



**WHEN THE WASTE-PICKERS GET OUT THE MARGIN<sup>1</sup> :  
LITTLE BATTLES AND MOBILIZATION OF ISTANBUL  
WASTE-PICKERS (TURKEY)**

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**ABSTRACT**

**As in most other countries, the “informal” waste-pickers of Istanbul are characterized by a “social indignity” and plural stigma. But the examination of their everyday social and professional practices reveals small daily battles to earn a livelihood in a brutal context of political reforms. In order to adapt and get round the obstacles confronting them, these waste-pickers adopt all sorts of small tactics to defend themselves and legitimize their position in the city and in urban society. The spatial dimension of their work is essential, as the city is literally a resource for these “poachers”. They also feel profound sense of injustice, which sometimes leads to indignation via mobilization: far from being passive or anomic, they try to have their work recognized by the authorities.**

**Keywords: Mobilization, Waste-pickers, Margin, Indignation, Istanbul.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Around the Mediterranean, there has been an increase in popular uprisings since the early 2000s; these are not, or not only, examples of the “bread riots” observed during the previous decades in the southern Mediterranean, or the street protests driven by political movements (parties, unions) on the northern side. Some of these demonstrations in central or peripheral spaces, inspired by the Occupy movement, involve local people who have been more or less marginalized and are considered as such by the public authorities, and who protest, seek to make themselves heard and be talked about, with more or less success. However, while the recent uprisings and revolutions have received strong media coverage, and rightly so, small movements have often been overlooked, because they are scattered and sector-specific. The same is true of everyday forms of resistance involving the “little people”, not considered worthy of interest because they are socially, culturally and economically vulnerable.

These invisible populations include the “informal” waste-pickers of Istanbul<sup>2</sup>, characterized by “social indignity” that puts them on the lowest rung of the hierarchy. However, examination of their everyday social and professional practices reveals small daily battles to earn a livelihood in a brutal context of political reforms that leaves them increasingly excluded, as we will show in the first part of this article describing the threats that face them. The second part of the paper is firmly in line with the ideas of Michel de Certeau (1984), who considered these tactics of the destitute, discretely transgressing the hegemonies of everyday life, as forms of resistance. Taking this approach, we postulate that these everyday actions can be qualified as acts of resistance once they deny, ignore or adapt the rules introduced by the ruling classes. Among the various discrete transgressions of the waste pickers, we will highlight their professional practices in public spaces, in spite of the fact that scavenging in rubbish bins is now forbidden, tipping them from “informality” to illegality. Consequently, they move out of their neighbourhoods – spaces that are marginal but protective and where they have a sense of group belonging – to work in public areas where they are visible and vulnerable. In order to adapt and get round the obstacles confronting them, they adopt all sorts of small tactics to defend themselves and legitimize their position in the city and in urban society. The spatial dimension

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<sup>2</sup>With a French-speaking master’s student in sociology, we interviewed about 30 waste-pickers and six warehouse owners in the European side of Istanbul in July 2014 and again in July 2015. A large number of waste-pickers also work on the Asian side, but to date they have not been contacted. I also thank Gülçin Erdi for providing and translating documents from Turkish press, especially concerning the case of Ankara in order to support our field observations from Istanbul. Finally, most of the photos illustrating this study were taken by Pascal Garret, sociologist and photographer, during interviews we carried out together and with the consent of the waste-pickers.

of their work is essential, as the city is literally a resource for these “poachers”<sup>3</sup>: access (or not) to waste, the raw material of their activity, thus provides a close link between the right to work and the right to the city.

More than their spatial exclusion or social status, this threat to their right to make a living “from” the city has led to collective awareness, raised and propagated by activists and waste management entrepreneurs. The third part of this article focuses on their profound sense of injustice, which sometimes leads to indignation via mobilization, but which also allows them develop arguments to justify their role in society and in the world that their work helps protect. Far from being passive or anomic, they have held demonstrations in Ankara, speak out and attempt to defend their rights and have their work recognized by the authorities in Istanbul. However, these attempts are difficult to put into action and lead only to a very fragile tolerance of their situation, rather than to public debate. This “micro” example also perhaps reveals the socio-political tensions in Turkey today, fluctuating between calls for democracy and authoritarian repression.

Whatever the outcome of this largely unprecedented indignation of the waste-pickers, it is not motivated or produced by the marginalization situation as such (it is even sometimes welcomed, as it seems to provide the waste-pickers with some sort of freedom), but by their sense of injustice and indignity: *“Individuals are not indignant because a vile act has harmed some abstract dignity; they declare their demand for dignity because they have experienced real indignations. It is in the wake of indignation that the idea of dignity takes root”* (Mattéi, 2005: 20).

## 1. THREATS TO THE WASTE-PICKERS’ NEIGHBOURHOODS AND THREATS TO THEIR ACCESS TO THE RESOURCE

### When the Margin is Both a Resource and a Place to Which the Waste-Pickers are Assigned

In Istanbul, the waste-pickers, *toplayıcılar*, scavenge for recyclable materials (cardboard, plastic, metal, objects) in rubbish bins and containers, recovering what would otherwise end up in landfills. In this way, they give new life to these materials, which to them, far from being just scrap, have a precise value and are an essential resource – their livelihood. Unrecognized and almost invisible because “it is the last of jobs”<sup>4</sup>, the waste-pickers are characterized, in Istanbul as

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3 As defined by J.C. Scott (1990) in the chapter “Infrapolitics of subordinate groups” regarding poaching in forests, considered as a right for peasants, who claimed their “right” to use the resources provided by the forest in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.

4 The expression “the last of jobs” came up several times in the discussions. Mahmut explained that *“Nearly all of us had another job here, but went bust, it didn’t work. We do this because it’s the last job before getting into a life of crime [...] Once you’ve started this job, you don’t care any more about what*

elsewhere, by their low social and spatial status. This also explains the fact that, despite the media coverage given to recycling, reuse and “sustainable development”, the waste-pickers do not have much say in the matter and are rarely involved in the reforms undertaken by the public authorities. Likewise, their work of ridding the city of large quantities of rubbish, sold to recycling companies via wholesale dealers, provides the basis of the formal and lucrative recycling system, but does not give them access to labour or social rights. This exclusion does not prevent them from being part of the urban economy in a form of “perverse inclusion”, whereby the social outcast is at the heart of the system and makes it work (Sawaia, 2001).

The *toplayıcılar* of Istanbul are at the margins of society and the city, even though many of them live and work in the central districts and near the popular tourist sites (Aya Sofya and the Blue Mosque for the waste-pickers of Süleymaniye; Taksim, Istiklal Avenue and the gentrified district of Beyoğlu for those of Tarlabaşı). The waste-pickers’ settlements on urban wasteland are seen as no-go areas, occupied by the underprivileged as well as by large numbers of refugees and illegal immigrants. The buildings are in an advanced state of decay, due to a deliberate strategy of neglect by the city authorities in order to better justify urban renovation projects, and the waste-pickers are highly aware of the threat to their living and working space. In Süleymaniye and Tarlabaşı, the large number of houses in ruins, walled up or burnt testifies to this strategy of neglect, while large hoardings in Tarlabaşı advertise major property development projects (already begun), supported by President Erdoğan himself<sup>5</sup>.

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*others think, because it's the last of jobs. So you just think of yourself and not of others*” (Mahmut, former waste-picker and owner of a small informal warehouse in Tarlabaşı, interviewed in Istanbul, 10/07/2014).

5 See the documentary about a waste-picker in the district: “Tarlabaşı and me” <http://sud.hypotheses.org/1690>. Note that there are about 500,000 waste-pickers in Turkey, and an unknown number in Istanbul. A large number of Kurds, from south and south-east Turkey, migrated to the large cities in the 1990s due to the violence against them and became waste-pickers, notably in Tarlabaşı.



1 – A “depo” (warehouse) in S leymaniye (Photo P. Garret, 2015)

In S leymaniye, the *toplayıcılar* live in dilapidated houses, caves, or ruins, and on bits of wasteland in the neighbourhood. Most of them come from four villages in the province of Aksaray in Anatolia, 700 km from Istanbul, and make regular return journeys: “There are nearly 1000 people from Aksaray here. The first person came after the coup d’ tat [1980] because of poverty. If someone asks for “Aksaray-Niğde”, everyone knows he’s come to pick waste. New people come, others return; we go back every month to see our wives and our children, to rest [...]. We couldn’t bring our families to live here, we couldn’t live, find a home for them, feed them [...]. This is the poorest district of Istanbul; there are criminals, it’s a really bad area! When we saw you coming, we said to each other that you should have gone somewhere else...”<sup>6</sup>. Not only are the waste-pickers spatially marginalized, they are also marginalized historically and socially, underlying the way that they are perceived and stigmatized by the authorities and other citizens – perceptions that they are highly conscious of. In addition to the hardness of their work, they live in constant fear of the police; this fear is greater among the undocumented waste-pickers than among the immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, Afghanistan, or Pakistan, or even the many Syrian refugees whose situation is extremely precarious.

Nevertheless, not all waste-pickers are poor and there is a professional hierarchy; at the top are the “depo” (warehouse) owners, who buy the materials

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Mehmet, a waste-picker for 15 years, 4/07/2014.



collected by the street waste-pickers, with whom they sometimes have family or interpersonal ties. The relationship between the warehouse owners and waste-pickers varies, fluctuating between paternalism and protection on the one hand, and dependence or even domination on the other. By way of example, the owner of one of the largest warehouses in Süleymaniye invited all the local waste-pickers to a large meal to break the Ramadan fast; and he frequently lends money or helps needy or sick waste-pickers in one way or another, or those who want to invest in equipment. The young Roma women who he employs to sort waste say that they are better treated and paid than when they collect waste. It is difficult to understand the power relationships when carrying out interviews in the warehouses, not least because the owner is always present when the workers are being interviewed, and they tend to express feelings of solidarity rather than of conflict. Nonetheless, in an interview carried out in French, and thus not understood by the other people, an illegal immigrant, who had recently arrived after a long and hazardous journey from Togo, told us that he was given the most difficult tasks – washing and grinding plastic at the back of a garage in a highly polluted environment – and that he was paid less than the others.

Finally, the spatial situation of the *toplayıcılar* is paradoxical. The fact that they live in run-down areas is precisely because these provide them with a spatial resource that is essential to their activity; it is on wasteland that they can store and sort the waste material they have collected, and the ground floor, basement, and sometimes the building as a whole can be used for storage<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, if the waste-pickers live and work in these districts, it is again because they know that their warehouses would not be tolerated elsewhere, particularly in more affluent neighbourhoods, and that they would not be able to find anywhere to live there. It is also precisely because these spaces are perceived as marginal that the waste-pickers can find some sort of peace and a form of much sought-after freedom.

### **When Public Action Reinforces Marginalization**

Since the 1990s, notably following a methane explosion in an unauthorized dump in Istanbul, which made a lasting impression on people, and even more since the 2000s during negotiations for EU membership, the Turkish authorities have undertaken a process to modernize, organize, rationalize and upgrade (in line with European norms) all aspects of waste management. This has gone hand-in-hand with extensive privatization. In this way, supervised waste-disposal sites have been created, illegal dumps closed and converted into green spaces, composting and recycling centres have been opened.

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<sup>7</sup> Advantage has also been taken of the sloping land in Süleymaniye: for example, at one of the large warehouses located above the street, the workers throw the bags of sorted rubbish directly into the lorry parked below, facilitating the handling of bags that are often very heavy.

A year that the waste-pickers remember vividly is 2005, when a directive about packaging enabled the local authorities to delegate the collection of cardboard (an important material for the waste-pickers) to private companies, and to set up sorting centres, to organize the sorting of waste at source, and to install underground containers for selective sorting. Pilot trials were carried out, and several central districts now have underground containers. This reform policy did not in any way take into account the existence and work of the informal waste-pickers (except in Ankara, as discussed below); since this directive, anybody working in connection with waste without an official permit is considered to be carrying out an illegal activity, and scavenging is seen as theft. Consequently, the waste-pickers' status has changed from informality to illegality. And yet, the informal sector in Turkey puts 30% to 70% of recyclable material back into the system; although this covers a wide range, it is the basis of the collection and recycling system, while the private or public companies working on behalf of the municipalities struggle to meet their obligations. Only 47% of household waste in Istanbul is collected by rubbish trucks; the remainder, including 80% of packaging waste, is collected by the informal or formal sector<sup>8</sup>.

In 2010, in a context of growing economic profitability of the sector, of competition and covetousness regarding waste management, and faced with the continuing presence of the waste-pickers, the city attempted to intervene and to pre-empt their material, as explained by Serdach, owner of a small warehouse in the district of Tarlaabaşı: *“According to a new law [directive of 2005], all the waste belongs to the town, so what we’re doing now is stealing! But the government can’t fight us. Five years ago [in 2010], the municipality summoned the waste-pickers and wanted to give them uniforms and fixed working hours. But the waste-pickers didn’t follow their instructions. So the people in the municipality told the warehouse owners that they would have to work with a specific private company who would buy our material; but it didn’t work, the prices were too low! That private company, Yüceler Kağıt, paid 10 Turkish lira, but we were getting 15 elsewhere! Now, it’s finished and they went bankrupt [...]. The government takes my taxes, but doesn’t recognize my job... it’s very strange!”*<sup>9</sup>

In August 2011, still following this modernization approach, a new law on packaging waste was introduced, banning both “informal” collection, reserved for people with a permit, and the purchase of this material by companies. However, this decision was not applied until 2016; very recently, the policy of excluding waste-pickers from this sector has hardened, and they are now

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<sup>8</sup> These figures are undoubtedly approximate, but there is a trend towards harmonization of waste management, via Istac, a company affiliated to the Metropolitan Council of Istanbul and which is responsible for monitoring and coordinating collection and recycling in Greater Istanbul. Another company, Cevko, was created in 1991 by 14 Turkish industrial firms to coordinate recycling. Finally, in 2014, 21 private recycling companies were licensed (Robin, Collas: 2014)

<sup>9</sup> Interview 5/07/2015.

threatened with fines and confiscation of their materials.

As described in the last part of this article, the waste-pickers' demands are not about the right to housing, even though many of them live in overcrowded and sub-standard "bachelor rooms", but about the right to work, at a time when access to their main resource, i.e. waste, is threatened by the reforms. Previously, the collection work as such required numerous small individual tactics of adjustment, arrangement, circumvention, and avoidance, which can be seen as micro-battles against urban norms that *a priori* exclude anyone whose presence is disturbing, such as the waste-picker. The ideology underlying the modernization reforms cannot tolerate the waste-picker in the public space, with his trolley full of rubbish and perceived as "dirty", "archaic", and undoubtedly uncontrollable. Daring to collect rubbish in the public space, in spite of the restrictions and bans, is clearly a matter of fighting for survival, but also of flouting the orders for upgrading.

## 2. SPATIAL AND EVERYDAY ACTS OF RESISTANCE

### The "Little Tactics of the Vulnerable" Used by the Waste-Pickers in Public Spaces

The spatial dimension plays an essential role in the *toplayıcılar's* typical resistance strategies, notably because knowledge and information sharing takes place at the scale of the neighbourhood, and this proximity enables them to join forces in order to resist the reforms. Here, the link between spatial, social and professional proximity is central to the waste-pickers' ability to organize themselves and act. In Süleymaniye, many of the *toplayıcılar* come from Anatolia and already knew each other before coming to Istanbul, and the tight family and professional networks give rise to a form of conviviality and solidarity. Moreover, the fact of doing the same stigmatizing job creates a strong sense of group belonging. The waste-pickers say that they only go into other districts to collect waste, and that they do not go elsewhere in their free time (which in any case they do not have), that they have no social contacts in Istanbul outside their immediate circle, etc. In Tarlabası, the migrant waste-pickers say that they save their money to finance the next stage of their journey and never go out. A warehouse owner in the same neighbourhood explained that the money the waste-pickers earn goes on paying for their telephones, alcohol and cigarettes. All these factors help make the neighbourhood safe and reassuring, but also no doubt confining and isolating.

However, for their work, the waste-pickers go into the city every day to collect material, and it is perhaps above all in the way they cross the neighbourhood boundaries or go beyond the margins (Agier, 1999) to work in public spaces where they are visible and vulnerable that the spatial dimension



comes into play.

Their collection itinerary can be about ten kilometres long, and some may work them four or five times a day. They collect waste in the main tourist areas of Istanbul, which are closely monitored and controlled, and in affluent districts where they are not always seen in a good light. And yet it is when working in the public spaces that their “little tactics” become acts of resistance, even if these are individual, discreet, sometimes short-lived and fragile. One such way of resisting is to demonstrate their patriotism, or even nationalism. For example, one waste-picker attached a large Turkish flag to his trolley, and a warehouse owner displayed a large banner portraying Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the street over the entrance to his warehouse. He explained this by his love for the father of the nation, and his pride in being a Turk<sup>10</sup>. This is a way of showing good citizenship and of legitimizing their presence, but sometimes it is also a means of self-protection, because the flag is sacrosanct. This is based on a code shared by the whole population (Mauss-Copeau and Copeau, 1998), and by displaying the flag, the waste-pickers demonstrate their full allegiance to it.

Another way of using public spaces concerns the attitude the waste-pickers must adopt to be tolerated there by the local authorities, the police, and the other citizens. They know (and say) that they must work quickly, discreetly, and leave the place very clean after going through the skips and garbage bins. They never have priority in the public space, and they know that they will always be in the wrong if there is a conflict or accident. This type of behaviour can be seen as an act of submission related to the stigma, but it is also a sign of their keen awareness of urban practices, and of knowing how to get round obstacles and utilise the resources of the town in the best possible way. To carry out their work, there are all sorts of small tactics: never obstruct the traffic of cars but use the tramway lines (dangerous); avoid pedestrians and tourists by going round them; go away in the event of a difficult interaction; use the mosques as a place to rest, go to the toilet and wash; leave the trolley when it gets in the way and use a small bag to collect waste; lend a hand to the official rubbish collectors in exchange for the right to collect certain materials, etc.<sup>11</sup> Yusûf described the waste-pickers’ know-how about avoiding difficulties as follows: “*The waste-pickers can go anywhere, they don’t have set times. Even if the town authorities forbid them to go to a particular neighbourhood, an hour later, they go there! And the police can’t do a thing. The waste-pickers can even beat the police and the town council! [...] They always find*

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10 Note that this display of the flag or of a well-known person is found in other countries, notably in Morocco where the slum-dwellers hang the portrait of the king on their shacks to avoid eviction.

11 These ways of proceeding and moving around public spaces were observed by Pascal Garret who followed a young waste-picker on his round of more than 9 km.

*their way*”<sup>12</sup>.



2 – *The collection itinerary of Yunus. Photo P. Garret 2015*

Another example involves making verbal agreements with shop-keepers to have direct access to the resource, as described by Mustafa: “[...] *The waste-pickers always find their way. For example, if they arrive after the municipality’s trucks, they still manage to find something [...]. Sometimes the residents give their sorted garbage to the waste-pickers, and sometimes even the garbage-men give them stuff directly [...]. We even have unofficial agreements with the police to collect their rubbish!!!*” Knowing the schedule of the refuse collection vehicles also enables them to get there first. In that case, they know that they are putting themselves in an illegal situation, but accept it because their livelihood depends on it.

Finally, overall, due to their skills and knowledge of how the town and urban society function, the waste-pickers are clearly out-of-the-ordinary citizens who, despite all, develop ways of adapting and fitting in and of getting round the restrictions.

### **Invention as a Form of Resistance**

In addition to the small tactics described above, which are fairly common in the informal waste sector in other parts of the world, there are inventive individual initiatives to overcome the obstacles. For example, in one warehouse, long poles are used to get hold of material at the bottom of containers. The waste-pickers acknowledge that carrying and handling this sort of “fishing rod”

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<sup>12</sup> Interview, 16/07/2014. In Turkish, “to find ones way” means to find a solution to a problem.

is not very efficient or practical, but they describe it as follows: “*However, there is a solution for the underground containers – a long pole with an iron hook! Even if they buried the containers 7 floors lower, we would always find a solution!*”<sup>13</sup>

Another form of adaptation, but which requires capital, is to replace the warehouse with a lorry. This is what Ahmet did, in anticipation of a hardening of attitudes towards the waste-pickers: “*There have been a lot of changes in Süleymaniye, and the local authority is undoubtedly going to close the warehouses. There are 500<sup>14</sup>, one in every street! I’ve got a lorry, so I’m OK, but I don’t know what’s going to happen to the others*”. The lorry also enables him to work further afield, in more affluent districts where the pickings are richer; and if there are problems with the police or residents, Ahmet immediately moves his lorry. He then sells his material to the recycling plants in the formal sector directly, without going through the wholesale intermediaries, thereby earning more.

Finally, at a different level, we can mention the case of a group of young men, brothers and cousins, who formed a cooperative and who work and live together. Before, they worked individually for warehouse owners who paid them on the basis of what they collected. Now they have been able to buy a lorry, rent a small place to live, and set up their activity on wasteland, selling what they collect to a local wholesale dealer. We can see this organization as a way of reducing their dependency and of circumventing the professional hierarchy within the sector.



3 – Young men who have formed a cooperative. Photo 2015

13 Interview with Mustafa, a warehouse owner, 07/07/2014.

14 This figure is very exaggerated, as the actual number of warehouses in Süleymaniye is about 30. However, exaggerating the number of waste-pickers, warehouses or the amount of waste collected could also be seen as a way of asserting the importance of their work and of showing that they are not negligible. By contrast, the authorities often tend to underestimate, for exactly the opposite reasons.

### 3. UNEXPECTED RESISTANCE: AWARENESS OF INCREASING EXCLUSION AND THE EMERGENCE OF OPPOSITION

Waste-pickers, because they do “dirty work” (Hugues, 1962) and handle filth, are associated at best with the poor and at worst with the impure and untouchable. These are groups of people whose qualities are ignored, and in official and even academic language they are referred to only in terms of what they lack - money, means, culture, knowledge, skills, etc. In spite of this perception of incompetence and inadequacy, they nonetheless show that they can be proactive (Boulier: 2009)<sup>15</sup>, raising the question of the “marginality” of people who may not be as subjugated as we imagine, although this should be viewed in relation to the inequality of social positions within professional and community groups.

#### The “Waste-workers” Dare to Express Themselves?

Compared to the strong community reactions or even demonstrations for “the right to housing” that sometimes (and increasingly frequently) occur following the eviction of tenants, the situation of the waste-pickers is very different. On the one hand, they are never informed directly of decisions, laws, plans or directives concerning waste-management policies, because they are not considered as having a role to play. They learn about them only through the media or by word of mouth. On the other hand, although the waste-pickers may have confrontations with the police during their work, this occurs individually and on a one-off basis. The political violence against them is thus largely hidden and latent, and is above all reflected in increasingly difficult access to the resource (on which they depend for their survival). From this it is clear that their exclusion is not immediately apparent, and hence it is more difficult to get people to rally to their cause. Finally, they are geographically scattered across the city of Istanbul, and the *toplayıcılar* of Süleymaniye say that they do not know those who work in Tarlabaşı, on the other bank of the Golden Horn, and even less those who work on the Asian side. In the same vein, they can, it is true, form small communities, like the *toplayıcılar* who come from Aksaray, or the Roma waste-pickers<sup>16</sup> who work together and who are linked by strong family ties, but

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15 See also Z. Bauman (2009): the author speaks of the “lost lives” of the unemployed, the poor, immigrants, etc., who belong to the horde of non-productive people, of wasted lives separated from the social body and assimilated to the industrial and household waste that the planet cannot rid itself of. The author describes as “human waste” these beings who are relegated to the margins of modernity by the global triumph of the market economy, and who are thus unlikely to oppose the public authorities. It is also interesting to note the juxtaposition of meaning between “*déchets humains*” (human waste), “*déchets sociaux*” (social waste), and “*récupérateurs de déchets*” (waste-pickers) proposed by D. Lhuilier (2005).

16 We were able to interview three young Roma women and one man sorting waste in a warehouse in Süleymaniye. They explained that they usually worked for themselves, but that they are well paid and have a more regular income in the warehouse.



this is not always the case. For example, waste picking in Tarlabası is not community based and there seems to be a rapid turnover of workers. The geographic dispersion, the difficulties of finding a firm residential and professional footing (they can collect waste or be employed on a day-to-day basis), the inequality of community links from one district to another, can create obstacles to the emergence of a collective voice.

However, in 2002, the waste-pickers in the Iskitler district of Ankara, comprising industrial wasteland and ill-reputed slums, rose up against the current reforms: *“We realized that privatization was being introduced by the local authority and we wanted to defend ourselves. The waste-pickers took part in the demonstrations of 1<sup>st</sup> May 2002 to draw attention to their situation. We went with our hand-trolleys and placards saying ‘Don’t throw capitalism in the rubbish bin, because it is worthless [i.e. cannot even be recycled]’. It was the first time that we demonstrated as a group! [...] People asked us who we were, and we said ‘People who recycle cardboard’, and someone even asked if we were Trotskyists, and we answered ‘No, we are paper workers [Kağıt İşçileri]”*<sup>17</sup>.



4 – Demonstration in Ankara, 1<sup>st</sup> May 2010. *“A poor paradise is better than a rich hell”*. *“Waste-paper workers”*. *“Don’t throw capitalism in the rubbish bin of history. It isn’t even worth two coins”*. [www.facebook.com/groups/7037320971/photos/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/7037320971/photos/)

In Ankara, awareness of the effects of privatization was raised thanks to the efforts of this militant, Ali Mendilliođlu, a former waste-picker and then owner of a small warehouse and a neighbourhood leader, and who has now become a public figure, defending the waste-pickers’ rights. During the same period, attacks against the waste-pickers increased; the police cordoned off their

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Ali Mendilliođlu, a former waste-picker, born in Ankara in the district of Dikmen, 13/07/2015.



neighbourhood, confiscated 4,000 hand-carts and assaulted the residents, some of whom were injured and taken to hospital. They also had confrontations with the police while collecting waste in the town. These episodes were followed by negotiations with the local authorities, because, as explained by Ali Mendillioğlu: *“You can’t put a policeman behind every waste-picker or every container [...]. In Ankara, we demonstrated, we wanted our rights, we fought for our rights ourselves [...]. It isn’t the town council who wanted to integrate us, it’s us who wanted our rights to be recognized! Finally, they allocated a single district where we could collect waste – only one, but it’s legal for us!”*

In Istanbul, the waste-pickers are also aware of the growing number of obstacles confronting them since 2005; on the orders of the local authorities, some informal warehouses in Tarlabaşı have closed; the police go through Süleymaniye announcing that all the warehouses will soon be illegal; others are monitored and must be “upgraded”; in theory, the waste-pickers are completely forbidden to collect rubbish, particularly in the tourist and affluent districts; the number of underground containers has increased, and small private sorting firms working under licence for the town councils have also been set up. At first, the waste-pickers were not organized, had no representative, and certainly no union. By contrast, they nearly all know each other, particularly in Süleymaniye where there is a strong community spirit and large family networks. In addition to these social ties, there are professional relationships between the waste-pickers and the warehouse owners and they meet and discuss daily. Everyone knows when someone has had a difficult time collecting waste or has been harassed by the police, etc. As explained by Yusuf<sup>18</sup>: *“In this job, everybody knows each other, either because they come from the same village, or because they do the same job. There is a lot of solidarity”*. These relationships foster discussions between the waste-pickers faced with difficult situations, and have led to the emergence of leaders, spokespersons for the “waste workers” who initiated negotiations with the authorities. In this way, in Istanbul, unlike Ankara, there have as yet been no spontaneous or organized collective protests, but more information-sharing and awareness-raising campaigns, as well as a form of delegating defence of the group to those who hold the highest social and professional positions, namely the wholesale dealers who run the warehouses.

### **The Role of the Warehouse Owners and Activists**

In Istanbul, the geographical dispersion of the waste-pickers and the topography of the city make any collective mobilization at the urban scale difficult (*“the waste-pickers don’t cross the bridges”*), unlike in Ankara where there is greater communication. By contrast, in Süleymaniye, at the local level, Yusuf,

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Yusuf, a wholesale dealer, 4/07/2014.

the main wholesale dealer and owner of a large licensed warehouse, attempted to bring together the local waste-pickers in 2005 and initiate discussions with the authorities. Yusûf is one of the most experienced workers – his father and uncles were already scrap metal merchants – and he is known and respected by all. He has sufficient social and economic capital to lend money to those in need. In addition to his paternalistic relations, Yusûf knows the whole recycling sector intimately, as well as the prices of the recovered material. His is thus a central figure on three counts: in relation to the community of origin, the professional group, and the neighbourhood. Quite naturally, he has taken on the role of organiser and decision-maker, and is recognized as such by everyone. First of all, he carried out a survey of the warehouses, their owners and their waste-pickers. Thanks to mobile phones, he can inform them of material that should be collected following price fluctuations, and he can also let them know about progress in negotiations with the local authorities. Then, in 2007, he created an informal organization that acts as an intermediary with the public authorities: *“Every three or four months, we get together and talk. The warehouse owners come with their waste-pickers. Some don’t come, but lots do. I also invite a representative of the local council to discuss problems [...]. In these meetings, we also talk about the legislation. If we could manage it, the waste-pickers would have social rights [...]. They aren’t official meetings, but we would like them to be. The idea is to improve the living and working conditions of the waste-pickers”*<sup>19</sup>.

As a result of these meetings, as mentioned above, the local authority proposed giving a uniform, gloves and fixed working times to the waste-pickers who collected for private companies. However, the price for the waste material they collected would be less than the market price, and they would receive no other advantage from this “integration” (such as social security, etc.). In the same vein, there was a proposal to give waste-collection tricycles to some waste-pickers (but with no clear criteria about who would be chosen), and a prototype has even been built. These proposals have been refused by the waste-pickers; they do not know how to use the tricycle and do not want to use it, because they are afraid of not being able to control it on the steep slopes of the city. They refuse to be compelled to work fixed hours, and above all, they consider that recognition only via the uniform is insufficient and that the loss of earnings would be too great.

So far, these discussions with the town representatives have not had any tangible results, but they have allowed a certain fragile status quo to be established – a sort of laissez-faire attitude by the authorities in exchange for the waste-pickers working discreetly and cleanly. The waste-pickers know this and say that they are very careful not to leave any rubbish round the containers once

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<sup>19</sup> Interview, 15/07/2014.

they have gone through them.

In addition to the warehouse owners who are at the top of the professional hierarchy and who set themselves up as intermediaries between the waste-pickers and the local authorities, there are activists like Ali Mendillioğlu, who already intervened on behalf of the waste-pickers in Ankara and decided to move to Istanbul in 2012 with the clear objective of “*helping to organize and bring the waste-pickers together*”<sup>20</sup>. Ali Mendillioğlu has been involved in political action for a long time, mainly in the socialist movement, although later in the interview he said “communist”. Paradoxically, his role as spokesperson is recognized more by the public authorities than by the waste-pickers, which he regrets. In fact, he says that the authorities regularly call on him to intercede with the waste-pickers, particularly the Roma, when there are problems. Due to the urban structure and the thirty-nine municipalities in the city, Ali explains that it is very difficult to organize the very large number of waste-pickers; for example, there are more waste-pickers in one of the main districts on the Asian side of the city than in the whole of the city of Ankara. Ali has become a public figure and has been interviewed on television, but he says that he is “*tired of talking on behalf of the waste-pickers*”, and without completely withdrawing, he has distanced himself somewhat from them.

While the waste-pickers’ attempts to organize themselves and make themselves heard have not resulted in very concrete outcomes in terms of recognition of their work by the politicians, they are clearly developing a coherent approach to legitimize their position, which can be seen as a form of political awareness. It is based on discursive arguments, found among both the “waste entrepreneurs” and the waste-pickers, namely that they play an important environmental role: “*We contribute to recycling plastic that would otherwise be dumped in the environment, even if we are not recognized for our contribution to the environment*”<sup>21</sup>. In the interviews, they repeatedly argue that they rid the city of a vast amount of rubbish, that they participate in the urban economy, and provide a livelihood for a large number of people in the city and in their countries of origin, which suffer from extreme poverty. They stress the fact that the residents of the city cannot and do not sort their rubbish as in Europe, and that they are more efficient thanks to their professional skills. These arguments form the basis of their demands both for social recognition and for the right of access to waste material, and more generally for the right to work. Their demands are thus driven more by a sense of injustice than of marginality: “*This job provides a livelihood for thousands of people, and we are better organized in Turkey than elsewhere. But we still have problems with the police. The people who live here also say that we are*

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20 Interview, 13/07/2015.

21 Interview with Mustafa, 7/7/2014.

*dirty, and we have problems with the local authorities. And yet we're very important for recycling and the environment [...]. Thanks to this job, we can survive. Otherwise, what would we do? Steal? Become a criminal? It's how I feed my family!"*<sup>22</sup>

Last but not least, in January 2016, the Minister for the Environment and Urbanism sent a circular to recycling firms, announcing that all purchase of paper and cardboard from the informal sector was prohibited and punishable by a fine of 140,000 Turkish Lira (€43,750). For their part, the waste-pickers were threatened with a fine of 20,000 Turkish Lira (€6,200) if they continued scavenging. The decree of 2011 is now being strictly applied, and it seems that a large number of companies have recently stopped buying cardboard from the waste-pickers. There is a video showing an altercation between policemen and a waste-picker who is literally hanging on to his trolley in order to avoid being arrested; passers-by come to his defence and he is finally allowed to go<sup>23</sup>. Although we do not know how the waste-pickers will react, this decision has created a buzz on social media and rallied support for their cause<sup>24</sup>. It is still difficult to measure the consequences, notably in terms of the emergence of a debate that would bring this issue into the public arena<sup>25</sup>.

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22 Interview with Mehmet, 09/07/2014.

23 See: <http://www.aktifhaber.com/kagit-toplayicisi-zabitalara-isyan-etti-ekmek-tekneme-el-koyma-1319548h.htm>

24 See for example a video of Dinçer Mendillioğlu, President of the Association of recycling workers pleading the waste-pickers' cause <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cApUdUczQP4>; the article at <http://www.kedistan.net/2016/02/04/ramasseurs-papier-turquie/>; the public support of İlber Ortaylı, a renowned historian and professor at Galatasaray University; a petition on change.org; the Facebook group Katık/Geri Dönüşüm İşçileri Dergisi (Katık, the journal of recycling workers) that carries out awareness campaigns and provides information; and the article on the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers' web-site giving an account at a different scale <http://globalrec.org/2016/02/05/will-waste-pickers-in-turkey-join-unemployed-army/>

25 Here, it involves the process whereby small discreet and transient movements, which are not taken seriously, can ultimately bring public issues to the public arena (Cefaï, Trom : 2001 ; Gilbert, Henry : 2012 ; Florin : 2015)



5 – Cartoon

“The firms buying waste from the pickers will have to pay a fine of 140,000 Turkish Lira.

**The State:** It is told that there’s a lot of money in your sector, isn’t that true?

**The waste-pickers:** No, there isn’t that much money, but at least we contribute to the protection of the environment, my brother.

**The State:** Stop talking politics!”

**Source:** a cartoon found on the Facebook page of a warehouse owner<sup>26</sup>

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The discreet and everyday tactics used by waste-pickers to get round the obstacles facing them in their work in public spaces are linked to their know-how and skills arising from their detailed knowledge of urban space and society and how they function. As such, the waste-pickers, generally considered as marginal, pariahs and “social waste”, are also “extra-ordinary” citizens who have good knowledge of how to overcome the constraints. Apart from these ruses that flout the public authorities’ bans and orders designed to clean up and upgrade the city, the demands made by the waste-pickers since the 2000s seem to indicate that they are gradually coming together as a professional group, with an awareness of group belonging, potentially giving them the means to become proactive. This is demonstrated by the use of the same arguments by waste entrepreneurs and

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/onemligeridonusum/?fref=nf>; March 2016. English translation by Gülçin Erdi.



activists, even if a distinction should be made between the two; for the waste entrepreneurs, the activity of the waste-pickers (with low income and no rights) is the basis of the lucrative recycling system, while the arguments put forward by the activists are politically motivated.

Finally, the increasing professionalism of the so-called “informal” sector belies the traditional representation of waste-pickers as “*bands of hunter-gatherers in the urban jungle*” (Lomnitz, 1975)<sup>27</sup>. Nevertheless, the fact that they are so firmly pushed to the margins – of the town, of society, of work – undoubtedly makes the possibility of mobilization difficult, in spite of the indignation that drives them. Their attempts to move out of the margins are limited, uneven, and have little chance of success: “When we examine how the various social actors respond to the many expressions of indignation, it is clear that indignation is a rallying cry. It is for this reason that many see it as essentially provocative, subversive, or even revolutionary. Is this enough to see it as the main motive of human actions? It is evident that the effectiveness of indignation can rapidly run out and be short-lived, producing only....indignation. In fact, it seems important to distinguish between different types of indignation: indignation that leads to discussion (sometimes in vain) and/or thinking; indignation that rouses opinions (sometimes in vain); indignation that provides the driving force for action, or better, produces action (and can also be in vain...)”.

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<sup>27</sup> Here, the author is referring to the rag-pickers in Mexico in the 1970s.

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