the movement, it is clear that most reforms were in name only.  

Unemployment remains high, social inequality is rampant, and many Moroccans continue to look to Europe as an ideal for the delivery of public services, such as waste management, which will be addressed in Chapter I. It is impossible to separate Morocco’s present condition from France’s paternalistic approach to it. The apparent “postcolonial” era in which we live is more colonial than it may initially seem. Anne Stoler writes in *Duress* that colonial presence coexists with postcolonial predicaments. Oftentimes, these colonial realities do not receive due scrutiny. With their own particular discourse, colonial records can delude us into thinking in binary terms about what was colonial and what is no longer colonial. I find that colonial remnants are pervasive in Meknassi daily life. In “Imperial Debris,” Stoler writes that imperial formations, unlike empires, are unfixed “processes of becoming.” They can operate throughout time and become repurposed within the present day.  

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28 Many of the reforms in question were nuanced changes to Constitutional wording. For example, Article 19 under the old constitution had described the King’s position as “sacred,” while Article 46 of the new constitution changed this descriptor to “inviolable,” invoking only a slight change in significance from religious to secular absolute power. Parliamentary members and the Prime Minister now have more independence from the king, yet his power remains dominant and dissidents still face harsh punishment for free speech. See James N. Sater, "Morocco's 'Arab' Spring," Middle East Institute, last modified October 1, 2011, accessed April 23, 2020, https://www.mei.edu/publications/moroccos-arab-spring.


30 Stoler, *Duress: Imperial 5."


32 Stoler, "Imperial Debris," 196.
about waste management dating back to the Protectorate era as a pertinent imperial formation, which I will explore in depth in the next chapter.

To return to the quote by Joshua Reno at the beginning of this introduction, waste’s forms in a particular location are indicative of that place’s political, economic, and social priorities. These priorities are informed by Morocco’s imperial legacies. The application of European waste management contracts in Meknes has created gaps in services that have enabled the development of a gig economy of mikhala. Mikhala are at once associated with obsolescence—scavenging is an age-old activity that gives the individual a level of self-sustenance—and hyper-modernity because of how they are needed in the modern waste management sector to carry out certain recycling functions. Whether or not it admits it, the state needs mikhala to function as a part of contemporary capitalism rooted in French Protectorate legacies.

In Chapter I, I take a temporal approach to waste management practices. I analyze how ‘modernity,’ as advanced by globalization, has shaped the present state of the waste management industry. I also explore the phenomenon of neoliberalism and the ways in which it impacts the work of muzbil and mikhala. Viewing waste management through a temporal lens deepens an understanding of waste management as a practice that operates on both local and global scales, and how the practice can perpetuate social inequality for those who work in the sector. In Chapter II, I examine the relationships between labor, neoliberalism, and the state. This discussion relates workers to their community and their government in order to better understand trends in labor and what constitutes ‘work.’ I also demonstrate how official discourses of ‘development’ are disguised methods for the state to maintain authoritarian control over the populace. The state’s approach to governance ultimately renders many people marginalized, forcing them to construct identities around the work that they are, or are not, able to find. Finally,
I return to a synthesis of these two chapters in the conclusion in order to show how the forces at work in the lives of waste management laborers are symptomatic of the larger processes that govern Morocco today, and why this matters in a global context.
“[T]he street garbage might be the endpoint for some, but for others it is only the start of a much longer temporal-material process. The distances and depths of these vectors, of time and material substances, are the means by which inequality is felt and normalized.”


A temporal approach to waste management in Meknes clarifies the differences between global structures and those which are uniquely Moroccan, and how these structures produce inequality. In particular, I ask how modernity has changed perceptions of what constitutes waste and the opportunities it provides for workers. This chapter opens with a look into the historical developments that have taken Morocco ‘global.’ I then demonstrate how heightened materialism and a culture of disposability have reshaped the ways in which the individual interacts with waste. Building on the theme of colonial remnants in the Introduction to this thesis, I detail how Europe has played a central role in shaping sanitation in Morocco. The interactions between international actors, Moroccans, and waste itself shape the nature of work for both formally and informally employed waste management personnel.

Beyond Social Exclusion: Globalization and Social Transformation

The title of this section is inspired by Ronaldo Munck’s book, *Globalization and Social Exclusion*, which correlates the interconnectedness of global markets and the growing amount of

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33 I define ‘modernity’ as the forces of societal improvement or change that have formed a distinction between the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern.’ The formation of this dichotomy in the context of Morocco is largely due to the neoliberal economic reforms beginning in the 1980s. As a result, Morocco has seen a growth in technological innovation and new formulations of state power that often take a back seat to market forces. Modernizing reforms have restructured life in Meknes; in the context of the waste management sector, modernity has limited workers’ employment prospects and overhauled ways of thinking about waste. Placed in conversation with neoliberalism and globalization, these modernizing transformations will be explored in this chapter. For a longer description of modernity as epistemology, see Couze Venn and Mike Featherstone, "Modernity," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, nos. 2-3 (May 2006): 457-65. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276406064829.
exclusion that results from this process. In this thesis, globalization refers to the processes that transform social relations by working across territorial boundaries. It involves the movement of goods and people, effectively de-territorializing processes that were once fixed in space. Consequently, globalization reshapes communities and ideas of who should be included in those communities. Munck argues that the restructuring of labor due to globalization reproduces inequalities, leading to heightened levels of social exclusion. However, rather than thinking solely about the exclusionary capabilities of global capitalist expansion, it is more productive to think about its transformative capacity within the context of Meknes’s waste management sector. For example, although mikhala may be understood as individuals excluded from the formal economy, they are still productive agents who contribute to the economic functioning of the state. The act of recovering waste for resale to fellow Meknassis and middle-men who then sell it to recycling companies provides mikhala with a significant economic impact on globalized Morocco. While they are excluded from formal employment, their informal work is integral to the recycling sector, even if it is not the primary function of their job. This section accounts for the contributions of mikhala and muzbil in greater depth to demonstrate the impact of imported neoliberalism on their ability to carry out work.

34 Ronaldo Munck, Globalization and Social Exclusion: A Transformationalist Perspective (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2005).
37 Munck, Globalization and Social, 64.
38 It must be clarified that mikhala and muzbil are not exclusively valuable in terms of their ability to do work. Jobs have been transformed through global economic restructuring, but the value of human existence remains intact. I focus on their contributions as workers in this thesis because their anxieties around finding work are relevant to the larger discourse on employment in Morocco. Their precarity in society leads them to seek out new work opportunities, even when they are found in the informal sector. Because the pursuit of work emerged as a central concern for muzbil and mikhala in our interviews, I explore the ways in which their work contributes to social narratives and the functioning of the state, while maintaining that these individuals are valuable beyond their ability to be economically productive.
In line with David Harvey’s definition, I characterize neoliberalism in this thesis as an ideology that prescribes private property rights, free market, and free trade as the primary means to advance human well-being. The state leverages this ideology to preserve individual freedoms for people, businesses, and corporations. In turn, neoliberalism requires that the state takes a step back from direct management of the economy. In the face of Soviet-era communism, Western governments and international institutions began to spread neoliberalism transnationally and propagate an ideology of privatizing economic development. Globalization can thus be understood as the mechanism through which neoliberalism has spread worldwide.

Beginning in the early 1980s, Morocco undertook a neoliberal structural adjustment program in order to receive International Monetary Fund and World Bank loans. These adjustments dramatically reduced the number of jobs available in the public sector, which had previously been the largest employer within Morocco. Intended to reduce the financial burden placed on the Moroccan government to finance development, the privatizing reforms of the 1980s reduced the level of government investment across the board, causing stagnant wages and higher levels of poverty and unemployment. Diminishing government-led educational and employment opportunities destabilized the job market. Today, the job market remains highly competitive and connections, rather than skills, are often determining factors in employment.

The latest report from the Moroccan Haut-Commissariat au Plan (High Commission of Planning) recorded 1,239,000 unemployed persons in the fourth quarter of 2019 out of a total 12,162,000

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40 Harvey, *A Brief*, 7.
41 Wikan, "What Is 'Neoliberalism,'" E-International Relations.
people in the total labor force.\textsuperscript{46} Many people are underemployed, if employed at all, and forced to find work in sectors other than those in which they are trained.\textsuperscript{47}

The global expansion of neoliberalism redistributes labor through technological advancement and the expansion and contraction of various industries. As a consequence, more people experience lack of employment and wages, becoming estranged from economic productivity. Increasing numbers of the urban poor globally have moved into slums where their working potential is further minimized by their living conditions. This excess supply of labor is much like surplus commodities in the capitalist economic system, becoming degraded with use, or completely disposed of with time.\textsuperscript{48} As Michelle Yates argues, people too are “embedded in a logic of disposability.”\textsuperscript{49} Humans themselves become dehumanized and objectified, much like the outputs that they produce, as fewer people are needed for material production and find themselves unemployed. Further, many of those who are employed in physically demanding jobs may also be ‘wasted,’ as their work can lead to the deterioration of their bodies. Along similar lines, Zygmunt Bauman demonstrates in \textit{Wasted Lives} how surplus labor produces redundancies in the workforce. To be redundant is to be unneeded or disposable.\textsuperscript{50} Not only do workers become wasted by the nature of their work, as Yates demonstrates, but those who don’t fit in within the capitalist logic too become disposable. Bauman, paying homage to Mary Douglas’s


\textsuperscript{47} Official statistics on employment may only be partially accurate given the prominence of street vending and other jobs that resist detection. For more on this topic, see Jaafar Aksikas, "Prisoners of Globalization: Marginality, Community and the New Informal Economy in Morocco," \textit{Mediterranean Politics} 12, no. 2 (July 2007): 253, https://doi.org/10.1080/13629390701388620.


\textsuperscript{49} Yates, “The Human-As-Waste,” 1679.

\textsuperscript{50} Bauman, \textit{Wasted Lives}, 12.
Purity and Danger, says that it is the “inner logic” of an object that turns it into waste.\textsuperscript{51}

Associating a person with waste in turn reifies that categorization; those who take part in literal ‘dirty’ work are subject to the same abhorrent gaze that the public gives to refuse. The transformative capacity of work under capitalism to turn the worker into waste demonstrates the role of labor as a disposable component in the larger economic system.

I met with many mikhala who epitomized the ‘wasted’ nature of labor in Meknes. When I first encountered Khalid, he was crouched against a chain link fence at the entrance to Bab al-Jdid. He wore a baseball cap to shield his eyes from the blistering summer sun above him. In front of him were neatly organized items for sale, including six pairs of shoes ranging in styles and sizes, a leather utility belt, two television remotes, a calculator, two sets of caster wheels, a collection of jewelry, and two cartons of Genpress, an ACE inhibitor heart medication. He had been selling at Bab al-Jdid for 16 years, purchasing these items from his fellow mikhala. When asked why he entered this job, Khalid said,

“I was a builder. I used to work with [construction] companies, but now I can’t because they give us specific conditions to meet every day.”

These conditions include a daily quota for how much each worker must accomplish. If workers do not meet their quotas, they cannot work with the company again. He continued,

“My age affects finding work. If I go to ask for a job, people say they need someone who is strong and still young…Companies are hiring only teenagers because they are stronger…It is not really difficult to do this job [as a mikhala].”

Khalid’s account is emblematic of the process highlighted by Michelle Yates above: his body has become ‘wasted’ with age and the difficult nature of construction work, relegating him to a job with greater flexibility and fewer physical demands as a mikhala. He also alluded to systemic

\textsuperscript{51} Bauman, Wasted Lives, 22.
issues within the construction sector, as companies constantly search for young, able bodies to carry out their work.

The informal economy in which mikhala work has ballooned in recent years due to the increasingly competitive opportunities in the formal sector for unskilled labor. Approximately 2.4 million Moroccans were engaged in informal work as of 2018. Khalid described how work as a mikhala is a comparatively easy way to make a living, as he can set his own hours. However, despite its flexibility, the job is far less lucrative. Khalid said that the amount of money he makes depends on the day, with some days’ earnings as low as 30 dirhams. His story exemplifies the human-waste dialectic; his inability to fulfill demanding work, as a result of that same work, has wasted his body and led him to a new way to make money at Bab al-Jdid. Yet, as someone working outside of the formalized work logic by re-selling found items on the street, Khalid cannot distance himself from an association with waste, in line with Bauman’s definition of redundant labor. Despite connotations with the abject, Khalid is still productive as a self-employed mikhala, demonstrating that his labor is not entirely excluded, but rather, transformed through neoliberal market reforms.

53 The currency conversion rate at the time of our conversation in 2019 was approximately 1 U.S. dollar to 10 Moroccan dirhams, putting Khalid’s daily earnings at $3.00. Notably, however, the amount that Khalid estimated as the lower end of his daily earnings was higher than the $1.50 to $2.00 amount that Omar had described in the Introduction.
Hamza, another mikhala I met on the same day, echoed Khalid’s sentiments about his work. Hamza worked as a vegetable vendor for many years, but had a difficult time interacting with customers due to hearing loss. He bought some of the items he sells from fellow scavengers, while others he found in the streets and trash containers nearby. Although he described work as a mikhala as less demanding than his prior work, he still struggles due to heart problems. “I have no choice—either I work this job or I don’t find one,” he lamented.

A majority of the mikhala I met were middle-aged and older men, like Khalid and Hamza. The job enables them to make money where they otherwise would make none due to their age and physical condition, while simultaneously providing Meknassis with affordable used goods. In her ethnographic study of similarly informal scavenging workers in Hanoi, Vietnam, Carrie Mitchell finds that the informal waste recovery sector has grown as a result of the increasing levels of consumption in a globalized world. This growing industry supported by the urban poor is directly linked to heightened consumerism across the city that creates larger...
amounts of waste. As Khalid and Hamza’s stories reflect, many mikhala were formerly employed in other jobs before beginning this work. A globalized consumer economy has contributed to the development of a secondhand goods market that provides a form of employment, albeit informal, to people who lost their original jobs to this same market force. Because of the ways that waste connects Meknassis to the mikhala, the mikhala have become permanent fixture in consumer society and make a contribution to the beginnings of a circular economy. They are thus subjects of social transformation, given their self-repurposing into new forms of work.

Figure 1.2: A view of Bab al-Jdid from the street’s entrance. Various vendors have placed their items for sale on blankets in front of the sidewalk where they sit. Men and women browse the offerings.

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Toward an Inclusive Waste Management System

In the previous section, I demonstrated how *mikhala* represent a shift in the function of labor in Meknes, providing an informal means of employment for those who cannot otherwise find work in a neoliberal system. This section describes in more detail how *mikhala* become integrated into the larger waste management system with *muzbil*. Just as economic restructuring has impacted the informal waste management sector, the formal sector has been transformed with the influence of countries who provide foreign direct investment to Morocco. It is, in part, the influence of these aid-providing countries which has solidified the place of the *mikhala* as a complement to the official sanitation workers of the city. I begin with an exploration of official waste management contracts and their implications for the delivery of services, then continue on to show how gaps in this system have enabled *mikhala* to fill a role in the waste management sector.

Solid waste companies from developed countries who implement their waste management systems in developing countries often create unintended consequences in the delivery of sanitation services.\(^{55}\) In Meknes, sanitation contracts are awarded by the municipal government in three districts of the city: Ismailia, Azzitouna, and Hamria.\(^{56}\) According to Suleiman, an administrator from TahirSys, each district serves 200,000 of the total population, which currently stands at 632,000. International waste management companies submit bids for contracts in each of the three districts. Ismailia, the district in which I conducted the majority of my research, is managed by TahirSys. TahirSys is a subsidiary of a Spanish sanitation company operating in nearly 30 countries worldwide. Similarly, the company charged with rehabilitating


Meknes’ landfill since 2014 is a subsidiary of an international waste management company based in France. These contracted waste management companies assist with technology sharing in a globalized world, yet they also cause gaps in service that enable trash to proliferate in the streets. In awarding these contracts, the government of Meknes and Ministry of the Interior relinquish control over the direction of services for years at a time. They entrust these companies with the delivery of effective waste management services. Koenraad Bogaert terms the general trend of privatizing free-market policies like these “de-Moroccanization” that brings foreign capital to the fore of some of the country’s largest industries.57 Despite their increasing prominence, these companies sometimes fail to deliver on their promises, though not entirely through their own fault.

Workers’ strikes are not uncommon among sanitation workers in Morocco, with the most recent one recorded in Casablanca in September 2019 for workers across multiple companies. TahirSys has faced workers’ strikes of its own. In 2011, unionized workers in the northern city of Tétouan paralyzed the city and backstopped collection of municipal waste. TahirSys refused to increase employee wages, even after the urging of the local governor. At the time of these strikes, TahirSys was a leading provider of sanitation services in Morocco. As of 2016, it maintained contracts in only five of the nineteen cities it had previously held in 2011, with only 1,500 of its initial 5,000 employees remaining. When the city of Khouribga cancelled its contract with TahirSys in 2016, it cited poor reputation on the national market, harkening back to the company’s handling of events in 2011. Although the government occasionally cancels a contract in favor of selecting a new company, TahirSys has evidently maintained a small amount of market share despite its damaged reputation. Sustaining a strained relationship with waste

management companies like TahirSys, however, comes at the detriment of workers, who are expected to carry out their duties regardless of conflicts higher up in management.

The *muzbil* I interviewed appeared more content with their working conditions, although some voiced complaints about the quality of working materials. As I rode in the cab of his garbage truck, Jihad, a *muzbil*, complained that the materials he needed to work with were inadequate. *Muzbil* must manually load trash containers onto the lever mechanism, which then tips their contents into the dump truck bed. Sometimes, these containers are damaged, allowing garbage spill out of them in the dumping process. When a garbage can empties into the truck bed, a worker must be standing inside with a rake to make sure that all of the trash gets removed from the container. This process requires standing in the midst the waste, comprised of a mixture of organic materials, consumer goods, and, often, shards of glass or metal that can harm the workers. Bodily harm appears to be a work-associated risk accepted by *muzbil*. Yassine, who has been working as a *muzbil* in Hamria for the last ten years, recollected,

“If I show you my hand, you will be shocked. I was injured by glass and had to get stitches. I had five stitches in my hand. Even though I wear gloves, the glass can still get in. When I collect the trash and put my hand on a bag, I might still be hurt by the glass. The gloves are not sufficiently protective. This is our situation—we are patient and receive medical treatment ourselves [because we do not get it from our employers]. We are exposed to risks all of the time. There are so many other cases. We face accidents all the time. One of my friends and I were on the back of the truck. A car hit us and my friend broke his legs.”

Limited resources and increasing government pressure seem to have jointly constrained the ability of sanitation contractors like TahirSys to carry out their work safely and efficiently. Yet, for Suleiman, the supervisor of TahirSys’s 20 contracts throughout Morocco, the faults of this system primarily rest in the hands of the Ministry of the Interior:

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58 This is the same friend of Yassine’s who he described in more detail in the introduction.
“The problem is that everything is done in the Ministry of the Interior. So they are the part that give the instructions to the districts in order to make this kind of contract. During meetings, during symposiums, during Congress, during everything, we try to speak to them, for example, in order to try to give new material of the latest technologies. For example, we have tried to look for some investments to change behavior—to teach people, teach students, teach children—in order to change things.”

Although he did not state it explicitly, Suleiman implied here that the government has not yet undertaken any reforms to increase public awareness about proper waste management. The disconnect between delegation and delivery of services ultimately factors into problems, such as those faced by Jihad and Yassine in their daily work.

Companies like TahirSys also struggle to keep up with the demands of their contracts due to backed-up government payments. Suleiman added,

“The first problem that we have here in Morocco is that the districts don’t pay at the right time. There is too much delay at the company. That’s the first problem. Imagine that sometimes in the contract, we have to wait 12, 13, 14 months to get the invoice paid.”

The misunderstandings between contracted service providers and the Ministry of the Interior are a root cause of inadequate municipal waste management services. Fault rests on neither party exclusively, but rather, on the implementation of private contracts themselves. This system borrows from European waste management standards, but does not account for the peculiarities of Morocco that may render the system ineffective in this location. In “The Anatomy of a Dumpster,” David Boarder Giles writes, “Waste is a determinative cultural-economic logic in its own right.”

59 Human waste habits in Morocco differ greatly from those of Europe because of its unique cultural and economic conditions. In Meknes, for instance, organic matter comprises a larger percentage of waste due to the abundance of fresh produce in the local diet and importance

of agricultural production to the region. Along similar lines, Joshua Reno suggests in “Waste and Waste Management” that “nothing is waste in general but only in particular.” He elaborates, writing that “[t]he kinds of waste streams that proliferate and their geographic distribution are tied to the global spread of capitalism and its crises, a growing divide between the world’s rich and poor, and political conflict and ethnonational divisions.” Cultural and socioeconomic factors distinguish what types of waste accumulate in a given place; accordingly, these differences impact how the waste management industry should respond. The inherent differences in waste management needs in each place, however, entail that contracted companies can never carry out a job that they are asked to fulfill with fewer resources and lack of understanding on the part of the government sponsoring them.

Figure 1.3: Muzbil empty trash containers from the old city into the garbage truck bed. One worker must load the trash bins onto the lever mechanism of the truck. Another worker must stand inside

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of the truck bed in order to ensure that all waste is removed from the container. The truck’s driver stands by to assist when necessary.

Figure 1.4: The refuse from the garbage truck is unloaded at a sorting facility a few miles from Meknes before it is taken to the landfill. Lots of unbagged, loose waste is visible.

The idea that effective waste management systems come from an ‘experienced’ Europe serves as a colonial remnant, collapsing time and shedding light on the false notion of ‘progress’ with respect to the delivery of sanitation services. In “Imperial Debris,” Ann Stoler writes, “[colonial] ruins draw on residual pasts to make claims on futures. But they can also create a sense of irretrievability or of futures lost.”62 While waste management contracts in Meknes are not in themselves colonial structures, European ideals pervade the waste management sector, perhaps preventing the implementation of a waste management system that functions better for the city. The school of thought that is now rampant in Morocco due to Western influences

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promotes a continuous ‘production-consumption-disposal’ mentality.\textsuperscript{63} I find that this mindset is a sort of neocolonialism that breeds Moroccan dependence on European powers for economic well-being. European waste management contracts are reminiscent of the Protectorate-era understanding that France can improve Morocco. Instead of a complete system of waste management and recycling supported by the government, Meknes relies solely on its formally employed sanitation workers, who cannot fulfill this job with the European tools they have been given.

Neocolonialism is an unnamed driver of globalization, which created the need for large-scale waste management itself. Moroccans look to Western countries, especially France, as a model for cleanliness. In doing so, these individuals are looking to a colonial past that precludes them from envisioning a future for themselves separate from France. Further, relying upon French and Spanish waste management contracts is deceptive and counter to the free-market appearance which they initially resemble: these contracts become new sites of patronage to Europe, fostering a relationship that is “parasitic,” in the words of Timothy Mitchell.\textsuperscript{64} The idea of ‘development’ through the implementation of European-style public services is actually a means of strengthening state power, both for Morocco and European hegemons.\textsuperscript{65} The ‘West,’ with its technology and expertise, is sent in to aid the perceived underdeveloped ‘non-West,’ ultimately resuming the imperial relationship which had presumably ended in Morocco in the 1960s.\textsuperscript{66} Despite his own Moroccan nationality, and perhaps due to his position as an


\textsuperscript{65} Mitchell, "The Object," 162.

\textsuperscript{66} Mitchell, “The Object,” 168.
administrator for a Spanish waste management subsidiary in Morocco, Suleiman could not help but juxtapose waste management in Morocco against that of Europe:

“Imagine in some countries in Europe, people now are not collecting waste every day. In some parts of the city, you can collect waste twice a week or three times a week, or from Monday to Monday. Not only do we have to do it every day, but in some parts of the medina in Meknes, for example, we do it twice a day.”

These types of comparisons reinforce colonial notions of proper sanitation. Looking toward European ideals precludes Morocco from charting its own path forward, making the best decisions for its unique situation.

The idealism generated in using Europe as a model does not offer any realistic waste management solution, especially with the relatively low level of investment that the Ministry of the Interior has placed in the waste management sector. Other waste management personnel, like Yassine, demonstrate a certain expectation of cleanliness from Europeans, drawing a sharp contrast with how he views Moroccans:

“This morning, I witnessed something that made me laugh. When I was waiting for the [garbage] truck at Bab Bou’ amair, emigrants [from Morocco, living in Europe]—who are supposed to be educated and aware since they’re living in Europe—were drunk. They threw their bottles from their car. We [muzbil] are really suffering from this issue. We feel bad. If they were Moroccans, we would accept this from them because we [Moroccans] were not educated on how to keep the streets clean. But, since they are living in Europe, they have grown up with more awareness about this. These [European] people work for the cleanliness of their countries. In Europe, they have trash containers separating the different types of materials (glass, cardboard, plastic), unlike here, where we don’t have it.”

What is interesting to note is that Yassine does not believe that these emigrants retain their Moroccan identities after they move to France. Both the negative, like their drinking habits, and the positive, like their supposed level of education, are distinguishing factors from Moroccans in Yassine’s mind. As Suleiman and Yassine demonstrate, Europe represents an ideal in sanitation
behaviors. Aspiring to become more like Europe, however, represents the “reappropriation” of a colonial metropole’s waste management system through “strategic and active positioning within the politics of the present,” as Stoler writes.\textsuperscript{67} The endless search for a waste management system modeled after Europe fosters a sort of dependence which, in turn, grants European companies the opportunity to assert a form of imperial control through waste management contracts.

In looking to a remnant of the colonial past, the backwards-facing focus of waste management collapses time through continued reliance on Europe for delivery of public services. France has effectively shaped Moroccan ideas of how a modern state should properly function. However, as I demonstrated in the introduction, France did not fully implement effective systems to carry out the workings of the state—after all, the protectorate had not been designed with Moroccan nationals in mind. In the years after France’s exit, Moroccan rulers implemented French-style rule to varying degrees. The second rise of France’s influence in Morocco is due to the prominence of French capital that has entered Morocco through both public development and private sector projects.\textsuperscript{68} This has enabled France to uphold a degree of influence abroad without needing the administrative and military baggage that accompanied it during the protectorate.\textsuperscript{69} Especially given the neoliberal economic reforms that began under King Hassan II, Morocco has bought into a Westernized infrastructural system that has extended to its waste management sector via foreign contracts.

Regardless of whether sanitation companies are consciously aware of their role, mikhala assist in the functioning of the current system. In utilizing sanitation contracts that cannot fully

\textsuperscript{67} Stoler, "Imperial Debris," 196.
\textsuperscript{69} Margaret A. Majumdar, Postcoloniality: The French Dimension (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), xii.
carry out cleaning duties, the ‘lack’ of complete waste management and recycling in the formal system provides an opening for mikhala in Meknes. The problems that the formal waste management system encounters necessitate additional bodies to collect and recycle what was once thought of as waste destined for landfill. Capitalism functions as a mechanism for both exclusion of workers, many of whom become mikhala, and inclusion for these same individuals, who find a form of marginal employment as a result of the system’s inadequacies. Together, the formally employed muzbil and informally employed mikhala provide a more complete system of waste management.

**Ways Forward: Re-orienting Meknes’ Waste Management Approach**

In the previous section, I explored how colonial notions of best sanitation practices are imbricated in the current delivery of waste management services, and how these gaps leave space for mikhala to operate in Meknes. This section moves beyond the current state of waste management in Meknes and approaches alternative views of how Meknes can conceptualize its public services. Despite the relative completeness that a system of muzbil and mikhala provide, I question whether a system that works only because of its dysfunctions can actually ever be functional. I also examine how the waste management sector has begun to absorb some informal labor within the last ten years. This recent development affects the lives of its newfound employees and those who continue to be informally employed. Here, I employ temporality in order to understand how past waste management practices have influenced current trends in the sector.

In *The World’s Scavengers*, Martin Medina writes that developing countries, like Morocco, need a fundamentally different approach to waste management in order to
accommodate their different needs.\textsuperscript{70} Among these are the geography of cities (those in the developing world contain narrow streets through which trucks often cannot pass), the need to create more jobs in developing countries to reduce poverty, the different types of waste generated and its implication for dumping at the landfill (waste in developing countries tends to contain a higher proportion of organic material, which differs in handling from the commercial packaging-heavy waste of the first world), and pre-existing informal waste sectors that can partially fulfill the waste management needs of the city.\textsuperscript{71} According to Medina, the conditions that distinguish Morocco from its European counterparts necessitate a decentralized municipal solid waste management system.\textsuperscript{72} As opposed to a centralized, traditionally European-style system, this type recognizes the socioeconomic differences of neighborhoods within the city, and how these differences impact the types of waste that they generate. Medina also recommends that a decentralized system takes into consideration the labor that informal workers, like the \textit{mikhala}, already carry out in these areas.\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Mikhala} as a form of work predates municipal sanitation contracts; recovery of materials did not just begin in recent years. For millennia, discarded materials have been reused when new individuals find them and assign a greater value to them.\textsuperscript{74} A better understanding of the particularities of waste management in Meknes would signify a move away from the current system steeped in colonial influence that does not suit the conditions unique to Morocco.

Medina’s suggestion that governments should consider the role of informal workers in designing a more complete waste management system seems to assume that informal workers

\textsuperscript{70} Medina, \textit{The World's}, 53.
\textsuperscript{71} Medina, \textit{The World's}, 54-56.
\textsuperscript{72} Medina, \textit{The World's}, 78.
\textsuperscript{73} Medina, \textit{The World's}, 79.
\textsuperscript{74} Medina, \textit{The World's}, 16.
are not already utilized. As I explored in the previous section, mikhala have a role in this system, in part because of its inadequacies in meeting the city’s sanitation needs. Trash accumulation and marginal recycling services provide ample opportunities for mikhala to scavenge and re-sell their findings, both to consumers on the street and to middle-men who then truck recyclable items to Casablanca for processing. However, Medina’s claim is valid, in that the social stigmatization that mikhala face does prevent them from being widely perceived as a component of the waste management and recycling system. Even Jihad, one of the muzbil I joined on the trash collection route, did not perceive mikhala as having any significant impact on waste management. In fact, his opinion of them was to the contrary:

“Some of [the mikhala] take things from the [trash] container, but sometimes they dump it out and search through it for the things they need…You can’t stop them. Once, a mikhala man came and dumped out the trash container. When my colleagues asked the man to stop, he didn’t listen. I came to talk to him. When I started talking to him, the man started insulting all of us. Ultimately, I couldn’t remain patient and I hit him. Later, we regretted what we did and apologized.”

Although physical altercations are uncommon, the muzbil I interviewed all held mikhala at a distance. They understood their formal work to be separate from what they viewed as self-interested scavenging activity that did not constitute true ‘work.’ The tenuous relationship between muzbil and mikhala is symptomatic of the lack of recognition of mikhala as a legitimate form of waste management—and, more generally, as a form of work. As Jihad’s statement implies, mikhala operate as free agents who do not consciously cooperate to improve the state of cleanliness in Meknes.

Waste pickers find an opportunity for work in their own interest by filling a gap in service that is left by the state, in turn providing them with both flexibility and sustainability by
earning some form of an income on their own terms.\textsuperscript{75} Kathleen Millar introduces the concept of ‘precarity’ to describe the role of informal waste management workers within the larger system.\textsuperscript{76} Precarity refers the insecurity of the individual within the neoliberal system in which they work. One’s own precarity depends upon the hierarchical social group to which they belong.\textsuperscript{77} Millar describes precarity as a “symptom of neoliberalism” because increasing levels of precarious employment have accompanied capitalism’s global spread.\textsuperscript{78} Loïc Wacquant echoes this sentiment in \textit{Urban Outcasts}, arguing that the marginally employed have been relegated to an increasingly precarious position as labor becomes “desocialized,” weakening the link between traditional (read: formal) labor and wages.\textsuperscript{79} Although \textit{mikhala} are a fundamental component of waste management infrastructure in Meknes, their occupation of the liminal space between unemployment and formal employment leaves them in a highly precarious position. \textit{Mikhala} are able to make a small amount of money in an economy where they otherwise might not, but they do not receive the same job security that formally employed personnel, both in waste management and beyond, receive. Rachid, a frail, older man who had been working as a \textit{mikhala} since he was in school, explained to me that he had been arrested many times throughout his life while scavenging for different recyclable materials. He wished that he could find another job, but attributed the lack of work opportunities for precarious individuals like him to government ambivalence toward the unemployed public.

\textsuperscript{78} Millar, "The Precarious," 35.
Mikhala do not intend to maintain a clean state of the city so much as they look for personal financial gain through the movement of waste from trash cans and landfills to consumers and recycling plants. In addition to the intentions of informal labor as it relates to waste management, it represents a breakdown of the labor force that cannot provide stability for the worker, instead replacing it with the same flexibility that Wacquant says represents labor desocialization.\textsuperscript{80} Attempting to re-absorb this labor and formalize it, as Martin Medina suggests as part of a decentralized waste management system, changes the nature of the work. Perhaps a change in the nature of this work would not be entirely negative; as Ronaldo Munck argues in Globalization and Social Exclusion, social classes are constantly repositioned in the neoliberal, globalized world.\textsuperscript{81} The place of the mikhala is not fixed and may be open to transformation, or absorption into the formal waste management sector. Yet, given scavenging’s staying power as an age-old activity in an economy with massive informal employment, it is questionable whether the informally employed mikhala will ever fully disappear.

The formalization of recycling has begun to occur in a limited capacity. At the main waste sorting facility in Meknes, former mikhala have been hired by the responsible company to sort recyclable items from waste.\textsuperscript{82} These items are then taken to recycling plants, although a handful of items get auctioned every morning to informally-employed mikhala. Shifting labor from the informal sector into the formal one, however, has not appeared to impact anyone beyond this handful of workers now under official company jurisdiction. In expanding its labor pool, this company has attempted to formalize a recycling sector that has largely grown

\textsuperscript{80} Munck, Globalization and Social, 64.  
\textsuperscript{81} Munck, Globalization and Social, 121.  
dependent on the flexibility and informalities that it provides.\textsuperscript{83} This process propels \textit{mikhala} further into precarity as Millar describes it: changing informal recycling’s purpose as an alternative form of employment has the potential to estrange the workers that have found some semblance of security in this job, essentially becoming another neoliberal class project. Koenrad Bogaert writes that these types of projects that seek to formalize work “(re)produce uneven development and transform authoritarianism and state power.”\textsuperscript{84} Instead of embracing an integrative waste management system, such as that proposed by Martin Medina, the state is attempting to dissolve the \textit{mikhala} occupation, which it sees as a harmful externality in the development process, in order to reproduce capitalist relations between these workers and the formal sanitation industry.

Neoliberal reform, including the absorption of \textit{mikhala} into the formal waste and recycling sector, represents a potential way forward that fundamentally changes the existing structure of waste management labor in the city. By using the \textit{mikhala} for their own ends, the city’s absorption of their labor highlights the value they place on capital expansion and the threat that the current system, comprised both of informal and formal work, poses to it. \textit{Mikhala} are able to carry out their work because of the flexibility it provides compared to other working-class jobs. With respect to the reappropriation of waste-picking labor, I find that the company employing former \textit{mikhala} at the landfill has neglected to consider the specificities of informal labor. They are in favor of a formalization of \textit{mikhala} to extract more profits from the recycling

\textsuperscript{84} Bogaert, \textit{Globalized Authoritarianism}, 95.
process. This development exacerbates the precarity of work, as becoming a *mikhala* may turn into a more competitive process, characterized by greater anxiety and unbelonging than ever.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I employed a temporal lens through which I examined the relations between *mikhala*, *muzbil*, waste management contracts, and the state. These relations are mediated through a neoliberal economic system, which continues to reshape how these groups understand each other. In the opening discussion of globalization and transformation, I demonstrate how many workers enter the waste management sector through a process of estrangement driven by neoliberal reforms that have reshaped the Moroccan workforce. The second section, focusing on an integrated waste management system, explains how the current waste management system in Meknes has provided an opening for *mikhala* to occupy. The relationship between waste contracts and the state, one often characterized by dysfunction, has in turn negatively impacted *muzbil* in the efficient fulfillment of their job duties. Gaps in Meknes’ waste management services are reflective of imperial legacies that do not address the needs specific to Morocco in waste management. Ultimately, this system leaves room for *mikhala* to operate in the spaces that *muzbil* cannot fill, such as in the area of recycling. There is no easy fix to Meknes’ waste and recycling conditions. *Mikhala* in particular epitomize this difficulty; their informality simultaneously works to their benefit and detriment by providing them with greater flexibility, yet economic instability. A time-oriented understanding of Meknes’ waste management system ultimately reveals the influences that claim greatest responsibility for the past, present, and future directions of sanitation practices—namely, neoliberalism, globalization, and persistent colonial remnants.
Chapter II – Wasted Work: Perceptions of Class, Labor, and Authoritarian Power

“Waste is the dark, shameful secret of all production. Preferably, it would remain a secret. Captains of industry would rather not mention it at all – they need to be pressed hard to admit it. And yet the strategy of excess…makes the cover-up a tall order. The sheer mass of waste would not allow it to be glossed over and silenced out of existence. Hence the waste-disposal industry is one branch of modern production…that will never work itself out of its job. Modern survival – the survival of the modern form of life – depends on the dexterity and proficiency of garbage removal.”

– Zygmunt Bauman, Wasted Lives, p. 27

This chapter addresses questions surrounding class, labor, and power as they relate to waste management in Morocco. I begin with an attempt to understand what constitutes “work,” and evaluate whether the formal-informal dichotomy of work is a useful way of understanding labor in Meknes. I then contextualize these different forms of work within the state’s pattern of private economic development. Neoliberalism has re-shaped sanitation labor in particular, creating a large portion of the population that must take part in marginal work. This discussion answers questions around how workers interact with the general public and the state. Ultimately, the distribution and types of waste management labor in Meknes are products of the state which, in turn, influence the ways in which muzbil and mikhala perceive themselves. “Globalized authoritarianism,” as Koenraad Bogaert terms it, enables the state to carry out projects that may appear liberalizing, but actually serve to reproduce authoritarian power that, in turn, codify labor roles.

The state mediates all interactions between those who engage in waste management—even the multinational waste contractors themselves—and the public, demonstrating the reach of government where it initially appears absent.

Defining Work

Cato Wadel calls work a social construction; the behaviors that constitute work are highly variable depending on the context. Further, he suggests that work should be understood as a characteristic of social relations, serving as an organizing principle for activity that can shape institutions. In order to understand its impacts, Wadel defines the central tenants of work, including the expenditure of energy, occurrence at set times and set places, a results-oriented nature, and a level of commitment that limits freedom. Perhaps most significantly, work can spurn the generation of new social values. I find this to be particularly significant in the context of Morocco, wherein public perceptions of waste management work intersect with the work involved in waste management itself.

In our conversations, muzbil perceived themselves to fulfill a role similar to that of the police, as guardians of the city. They felt a sense of duty to carry out their work and beautify their city. In contrast, mikhala expressed no such views; they take up work as scavengers primarily as a means of survival when no alternatives exist. I find that these differences in self-perceptions symbolize different social values associated with these two forms of work. Muzbil are formally employed, which is a coveted credential given the high rates of unemployment in Morocco. Karim, a garbage truck driver, told me that his job as a muzbil came with reward from God, and that people should be thankful for whatever work they are able to find. He elaborated,

“Human beings are not content. Whenever you reach a goal, you want more. If you are not content, you will not carry on with your job. The circumstances in life now are really expensive. The times are expensive. I am patient and accepting with the salary I get. Al-barakah [it is a blessing]. I am thankful for it. If there is no blessing (meaning: you’re doing your job poorly and without God’s blessing for the quality of work you’re doing), even if you make two million dirhams [$200,000 USD], it means nothing.”

The feeling of a blessing that muzbil such as Karim derive from their work is vastly different from how mikhala feel about their jobs. Omar, the 38-year-old mikhala who had said earlier that the garbage bin was more merciful to him than his country, made it clear that he felt victimized by others who preemptively judged his job, despite the honest, hard work he puts in. Gesturing to the items for sale in front of him, he recalled,

“I stayed up the whole night picking these things up from the garbage. Some people look upon us as bad people or drug addicts, but we are not. I am 38 years old and I have never been suspected of committing and any bad thing or a crime. We live in Sidi Baba, one of the oldest neighborhoods in Meknes. We have never brought about any problems. We are a poor family. We have never been suspected of causing any problems. We [mikhala] hope to find a better job.”

The vastly different outlooks on work held by muzbil and mikhala speak to their different social positionings, as Wadel describes above. Work is a socially constructed activity, and clearly, the public’s lack of acceptance of mikhala as legitimately employed individuals impacts how they understand their place in society. Omar blamed the state for lack of available job opportunities. In making this statement, even he discounted his work as a mikhala as a legitimate job. What’s more, muzbil contribute to the beautification of their city, in a sense ameliorating the social problem of waste accumulation that Meknassis discuss widely. In contrast, mikhala are seen in society as a source of the problem of waste accumulation. Karim said he believed that mikhala are responsible for keeping the city clean, but they are causing some of the problem by rummaging through trash containers and making a mess of the area. The perception of mikhala labor as antithetical to cleanliness ultimately undermines understandings of their jobs as “work.” These self-employed workers act in accordance with their own interests. The perceived selfish nature of their work, as opposed to muzbil’s perceived duty to clean, distinguishes their functions in society.
Up until this point, I have characterized *mikhala* work as “informal,” inasmuch as *mikhala* do not contribute to the taxed and monitored economy. However, some scholars contest the classification of informal work as such. Jaafar Aksikas writes that informality as a grouping for labor is “problematic,” especially when considering the extent to which informal labor is actually distinguishable from the formal sector.\(^8\) Despite their different social connotations, *mikhala* and *muzbil* overlap in many respects; primarily, they are responsible for, and derive a profit from, the transfer of waste. The means through which they derive profit differ, yet they each contribute to the same economic system. *Mikhala* are also not separate from the formal economy on the whole. Karim also told me that if he and his fellow *muzbil* find a relatively valuable item along their collection routes, they will save it and sell it to the *mikhala* so that they can then bring it to Bab al-Jdid for resale to the public. It is impossible to separate the informal economy from the formal one; companies that auction items to the *mikhala*, such as TahirSys, are evidence of the ways in which formal businesses also operate in the informal economy. By their very nature of living in urbanized Meknes, *mikhala* participate in the market, buying and selling goods on a daily basis. Much of their profits from informal work are ultimately spent in the formal economy.\(^9\) Though they are most frequently considered informally employed, the notion of informality in relation to the *mikhala* can collapse the significance of their economic participation.

Informality, while a convenient term to reference the work undertaken by *mikhala*, can inadvertently connote victimhood and lacking opportunity. Instead of thinking about informal labor exclusively in this light, it is more productive to explore the complexities associated with

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the decision to work in the informal economy is itself a conscious choice resulting from the interaction of local and global elements. Although some mikhala described stories of lacking opportunity leading them to their work, informality provides the worker with the autonomy and flexibility that they lack in formal employment.\(^90\) In addition to the individual-level benefits of informal work, the act of providing informal waste management services to the community represents an opportunity for self-employed individuals to fill a gap in services left by the state. Diego Coletto and Lieselot Bisschop contend that this work should then not be considered a ‘last resort’ for employment since it is a means of economic empowerment for poor urban workers.\(^91\) The stigma that arises against them is due in part to state denial of the condition of sanitation services; government authorities and waste management companies see them as irreconcilable with the formal waste management infrastructure in the modern city.\(^92\) Thus, it is clear that a state- and industry-led narrative reigns supreme in how the public perceives informal waste management labor, perpetuating a stereotype that it is an unsavory last resort for the unemployed urban poor. Few outside of the mikhala circle understand it to be a form of economic empowerment, but even they draw distinctions between what they understand to be a true ‘job’ and the scavenging work that they undertake.

‘Work’ is clearly a complex unit of analysis, whether formal or informal. Informality in itself can be a flawed notion, as informal labor does not preclude the worker from participation in the market. It can perpetuate a sense of victimhood for marginally employed individuals, yet also serves as a form of empowerment for otherwise unemployed people. Through a discussion


\(^91\) Coletto and Bisschop, "Waste Pickers," 284.

\(^92\) Ibid.
of work emerges an understanding of how mikhala and muzbil differ, both in their sense of purpose and how society perceives them. External perceptions of waste management personnel are mediated by corporate and state discourses that dictate what employment should look like. The inclusion-exclusion dichotomy of labor mediates the worker’s ability to do work and go about their daily lives.

**An Infrastructure of Workers**

In “Alienation and Globalization in Morocco,” Shana Cohen traces the globalizing processes that have led to what she terms the “detached middle,” a class of younger, urban people with a university education that are unable to find work. She argues that this detachment has led to a loss of identity that disconnects these individuals from social and political life in Morocco.\(^93\) The detached middle is a symptom of the larger changes that have taken place in Morocco as neoliberalism has become an entrenched part of Moroccan life. Social protections, labor rights, and other checks on capital accumulation are brushed aside as the state promotes a neoliberal order based on market rule.\(^94\) Neoliberalism entails a reduction in stable, full-time unemployment which, in turn, forces more individuals to question their place in society.\(^95\)

Cohen demonstrates how detachment operates on various socioeconomic levels, beyond just the middle class: limited social mobility has forged new social groups, including large swaths of unemployed and exploited service workers.\(^96\) In Chapter I, I detailed how Morocco’s economic reforms beginning in the 1980s to attract foreign investment removed many qualified

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individuals from the workforce by slashing public sector employment opportunities. This sense of estrangement from work has carried into the present, impacting the outlook of subsequent generations of Moroccans. Here, I extend Cohen’s portrayal of the detached middle to a detached working class that partakes in informal waste management work. These class-based groups necessarily impact one another by virtue of coexisting within the same space. Perhaps more consequential than the middle class estrangement from social and political life that Cohen unpacks in her article, many of the lower-class, self-employed individuals, like mikhala, experience ruthless detachment from social and political life that has led to the creation of a new informal infrastructure of labor in Meknes.

Meryem caught my eye among the other mikhala standing at the road’s edge. For one thing, she was the only woman I observed selling items at Bab al-Jdid over the multiple visits I made to the site. She was also much older than most other mikhala, but stood tall in her sky blue jelaba and matching hijab in the 95-degree heat. Her items for sale consisted solely of clothing and shoes, primarily for women and children. It was fairly common to see women selling clothing in the alleyways of the old city, but exceedingly rare in the male-dominated Bab al-Jdid at the old city’s outer edge. Meryem said that she needed to earn some form of income since her husband died and she had to support her children. She said that she purchased some of the items that she had for sale, while others were donated to her. When asked why she made money this way rather than in a different job, Meryem said, “I would if I could. I am getting tired [of searching]. We [mikhala] just sell these scraps.” Although she is different in some regards from the other mikhala of Bab al-Jdid, Meryem echoed the same sentiments of hopelessness and exhaustion with alternative job prospects. She also identified with a group, talking about the collective of individuals who sell old items in this part of Meknes. The alienation of mikhala
from social and political life enables them to form their own system of organization detached from those which are managed by the state. AbdouMaliq Simone terms this notion “people as infrastructure,” in order to demonstrate how marginalized people in urban centers can collaborate in the economy.\textsuperscript{97} The privatizing neoliberal reforms that have given rise to a large, unemployed urban population have untethered a vast portion of the public from the visible institutions of the state, in turn forcing them to rethink the ways in which they connect to the world with limited resources.\textsuperscript{98} With more competition for employment in private enterprises, those who take up informal work often must form their own sorts of ‘industries’ by collaborating with others in similar circumstances. For mikhala, this takes shape as an infrastructure of collectors, auctioneers, vendors, and recycling transporters.

In \textit{Garbage Citizenship}, Rosalind Fredericks demonstrates how individuals in Dakar, Senegal have sought employment in the waste management sector and have forged collective identities that contrast state projects of neoliberal development. Communities have joined together to clean their city, grounded in ideas of moral purity and belonging, in contrast to the politics of the state, to create “participatory waste infrastructures.”\textsuperscript{99} 1990s Dakarois youth banded together to remove waste and combat those activities in the urban setting which they viewed as immoral—prostitution, alcohol, and violence. In doing so, they acted upon the widespread problem of unemployment within an overabundant labor pool in Dakar and claimed a place for themselves in urban society.\textsuperscript{100} Fredericks’s characterization of sanitation labor in Dakar takes Simone’s understanding of people as infrastructure one step further, wherein people

\textsuperscript{98} Simone, "People as Infrastructure," 411.
\textsuperscript{100} Fredericks, \textit{Garbage Citizenship}, 66-7.
collaborate outside of official channels of work to provide a beneficial service to their community. This example parallels the situation in Meknes. In the absence of employment through official means, mikhala have established their own human infrastructure in the waste management sector. Although their work does not function primarily as a form of moral duty as it does in Dakar, mikhala value the fact that they have created their own work to counter narratives of a lazy, unemployed urban poor. They interact and collaborate through the trading of used goods, creating a more or less self-sufficient recycling network in the city. Muzbil and the general public too participate in this infrastructure through the buying and selling of used mikhala goods.

Figure 2.1: The large selection of clothing for sale at Meryem’s spot on Bab al-Jdid.

In the back alleys of Bab al-Jdid, middle men purchase recyclable scrap material from mikhala, who find such items on roadsides, in trash containers, and at the landfill. These middle
men serve as a link between the mikhala and formal recycling companies, enabling mikhala to more easily receive payment for their findings than they would selling individual items on the street. Mikhala weigh their materials—glass, metal, plastics, and cardboard—on the middle man’s scale. He provides them with a receipt and money for their finds. The middle man stores these materials in the rooms they lease until a truck can come and bring them to Casablanca. The recycling plant, located in Casablanca, then pays the middle men for these materials, which are recycled into a variety of products, including consumer goods.

Understanding the total waste management system of Meknes as an infrastructure of labor detached from the state aids in grasping the social positioning of mikhala and muzbil. Together, mikhala, muzbil, recycling middle men, and the more distant upstream recycling personnel in Casablanca forge a relatively functional infrastructure. This infrastructure is important to fostering an understanding of urban citizenship in the present; while it represents a form of independence and relative financial security, it also involves “violent bodily burdens,” in the words of Rosalind Fredericks.101 These violences include not only the physical demands of work, but also the precarity that it entails, as this form of employment does not provide workers with the predictabilities of work in other vocations. As workers put their bodies on the front lines of waste management and recycling services, they expose themselves to the dangers of collecting—hazardous materials, burglars, and risk of arrest, to name a few—with little to no safety net when problems arise. Their engagement with garbage also demonstrates the significance of the spaces that hold society’s detritus and which populations are consigned to its management. Following Mary Douglas, Fredericks asserts that garbage is a mode of governance with the power to render certain populations abject. Yet, despite garbage’s power, it also

101 Fredericks, Garbage Citizenship, 152.
provides workers with some opportunity to creatively utilize it and reclaim a sense of dignity through paid work. Their ability to navigate a variety of social situations, from their interactions with fellow waste management personnel to their independent collection activity, works to both the benefit and detriment of mikhala and muzbil, as they are not rooted firmly in any one social position in a state of precarity. The system of people as infrastructure in Meknes demonstrates how individuals “circulate across and become familiar with a broad range of spatial, residential, economic and transactional positions,” as AbdouMaliq Simone frames it. Together, this host of actors form an interconnected web that supports an economy of recycling, ultimately resulting from the neoliberal projects that have forged this pool of labor.

Figure 2.2: The mikhala’s items are weighed on a balance and then the middle man pays him for his findings. All of the middle man’s purchased items lay strewn throughout his small shop in the alleyway until the recycling truck comes to collect it and bring it to Casablanca.

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102 Simone, "People as Infrastructure," 408.
Figure 2.3: In an alley of Bab al-Jdid, a recycling middle man (right) inspects the materials that the *mikhala* (left) has brought to sell.

Figure 2.4: A man stands atop recyclable items in a truck bed, attempting to create as much space as possible so that he can truck a large amount of recyclable items to Casablanca and turn a profit.
Internal and External Perceptions of Class in Waste Management

The infrastructure of labor detailed above simultaneously connects workers to, and distinguishes them from, the formal waste management sector. This infrastructure represents a class apart of individuals employed in the informal waste industry. I use ‘class’ as a lens to examine the relations between groups and the practices inscribed in these relations.\textsuperscript{103} Similar to Wadel’s understanding of work as a characteristic of social relations, class is a useful frame of analysis as it helps to understand how groups of people interact with one another in the appropriation of economic surplus. This appropriation reproduces economic inequality, which is at the core of class relations.\textsuperscript{104} Class is an important framework for understanding how people employed in the waste management sector perceive themselves within the context of social hierarchy. To unpack ideas surrounding class, I now return the focus to \textit{muzbil}, people who perform stigmatized work, yet still find pride in their formal employment.

When I asked Jihad what his job title is, he first said “\textit{muzbil},” the word I have employed throughout this thesis to refer to formally employed waste management personnel. \textit{Muzbil} comes from the same three letter root for garbage (لزب), which I interpret to mean “one who works with garbage,” or more simply put, garbage men. After initially telling me his job title, Jihad elaborated,

“Most people call us garbage men (\textit{muzbil}). As we all know, we are responsible for the cleaning. We should not be called garbage men because we are not the ones making the trash. We are Moroccans. We don’t respect sanitation workers (Arabic: عمال النظافة). If someone experienced what we went through and how we suffer, they will excuse us. There are people who appreciate what we are and they make supplication (Arabic: دعاء).”

\textsuperscript{103} Bogaert, \textit{Globalized Authoritarianism}, 98.
\textsuperscript{104} Bogaert, \textit{Globalized Authoritarianism}, 96.
Jihad draws a clear distinction between garbage men and sanitation workers. For him, the two terms carry different weight and ascribe to different meanings. Jihad associates ‘sanitation workers’ with more dignity. Despite the three shifts of workers who remove garbage from their city daily, *Meknassis* do not perceive of their city to be as clean as other Moroccan cities, such as Tangier, Tétouan, and Ifrane.\(^{105}\) Perceptions of Meknes as a lesser-esteemed site of cleanliness lead many residents to believe that sanitation workers are ineffective at their jobs. The workers associated with waste thereby get lumped in with the disposable, abject trash that they seek to remove, which partially explains the connotations held by the title *muzbil*. In their own words, *muzbil* are associated with refuse, marking them as a group apart from those in society who produce this refuse and expect others to dispose of it.

Yassine, the *muzbil* approaching his tenth anniversary of work in the Hamria district, shared with me sentiments of feeling like ‘human waste.’ Although he took pride in his job, he felt that most residents of Meknes do not respect the profession. He recounted,

> “I recently experienced this when I went to a supermarket. A man bought yogurt and biscuits. When he finished eating, he threw everything on the ground. When I saw him throwing it on the ground, I didn’t remain silent. I said to him, ‘Because you threw this [trash] on the ground, do you consider me trash as well?’ The man said no. I said, ‘the thing you threw is trash, so I am trash.’ I asked him again what he threw on the ground. The man said ‘trash.’ The guy started looking at me. I said, ‘we will never be better without educating ourselves.’ I told him that there is a small trash container next to the supermarket. Since there is a container here, why don’t you put the trash in it? I myself used to throw trash on the ground before I started this job. When I started this job, I recognized that people are not responsible with their trash.”

\(^{105}\) In my interviews with *muzbil*, I asked whether they believed Meknes was a clean city. Numerous individuals responded no, comparing the condition of Meknes to the cleaner reputations of Morocco’s northern cities. It is commonly believed that the European influence, larger tourist populations, and robust public works budgets of the northernmost cities have fostered a stronger citizen culture surrounding cleanliness. A video that surfaced in August 2019 shows *muzbil* being applauded while cleaning the streets after a parade for the annual Throne Day celebration in honor of the king. The circulation of media such as this video reproduce assumptions that the citizen culture of the north emphasizes cleanliness more than smaller, less touristic cities like Meknes. See "Le Bel Hommage des Habitants de Tétouan aux Agents de Propreté de la Ville," video, Facebook, posted by Moustacho, August 15, 2019, accessed April 14, 2020, [https://www.facebook.com/moustachoMA/videos/487253778487135/?v=487253778487135](https://www.facebook.com/moustachoMA/videos/487253778487135/?v=487253778487135).
Yassine’s metaphor of being ‘trash’ represents the public apathy toward his profession that many of the garbage men I interviewed feel exists. The closer that one works with trash—society’s refuse—in Meknes, the more that he is seen as trash himself, thus explaining how others relate to, or, contrast themselves against, waste management workers. Although it plays a significant role in reifying class in Meknes, the disrespect for their work that muzbil perceive does not entirely determine their understanding of themselves. Instead, an internalized belief that their social position connote shame gives rise to a personal narrative of dignity. Muzbil take pride in the necessary service that they provide to their city. These jobs are not only demanding, but also contribute to the sanitation and health of the community. In identifying with these aspects of their work, muzbil are able to reframe their occupation as a beneficial service to the city.

Muzbil articulate their employment status through separate narratives that are descriptive and prescriptive, respectively. Descriptively, they recount stories of how other people view them as trash. Prescriptively, and in order to counter this perceived image of muzbil as trash, they express personal feelings of dignity about their work. The narrative constructed by muzbil to generate self-worth contrasts against that of the mikhala, in that socially constructed ideas of work produce a greater degree of shame surrounding their jobs. Mikhala do take a degree of pride in having a job to do and look down upon those of higher socioeconomic statuses who feel entitled to jobs or can support themselves because of their background. However, I did not observe the same sense of higher purpose to carry out their work as muzbil expressed, likely because their primary function is retailing used goods, not public order through sanitation.106

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Muzbil value their labor not only in terms of community maintenance, but also in a religious context. Karim, the muzbil garbage truck driver, brought up al-nidhafa min al-Iman (النظافة من الإيمان), an idiom meaning cleanliness comes from belief. My interlocutors identified this saying as Hadith attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, promoting cleanliness among Muslims as a sacred part of life. It was frequently cited by muzbil in particular when we discussed the Islamic duty they fulfill by cleaning the city. These workers create their own social legitimacy despite working in a profession that is relegated to an urban poor class due to the stigma attached. Muzbil employ al-nidhafa min al-Iman to this end: in their quest to construct professional dignity, they describe the religious duty they fulfill in their roles.

Al-nidhafa min al-Iman relates to both the quality of work and the actual task of cleaning itself. Much like Karim, Jihad stressed the importance of this concept in his work:

“Apart from [the problems with work], we are willing to work for our city, for our country, and for our Islamic families because of al-nidhafa min al-Iman. You have to work your hours without cheating. You need to be flexible. Even if someone tries to provoke you, you cannot pay them any mind.”

By emphasizing the patriotic and religious duties of work—specifically, sanitation work—Jihad reasserted the dignity of his profession. Numerous muzbil referenced al-nidhafa min al-Iman when discussing their jobs, pointing to the significance of honesty and higher purpose that, for them, sets their work apart from other jobs that are stigmatized, yet do not provide the same benefit to the community and to God.

This view of garbage workers is not unique to Morocco, but occurs worldwide in both formal sanitation infrastructures and informal waste picking businesses. Joel Lee has written about the close association between the work one performs and one’s social status. In the case of Indian Dalit Muslims, their genealogical status determines their occupation. These Dalit Muslims are also viewed as ‘trash’ by other Indians. As the lowest caste in Indian society, they have
traditionally undertaken the work society designates as unclean. The group of Dalit Muslims studied by Lee, however, call themselves *Halalkhor*, meaning ‘one who earns an honest living.’ Just as with sanitation workers in Meknes, the *Halalkhor* engage in work that cleans their surroundings, yet also entrenches them within widely held views of garbage as a vile substance to be held at a distance. Sanitation workers nevertheless continue to fulfill their work obligations with dignity despite negative external perceptions of their work. Though the monetary and social reward for *Meknassi* sanitation workers may be small, they take some comfort in personal and spiritual reward. Yassine explained,

> “I fear God and don’t care about the people who are managing the company, or the money that I am paid to do this. I am doing this for the sake of God to keep the place clean. God gave me this job so I have to do it with honesty.”

Yassine too pointed to a sense of purpose in his work that surpasses the social and economic pressures that drive many individuals to work in the often-scorned waste management sector. Men employed as sanitation workers commonly feel a greater moral imperative in doing so, sometimes emphasizing this spiritual duty above any economic one. Cleaning is not only carried out for the self or residents of Meknes, but also for God. Though taking a job as a sanitation worker is not a first choice and is often forced upon them by the process of technical modernization and its resulting vulnerable labor force, sanitation workers point to *al-nidhafa min al-Iman* and the religious duty their jobs fulfill. This outlook on work enables *muzbil* to look past the association they have with refuse and locate honor in difficult work.

Although sanitation personnel expressed feelings that public behavior must change in order for cleanliness of the city to improve, the public’s own belief in *al-nidhafa min al-Iman* may be reinforcing the views they hold of waste management in Meknes: they feel that sanitation workers are to blame for the poor condition of their city. People in the waste management sector
expressed views that the public thinks that the work habits of muzbil need to change rather than their own in order to uphold al-nidhafa min al-Iman. These conflicting understandings of who bears the burden of cleanliness have perpetuated negative associations with waste collection and perceived cleanliness of the city. The perception of muzbil as ineffective at their jobs effectively reproduces understandings of public sanitation services as lacking. Additionally, the exclusion of mikhala from the public discourse on sanitation further reduces the waste management sector’s reputation in Meknes, making it appear to most people that no one is filling these gaps in official services.

It is evident here that the class of which muzbil are a part is partially defined by mainstream perceptions of cleanliness. Public apathy toward the quality of sanitation services in Meknes characterizes the working class of waste management personnel. While these individuals are active contributors to their locale and the global economic system by nature of their labor, they cannot escape outside perceptions of waste management work. The continuous need for waste removal and sanitation necessitates a relation to the residents for whom they clean, making interactions between muzbil and the rest of the city both “legible” and “explicitly political,” in Koenraad Bogaert’s words. All of their interactions with fellow Meknassis are embedded within ideas of class that are mediated by perceptions of sanitation. The perceptions that residents hold of these stigmatized workers is out of their control; thus, the construction of dignity around al-nidhafa min al-Iman enables muzbil to regain control of their own social narrative, regardless of how others perceive them, forging a group of sanitation workers loyal to their profession.

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The Liberalizing Authoritarian Paradox

In the final section of this chapter, I examine the overarching forces that mediate the class dynamics discussed in earlier sections. I identify neoliberal projects as a primary driver of these relations. Again, I draw from Koenraad Bogaert, who understands the state-driven projects of the last twenty years not so much as liberalizing as much as they represent the way an authoritarian government operates in a globalizing state.108 King Mohammed VI, viewed by many as a great reformer over the last two decades, has ruled through new state agencies, representing a new kind of authoritarianism that is compatible with the liberal global order.109 As I discussed in the previous chapter, neoliberalism has introduced privatization, technical solutions to problems, and public services modeled after Western examples. In addition to the inadequacies of these projects in addressing Meknes’ needs, they influence the status and condition of those employed, both formally and informally, in waste management. Neoliberalism perpetuates the exclusion of these individuals, who do not experience the full benefit of these projects—mikhala even less so than muzbil.

Cedric G. Johnson writes that under neoliberalism, the state becomes beholden to the market.110 The state acts in accordance with what it thinks is best for the market. It provides for day-to-day stability through production of currency, the justice system, and delivery of public services, such as sanitation. Implementation of sanitation systems modeled after those of Europe are intended to promote order, public health, and economic opportunity. Dipesh Chakrabarty explains this same phenomenon in India as a product of the capitalist global order. He demonstrates how imperialist and nationalist discourses emphasized a citizen culture around

108 Bogaert, 9.
109 Bogaert, 91.
public health and sanitation in the service of modern state. These ideals were attempts to reshape the interior-exterior dichotomy of traditional Indian society: the street was a sprawling, often disorderly place, whereas the home was reserved for cleanliness and order. Regulated sanitary public places enhance the productivity of capitalism by promoting the health and longevity of the workforce. Chakrabarty writes that Indians largely did not heed these calls to order, which they saw as intrusive forces aiming to eliminate the thrills of the street.

In Morocco, pushes for European-style sanitation have had mixed results for similar reasons. From logistical constraints, such as the inability to collect trash in narrow streets of the old city, to ideological ones, where people scoff at the sight of sanitation workers, the implementation of Meknes’ waste management system has developed in large part because of an elite-led push for cleanliness and order that empower the state’s neoliberal projects. True, there is a cultural motivation to keep the city clean, as evidenced through the importance of al-nidhafa min al-Iman. However, the state is the ultimate driver of present-day sanitation practices that impact the majority of Meknassis beyond just those employed by the waste management sector. Waste management contracts are seen as essential to the functioning of society on a larger scale, whereas al-nidhafa min al-Iman can be understood more so as an individual behavior that assists this larger waste management program to keep the city healthy and orderly.

Still, not everyone receives the benefits of state sanitation projects equally. Due to the nature of their work, both mikhala and muzbil must cross the boundary between life and death, where refuse represents the loss of value that renders an object lifeless. Those who manage refuse are the keepers of the waste and recycling systems, charged with the disposal of the

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lifeless to preserve the well-being of the living. In order to keep this system functioning, the state puts these workers on the front lines of waste removal, creating a social order around cleanliness and differences in value. The trash, which has been devalued by its former users, must be taken away by muzbil, who, as I demonstrated in the previous section of this chapter, similarly feel devalued by their community members. Mikhala attempt to breathe value back into some of this waste, which is only a moderately successful pursuit, as a subset of the population makes purchases from them—much of the recyclable materials never regain value until they are transformed into new items after being brought to Casablanca. This system of removing devalued material, carried out by devalued individuals, creates a social order of its own. It is a hierarchy of individuals that is constantly reinforced on the basis of whether or not they associate with trash.\textsuperscript{114} Neoliberal projects generating waste have come to define the meaning of value in Morocco, both in terms of people and inanimate objects.

The state-driven attitude on waste removal assumes a certain anthropocentrism: it attempts to take away the agency of nonhuman things that do, in fact, shape social interactions in Meknes. In \textit{Vibrant Matter}, Jane Bennett demonstrates how human interactions are always accompanied by the nonhuman, whether it be technology, animals, or detritus.\textsuperscript{115} These nonhuman things have agency of their own; for instance, in Meknes, trash evidently provokes reactions that force individuals, such as muzbil, to mingle with and remove it.\textsuperscript{116} The state, as the sovereign power to manage human existence within its territory, also reserves the necropolitical right to expose populations to death. Necropolitics creates “death-worlds,” in Achille Mbembe’s

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\textsuperscript{116} Bennett, \textit{Vibrant Matter}, 107.
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words, wherein certain segments of the population are immersed in living conditions that transform them into socially ‘dead’ bodies that get overlooked by more useful, ‘living’ beings.\textsuperscript{117} The short supply of formal work opportunities in Meknes pushes people to the margins of society, otherizing them and calling into question their own identities. Those who coalesce around the management of garbage thus become objects of social death. Lacking recognition of for their labor contributions, mikhala in particular are victims of social death. Bennett writes that these living dead will intermingle and find ways to restore their power or mitigate the damage that has been done, enabling them to take political action of their own.\textsuperscript{118} As examined in the previous section, muzbil and mikhala each reclaim a degree of agency by forging identities around their work while ignoring the dominant necropolitical narrative that frames their lives from the outside.

The city is a relatively clean and orderly space, with trash hauled out of sight on a daily basis. This daily ritual enables a continuous cycle of production and consumption for the city.\textsuperscript{119} At the same time, it places the waste management personnel closer to this refuse, positioning them as facilitators of the productive-consumptive cycle. The neoliberal project of state-sanctioned waste management contracts thereby reinforces a system of order for most, but bodily degradation for some, irrespective of the narratives that they construct to reclaim dignity. Moroccan governance through disposability occupies a liminal space between coercive authoritarian governance and no governance at all. It represents a new authoritarianism that relies on the private sector to do its bidding. Using private contracts, the state is still able to assert its

\textsuperscript{118} Bennett, \textit{Vibrant Matter}, 101.
\textsuperscript{119} Fredericks, \textit{Garbage Citizenship}, 131.
control over the cleanliness of the city through infrastructural management. Yassine, the *muzbil* in Hamria, recalled his relationship with the king:

“We respect the king and we love our country. When he used to come and visit Meknes, the city would change. The king would say that they were doing a good job cleaning for his visit, saying, ‘May Allah help you.’ He was appreciative of the work we were doing because he witnessed it with his eyes. No one knows the reasons why the king does not visit Meknes anymore. We were waiting for him to visit Meknes for the opening of the International Agricultural Fair in Morocco. But he didn’t come and no one knows the reason why; only Allah knows. The people in Meknes love their king and want to know from the city why he doesn’t come.”

While the reasons for this change in relationship to Meknes are unknown, Yassine’s example reinforces my point: even without direct intervention on the part of the monarch, the state is still able to maintain its grasp over the delivery of sanitation services through bureaucratic structures. In the process, however, the weakening link between the public and the monarchy has served to alienate *Meknassis* from the state. They continue to pledge allegiance to their leader, but do not receive the reciprocal benefit of state support. The presence of the king has historically served as a morale boost for citizens regardless of class. This recent shift in perception of the king’s role in the city may entail social consequences: *muzbil* feel decreasing motivation to keep their city clean as a nationalistic duty and may increasingly recognize themselves as necropolitical subjects.

Whereas the state’s hand in the work and motivation of the formal waste management sector is immediately apparent, more specific to the case of the *mikhala* is how the state inadvertently supports marginal labor. Informal work is an intrinsic consequence of capitalist development, not just an accidental by-product. Jaafar Aksikas demonstrates how unemployment—which is commonly viewed as natural under capitalism—and marginal

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employment are similar in the eyes of the state by virtue of their absence from the formal employment sector. Aksikas goes as far as to say that marginal employment is “a form of disguised unemployment” for all intents and purposes.  

Though it is an inevitable outcome of globalized authoritarian government in Morocco, informal employment alienates the mikhala and prevents them from reaching their full productive potential under capitalism. This presents a challenge for the developing Moroccan state, which will stay subordinate in the international market with high levels of unemployed labor. Informal employment in the waste management sector thus remains an under-the-radar threat as the state tries to maintain the appearance of control over the country’s labor supply. The king’s relatively frequent speeches on job creation in the Moroccan economy serve to counter the reality that informal work, such as that in the waste management sector, is a prominent form of income for Moroccans. The official discourse here masks the reality faced by hundreds of thousands of officially unemployed individuals, resulting in an illusion that renders the mikhala and others socially placeless to a greater extent than the formally recognized muzbil.

Authoritarianism in Morocco has hidden behind market reforms that have grown the private sector. Ultimately, however, these reforms have worked in the service of state dominance. The state ‘liberalizes’ and promotes market reform as a means of quietly dominating the private sector. This phenomenon is evident in the issuance of private sanitation contracts. Consequently, neoliberal waste management practices define value in society, in both a human and material sense. What people decide to throw away and how it gets removed are partly

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121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
determined by the frequency and efficacy of the waste management services they receive from the public sector. The condition of these services—which, as I have demonstrated elsewhere, cannot fully address the needs of Meknes—have led some to question their position in relation to the state. Waste does not take exclusively inanimate forms; I have also shown how capitalism’s productive mechanisms render certain individuals unemployed and marginally employed, creating Meknes’ ‘living dead.’ I critique the official discourses on employment and the waste management sector in an attempt to understand what has built Meknes’ current waste management infrastructure.

Conclusion

This chapter explores themes of work, class, and marginality as they relate to state-driven waste management work. The waste management sector is an excellent field through which to gain an understanding of how labor as an object of study operates in Meknes. By focusing primarily on an internal-external dichotomy of labor relations, I demonstrate how waste management workers mitigate public perceptions of their jobs, and how their work is ultimately mediated by the state. Examining these questions within the context of waste management serves as a model for the marginal employment trend that is prominent throughout Morocco as a whole, as unofficially employed workers assist the formal muzbil in carrying out this public service. Mikhala and muzbil exemplify the complex working relationships that permeate everyday life in Meknes.

As reflected in the quote from Zygmunt Bauman that opened this chapter, waste is at once a source of shame and inevitable consequence of neoliberal existence. The expansion of the free market into Morocco has caused unprecedented levels of waste. The workers who deal with
this garbage demonstrate the necessity of waste removal and recycling as critical services in present-day Morocco, and how those who perform this critical function still feel undignified in doing so. *Muzbil* and *mikhala* have different responses to how they perceive their work—the former cope by employing a sense of duty, while the latter tend to criticize the system that has driven them to this work. Ultimately, the state’s disengagement from everyday life leave workers like *muzbil* and *mikhala* feeling cut off from mainstream social life. They construct their identities on the basis of conditions created by the state, a highly consequential method of association which, in turn, illuminates the extent of the neoliberal regime in everyday life in Meknes where it might initially appear to be absent.
Epilogue

“We are here to work, not to choose.”
—Jihad, muzbil

The waste management sector is an integral part of life in Meknes. By providing a public service, even when it is performed inadvertently by some, muzbil and mikhala facilitate the process of cleaning, waste disposal, and recycling. However, the sector’s significance surpasses the duty that it is intended to carry out. Studying those who facilitate the waste management and recycling process reveals some of the most pressing issues that Moroccans face today, surrounding job opportunities, state power, and personal dignity, to name a few.

Understanding Meknes’ waste management workers from a global studies perspective illuminates the multidimensional forces that play a role in everyday life. I have employed ethnographic testimonies in the service of my larger observations and findings from established literature. Incorporating individual voices in my work has not only highlighted compelling personal anecdotes, but also demonstrates a level of cohesion between the narratives of mikhala and muzbil, respectively. I have shown how muzbil, as stigmatized workers, find motivation in personal feelings about patriotism and religious duty. Conversely, mikhala tend to hold more cynical views of their work, feeling resentful of the lack of employment prospects available to them. Both groups shared feelings of being disrespected by fellow Meknassis who look down upon engagement with garbage. The ways in which these workers conceive of themselves and their position within society effectively reifies class. Situating these individual and group narratives within the contexts of Meknes at a microscopic scale, Morocco at a mesoscopic scale, and the neoliberal world order at a macroscopic scale reveals how workers of different social statuses operate.
I framed this discussion in two chapters to explore waste management from historical and sociopolitical dimensions. Chapter I chronicled the forces of globalization that have led to waste management as it exists in the present moment. Some of these developments were unintentional; while the formal waste sector has been explicitly planned and executed by the Ministry of the Interior and foreign contractors, the informal recycling sector has been an incidental participant in this system. In exploring the (un)intentionality of waste management practices, consequences of globalization—namely, social transformation—come to light. Chapter II examined the situation from an individual perspective, demonstrating how mikhala and muzbil deal with economic hardship and dignity under deceitfully authoritarian conditions. Through these discussions I aimed to show that Meknes, although significant, is not unique. By contextualizing muzbil and mikhala within larger narratives of progress, economic development, and colonialism, I show how Morocco is but one locus of these issues on an international scale. I provided case studies from other scholars—Joel Lee, Carrie Mitchell, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Rosalind Fredricks, to name a few—to show how similar activities of trash collection, sanitation, and recycling operate throughout the world. To demonstrate the underlying processes which these case studies represent, I supplemented them with theory pertaining to social exclusion, discard, and economic development.

I challenge widespread notions of what constitutes ‘trash’ and what constitutes ‘work.’ By questioning definitions of these objects of analysis, it is possible to understand the historical developments that inform perceptions of waste in Meknes. Few studies have aimed to connect informal and formal sanitation work to demonstrate how they actually coexist and subconsciously work together. Understanding mikhala and muzbil as symbiotic forces reveals how individuals forge their own infrastructure when the state does not. In the case of Meknes,
many *mikhala* undertake such work because the state cannot provide for them. Similarly, *muzbil* do not take up their jobs as their first choice. Although they also face a social stigma due to their engagement with trash, it is less so than the added shame that comes along with scavenging. Each group has dominant narratives justifying their work: for *mikhala*, they recall economic estrangement, while *muzbil* emphasize religious and patriotic duty. These unique narratives elucidate the value inscribed within different forms of employment in Meknes.

From the interviews I conducted with waste management personnel, the idea of work, and the resulting anxiety around unemployment, emerged as the most central, pressing factor in the lives of *muzbil* and *mikhala*. Outside of the patriotic and religious motivations of *muzbil*, I got the overwhelming sense of reluctant acceptance of their work, characterizing it as difficult and physically demanding. *Mikhala*, too, fully understood the insecurity of the job market that drives people to accept any opportunity for money. One individual even admitted to me that he didn’t blame the people who had previously robbed him, because at least they were making a living somehow. Anxieties over earning an income appear to be at the fore of everyone’s minds in the waste management sector. As my friend, Zineb, and I spoke with these individuals, I noticed that she shared in their anxieties, commenting on how it was difficult for her to find employment as a young university graduate. I cannot begin to claim that these feelings are universal among *Meknassis*, but they are permeable across the different ages, genders, and socioeconomic groups that I encountered over both of my extended visits to the country. Examining these sentiments from some of the most precarious groups in Meknes is an entry point into understanding the inequalities that shape Morocco today.
Bibliography


