Barbéchas – Waste Collectors

Margins of Society or Centre of a Circular Economy?

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KHIRA: 'I'm a widow [...] my husband didn't leave me any pension or anything.
I don't have a care book (health insurance),
my son is unemployed and still lives with me.
I collect bread, a few plastic bottles and aluminium cans to earn
between five and eight Dinar a day.
You know, like today's young people, my son doesn't want to work with me.
He's even ashamed of me.
When he sees me in the back streets of the neighbourhood, he ignores me [...].
Look at the state I'm in, but what do you want me to do? [...] I don't talk to anyone, I
just work, staring at the ground with my mouth shut, and I go home.
I don't like the neighbours to see me carrying a big bag full of plastic'.

Khira, aged 71, collects plastic and old bread in the Ennassim neighbourhood

The current Tunisian context is characterised by increasing unemployment and poverty. This deteriorating socio-economic situation is fuelled by factors extrinsic to the local context, namely the political, economic, health and environmental crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine and climate change. Greater Tunis, the largest fast expanding urban space in Tunisia, is marked by environmental problems and social inequalities that challenge the social landscape. Since the 2011 revolution, there has been growing awareness and mobilisation around environmental issues, particularly in relation to poor waste management (cf. Furniss/Bouhlel, this volume). Alongside visible mobilisations, other more invisible practices, particularly among marginalised sections of the population, who make a living from collecting and recycling waste, are fighting exclusion and poverty. The Tunisian government has been implementing a waste recovery and management system since the 1990s. This system is dominated and governed by the state through the coordination of actions between municipalities and national institutions. In recent years, however, the problems associated with waste management increased, and induced political debates and growing tensions between civil society, cit-

izens and public authorities (ibid.). On the one hand, conflicts have fostered demonstrations and collective actions that in turn have challenged government policies, for example in Djerba, Galléla or Sfax (cf. Weißenfels, this volume). On the other hand, the problems and debates also highlighted another group of stakeholders of prime importance for waste management and, particularly, for the circular economy in Tunisia: the waste pickers, or *barbéchas* in the Tunisian dialect. These are individuals living on the fringes of society, carrying out waste collection activities informally. Plunged into oblivion through social invisibility (Le Blanc 2009: 1) they are nonetheless highly active in the urban space, in Tunisia as in other cities in so called developing countries (Florin/Alix 2016).

In urban situations, characterised by social inequalities, poverty and exclusion of vulnerable groups, *barbéchas* interact, scavenge, recover and sell recyclable waste abandoned by city dwellers. Although they are stigmatised and regarded as the weak link in the waste recovery chain by state institutions, such as the national waste management agency ANGED, they are nonetheless at the heart of a circular economy. Conceptualising a circular economy as a model of production and consumption, that involves sharing, reusing, repairing, refurbishing and the recycling of existing materials and products as long as possible, in order to extend the life cycle of products (Hobson 2016), the *barbéchas* are the essential suppliers of recyclable waste in Tunisia. But their everyday practices come at a high social cost, particularly as their recovery activities are neither regulated by legal or institutional frameworks nor supported or protected by any third party – in this sense they are part of asymmetric economies (Gertel/Audano, this volume). Through an analysis of the social context, the organisation of their recycling activities, and their spatial practices in the city, this chapter reveals a form of 'ordinary resistance' that the *barbéchas* engage with in relation to their stigmatisation and social invisibility. Daily resistance, engaging in a constant struggle against life's constraints, requires skills, the ability to act, and to negotiate (Gertel/Grüneisl, this volume). This aspect will be analysed in this chapter in order to deconstruct the social and cultural realities of these marginalised people. Deconstructing their realities will reveal their ways, means and strategies for accessing and appropriating the resources required to improve their conditions and preserve their dignity. It also aims to answer the question of whether the *barbéchas* represent the margins of society, or are found at the centre of a new circular economy.

To tackle these questions, I carried out an ethnographic study using life stories and participant observation with *barbéchas* in Greater Tunis. I accompanied *barbéchas* in the Ettadhamen district during their working day and took part in the collection and sorting of certain types of waste. As well as in the Mnihla commune in the district of Ettadhamen, I also worked in the commune of Soukra in the Ennassim district. Another part of my survey was carried out in the officially controlled dump spot at Borj Chakir, but this was interrupted when ANGED refused to grant me authorisation. Nevertheless, some empirical data collected at Borj Chakir will support the analysis presented in this chapter. The choice of the two districts – Ennassim and Ettadhamen – was prompted by the concentration of a large number of *barbéchas* in these two working-class areas. About 250 *barbéchas* live in Soukra and almost 800 *barbéchas* in Mnihla (c.f. International Alert 2020). The group of people I interviewed was made up of women, men and also couples engaging in waste recovery activities together. I interviewed three couples, eight women and seven men from the two neighbourhoods. Their age ranges from 45 to 70 years. This

variation in age and sex allows me to compare the different experiences and life trajectories of waste collectors.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first describes the social context of their lives in order to identify and understand important and significant moments. In the second section the focus is on their practices and know-how of their work. Finally, I address and analyse the spatial dynamics and reconfigurations of the living space and the neighbourhood in relation to the waste collection activities.

The Social Context of *Barbéchas*

Capturing the history and social context of the *barbéchas* makes it possible to understand their lived experiences and to scrutinise the links between the different fragments of their social life, as well as to understand the logics of action that fuel their choices. Their personal narrations are characterised by a feeling of exclusion, of rejection from social life, which takes the form of marginalisation in the urban space while also being neglected by state institutions. The *barbéchas* interviewed all originate from families who migrated from rural areas to the capital Tunis in the 1960s and 1970s. As former farmers confronted with the poverty and hardship of rural life, their parents moved to the outskirts of the city to build neighbourhoods such as Ettadhamen, Ennassim or Ennour near the Borj Chakir dump site. Because the public authorities consider these areas to be illegal settlements, living in them carries a stigma. What is more, the lack of legal recognition creates a state of rupture, discontinuity and even rejection in relation to the city. Their precarious living conditions and weak infrastructure also translate into practical difficulties, like accessing public transport. This is a major constraint to fluid mobility and prevents the creation of close links and affinities with others in the expanding metropolis, while also fostering a sense of enclosure and confinement to the neighbourhood, which reduces the chances of socio-professional mobility (cf. Bouzid, this volume).

The low cultural, economic, and social capital of *barbécha* families has contributed to the social reproduction of insecurity and precarity. In relation to the argument of Castel (1994: 13), the absence of relational networks and the lack of work, push *barbéchas* and their family members from the 'zone of vulnerability' to that of 'disconnection'. Zina, aged 61, a *barbécha* in the Ettadhamen neighbourhood, talks about her experience:

> I'm originally from Béja, and my father and mother came to Tunis when I was 20, and we were poor, so we moved here and stayed with family members in Ettadhamen. […] Precarity and I know each other very well […] I can even teach people how to live in poverty and insecurity.

In the same context, Sayda, aged 45, adds:

> I'm from Le Kef, there are eight of us in the family, we came to Ettadhamen when I was eight years old. […] My father was ill and couldn't work. […] I didn't go to school. It was misery.

Although the life stories of the *barbéchas* diverge, they are similar in the description of unbearable experiences of misery, accompanied by a degrading and devaluing perception of themselves. Their feelings of isolation, confinement and rejection reflect the negative image of their social life. This image of low self-esteem is captured by Serge Paugam as being the result of a context where 'success is transformed into a value in societies, and where, within the justifying and dominant discourse of wealth, poverty becomes the symbol of social failure' (2006: 16). He further adds that most of their life and energy is invested in maintaining the biological existence of their exhausted bodies (ibid. 119). This also perfectly applies to the situation of the *barbéchas*. One man, aged 54, who works at the Borj Chakir rubbish tip, explains:

> I've spent my whole life in the rubbish, my father was an alcoholic, and I've been collecting rubbish since I was 12 years old. […] You call that a life, don't you […] nobody thinks about us, neither the state nor the political parties – nobody […] I can't take it anymore.

Another man working in Borj Chakir added:

> People are afraid of us, they look down on us, classify us as *hogra*, (meaning contempt, repulsion in the Tunisian dialect), they think we're – you know – criminals, thugs. When you go to ask for a job in a factory or a company, as soon as they find out we live in the Ennour neighbourhood (next to the rubbish dump) they get suspicious.

Social stigmatisation and neglect by state institutions (by social services, care services, public health centres) has led to a feeling of helplessness and powerlessness among the *barbéchas*, who have neither the resources nor the tools to develop projects that would enable them to move up the social ladder. This repulsion, the imprisonment in a sphere of exclusion, has given rise to a perception of social existence that is reduced solely to the biological significance of survival. In 'Sources of Shame', Vincent De Gaulejac (1996) shows that poverty becomes humiliating when several factors come together, such as degrading living conditions, stigmatisation, and abandonment by institutions. This relation between the effect of shame and poverty reflects the unease of the *barbéchas* about their living and working situations. This shame often takes the form of withdrawal and invisibility in the space of social interaction, such as in the neighbourhood, or in relation to neighbours and relatives – as exemplified in the introductory quote. A man aged 65, living in the Ettadhamen district, further exclaims:

> I often work at night so as to be safe from the contempt of the inhabitants of upper-class districts like El Manar and El Menzeh, you see. […] I'm always surrounded by rubbish and bad smells, but what can I do, eh – nothing. They treat us as if we were a virus. The other time a woman in El Manar kept a bag of plastic bottles for me, you know, she opened the door of her flat and suddenly threw the bag out, the bottles scattered, it hurt me, but I picked them up. One time a woman threatened to call the police, because I was rummaging through the rubbish – she said it was noisy.

Despite this stigmatisation of the *barbéchas* – linked to their professional activity of collecting rubbish – their autobiographical accounts also bear witness to the many strategies they use to resist poverty, and even destitution. Their involvement in the survival economy (*economie de débrouille*, Ayimpam 2014; 'hustle economy', Thieme 2017) shows that, in a context of crisis, poverty and exclusion, individuals who lack resources – not just material resources, but also cultural, social and symbolic capital – choose to struggle through, in order to gain a degree of social recognition and to give meaning to their lives.

During the interviews, the *barbéchas* recount short stories that illustrate their experiences with the world of hustling, the search for opportunities and the continuous management of risk (Thieme 2017: 537). It was through *tadbir rass* (hustling) – for example, accepting odd jobs as bricklayers, hairdresser apprentices, stocking goods at a grocer's or selling sweets outside schools – that the *barbéchas* managed to provide for their families before joining the waste recovery sector. The quest for small, exhausting and underpaid jobs is a way of coping with uncertainty and socio-economic instability (cf. Gertel 2018a). Getting by 'to survive', 'to feed the mouths', and 'to feed my children' are expressions that recur in the life stories of the *barbéchas*. The search for new means of survival is often triggered by events such as the death of one of the parents – especially the father – the start of a family, or caused by the husband's low income.

What's more, people's perceptions of these odd jobs reflect a whole concept of work and self. According to them, working for someone else is seen as degrading for oneself, even humiliating, and working in waste recovery therefore represents a choice for them.

> My father was a farmer, I love the land, the greenery, but we moved here to Ettadhamen in the hope of improving our lives. […] Farming doesn't pay as much as it used to. […] I worked in a Hairdresser's. I earned from day to day, but not too much – it's hard. As time went by, I couldn't stand being humiliated in front of customers or offended by an inappropriate look or word, so I gave up. […] I prefer to be isolated and free, which is why I chose waste collection. It's true that it's tiring, but no one tells me what to do.

A 45-year-old woman at the Borj Chakir dump site exclaimed,

> Before coming to the dump, I worked as a cleaner. It's tiring and at a certain point you can't take the humiliation any more. So, I started collecting bottles and tarpaulins here at the dump. […] Well, it tires me out but it's better that way.

A woman in the Ettadhamen neighbourhood adds,

> When I was 25, I started working as a cleaner here in Ettadhamen, but it doesn't earn me anything, people are poor here and they can't afford to hire a full-time cleaner, sometimes I earn three or five Dinars for mopping. In the summer, I make a bit of couscous and spices that I sell. But at the age of 45, I stopped doing this kind of work, my body aches all over. So, I started collecting bottles and bread to help my husband, he works day to day. It's hard, but hamdulillah.

The social life of the *barbéchas* is a succession of ordeals that push these players to reinvent their social realities by resisting poverty and exclusion. The *barbéchas* may see themselves as marginal, invisible or even disqualified 'but they are also free actors capable of adjusting their actions to the situations they face' (Nachi 2006: 56). These individual trajectories retrace similar collective experiences that show how the *barbéchas* act, interact with those around them and mobilise a network of local actors to implement a socio-economic dynamic based on the activity of collecting and selling waste as a survival strategy. By collecting waste, they expand their mobility in the neighbourhood, and sometimes even in other neighbourhoods, which enables them to escape from their isolation. This spatial mobility, going beyond the neighbourhood, also enables them to become part of the network of actors involved in the collection and sale of waste. The *barbéchas* interact and forge links with small wholesalers and collectors with lorries (cf. Grüneisl 2021). Sometimes, they choose to socialise with their neighbours so that city dwellers will buy waste and recyclable objects from them. This unregulated activity is carried out informally and is organised according to standards, working practices, and rules that are the result of negotiations, conflicts, and arrangements between the protagonists of this recycling economy, thus conveying a unique socio-cultural dynamic, including, of course embodied costs and risks threatening their health and limiting the prospects of a fulfilled life.

Waste Collection: Practices and Know How

The characteristics of waste collection activities in Tunis reveal that access to this practice is not governed by fixed social norms and is not reserved for a particular social, religious, or ethnic group, as is the case in Egypt (c.f. Assaad/Garas 1993/94). In her study of the Zabbâlin, the garbage collectors in Cairo, Bénédicte Florin (2015) notes that the government neither runs a rubbish collection system nor operates a waste recovery system. The collection of recyclable waste is carried out exclusively by a group of Christian Copts, living in the rather marginalised Manshiat Nasser district of Cairo (Tekce et al. 1994), handing down the profession from father to son. Women are not involved in this activity of collecting waste from public spaces and households. The same is true of Morocco, where women only take part in sorting activities, but not in waste collection (Florin 2015b).

Women in Tunisia, in contrast, collect and sell waste both inside and outside controlled dump sites, and they engage in socio-professional mobility, as will be detailed later. Based on my participant observations, I distinguish between two modes of work for the same activity, the first being collection of waste at the central dump spot of Tunis, Borj Chakir. There are more than 900 *barbéchas,* active men, women, and children that are working at the site. The work consists of collecting the waste deposited by the municipality's skips, sorting it and selling it on or off the site. What characterises this activity is specialisation: each *barbécha*, man or woman, specialises in a type of waste, such as plastic, aluminium, wood, iron, foam padding or cardboard. This specialisation is organised according to gender, as gender relations have had an impact on the division of labour in the landfill. This can be seen in the way the territory is divided up and the objects appropriated: men collect more varied types of waste than women (plastic, tarpaulin,

wood, iron, copper, cardboard) and have greater freedom to move around the landfill. The women, feeling dominated by the men, collect, for example, clothes and upholstery foam, which they renovate and sell in the neighbourhood. Faced with this situation, the women have adopted a strategy of withdrawal and have appropriated an isolated corner near the platform where the waste is deposited. Here they can do their sorting and sell their waste to the buyers who come with their lorries at the end of the working day (about 2 pm). In addition, collection and recovery work at the dumpsite is highly hierarchical. In fact, I observed a pyramidal and hierarchical structure of relations with the following configuration: lorry owners who transport the waste, workers who work on their behalf and recover the waste, and groups of workers (about 10–15 persons) that specialise in a specific type of waste, and finally, the individual *barbéchas*.

The second mode of work, the work of collecting and recovering waste by the *barbéchas* outside the Borj Chakir site, is completely different from the first. This work allows greater flexibility and freedom in terms of work processes and the choice of recovery areas. The *barbéchas* are autonomous in the way they organise their working day, working hours and days off. The choice of territory is not governed by strict rules, although there may be conflicts over territories, as will be explained below. The work process consists of collecting or digging up and selecting the rubbish in their neighbourhoods and vicinity. *Barbéchas* can also extend their working territories, often by forging affinities with neighbours or acquaintances who would keep their waste for them. The vehicles for the trade are generally objects that have been abandoned by city dwellers, such as pushchairs or shopping trolleys taken from shops to transport recovered waste. Some *barbéchas* invest considerable amount of capital, borrowed from family and friends, to have (push) carts built by blacksmiths. Others, lacking the financial means, use their bodies to carry the large filled bags on their shoulders or heads. Another group of *barbéchas* use motorbikes or small pick-ups rented for the day costing between 10 and 15 Dinar. When it comes to exploring and digging, *barbéchas* construct their own tools from discarded objects, such as screwdrivers and small iron bars that they use to rummage through rubbish containers or uncontrolled landfill sites. This enables them to avoid abrasions and injuries during the search.

The next phase of the work process is sorting, which mainly takes place in private homes. Sorting is governed by criteria such as the cleanliness of the goods or their condition, which qualifies objects for resale or re-use. The selection methods are part of a strategy to build buyer loyalty: offering good quality goods improves stable demand and enhances profitable sale prices. The *barbécha* men and women who use carts, wheelbarrows or motorbikes travel to storage depots, often identical to semi-wholesalers, to sell their goods. Although (valuable) waste is often collected in unregulated ways, its purchase and sale prices are determined by the international recycling market (e.g. Turkey, China, etc.) and price trends. For example, the purchase price of plastic tripled from 2020 to 2022, while aluminium prices have risen by fifty percent in the same period. There are also fluctuations, such as price variations determined by wholesalers and recyclers. The *barbéchas* have developed a strategy to sell at the most profitable price. They mobilise a network of players (other *barbéchas*, semi-wholesalers, etc.) to collect information on variations in selling prices, and choose and negotiate by making 'arrangements' (Nachi, 2001: 92) with the semi-wholesaler who offers the best price.

While price setting is generally a peaceful way of solving trade conflicts, at the Borj Chakir dumpsite, conflicts also arise over valuable waste recovered and the space used for recovery, i.e. the objects and resources of exchange itself. For example, the *barbéchas* of Borj Chakir consider the owners of lorries originating from Sidi Bouzid as intruders. To resolve these kinds of disputes, the antagonistic players adopt strategies to compromise. The *barbéchas* of Borj Chakir sell types of waste such as mattresses, plastics and packaging to the lorry owners, who spend between two and three months at the dump collecting waste to sell in Sidi Bouzid. Negotiations also revolve around selling and buying prices between the semi-wholesalers and the *barbéchas* outside the landfill site. On this subject, Sayda, a *barbécha* in Ettadhamen, explains:

> I don't have any friends in the trade. I sell to whoever offers me the best price. I get information, I go round the neighbourhood to see what's going on, you see. I make a good selection and I offer a good price. […] At the moment I'm selling to a woman who has a storage depot, we work things out and I sell to her on credit and she offers me a good price.

Sales also depend on the means of transporting the goods, which determines the quantity of waste collected and therefore the profit. *Barbéchas,* who do not have the resources for transporting their own goods to a wholesaler, forge a link with a collector – the owner of a lorry – who comes to buy and collect their goods. These *barbéchas* opt for a strategy of withdrawal and concession, in order to keep the business going. Lacking the material resources to improve their work tools or to increase their earnings, they collect valuable waste by storing it at home, often up to a week. This type of sale involves relationships of power imbalance. These *barbéchas* do not have enough resources to negotiate with peers, which manifests in an asymmetrical balance of power, largely advantageous to the buyer. In this context, a *barbécha* man explains:

> I'm old. I have no means of transport, so I put my bottles in this big bag and at the end of the day I wait here under this post for a man I know to come and buy them. He doesn't weight the bottles, but he gives me five Dinar, sometimes a bit more. […] I can't complain, you know.

A 35-year-old woman from Ettadhamen adds:

> I have nothing to carry my goods in. I wait for the man to come and get them. He gives me a sum of money without weighing the bag. He knows that I can't refuse, which is why he exploits me – I can't do anything. […] Yes, he's the one who contacted me in the street while I was rummaging.

These testimonies demonstrate the power imbalance that was also present in the hierarchy of waste collection and recovery work at the Borj Chakir dump site. The organisation of work, the choice of working hours and of the sales method depend on the type of waste, its availability and the skills required for collection. Additionally, the position in the *barbécha* hierarchy also depends on the type of networks, skills, and knowledge about waste that they can mobilise. The development of these skills depends on forging links with

'connoisseurs' and those who know 'the tricks of the trade', who pass on their experience to the *barbéchas*. Skills development also involves enrolment in recycling courses. These skills and knowledge are a prerequisite to explore new areas and new types of valuable waste: Sayda tells me how she rubs shoulders with recycling plant workers, who taught her how to use a magnet to check the metal recovered. She also learned how to burn electricity wires to extract the copper. Sayda has also learned how to take apart a fridge motor or a washing machine to extract profitable materials (copper, spare parts, etc.). She assures me that she keeps her knowledge a secret. Zouhaier, another *barbéche*, has learned about the types of objects desirable for resale and re-use, such as kitchen utensils, screws, motorbike chairs, lamps, and old taps through observing and engaging with the sellers of re-use items at the weekly markets. Since then, he has been collecting these items during his working days and selling them at the Sidi Abdeslam market in the Tunis medina on Sundays. He has even attended recycling training courses in the hope of setting up his own recycling unit. The development of skills, the weaving of networks, and bonds of sociability make it possible to achieve social mobility. This can be seen in the transition from *barbéche* to semi-wholesaler. Zoubaier, a semi-wholesaler based in Soukra, describes his own path:

> Times were hard, I worked night and day as a *barbéche*, collecting everything I could sell, and I saved a bit of money after a big sale of copper. Then a recycler who trusts me loaned me money, so I was able to rent out this depot, and it's working.

On the same subject, Sayda explains:

> Sometimes, I still go out to collect when I don't have a customer. […] You know, I took a risk, but it's worth it to get ahead. I borrowed 500 Dinar from a friend – God bless her – and I rented this little depot. I know it's difficult, given the competition, but I'll hold out and I intend to set up a small plastic crushing unit and buy a more sophisticated scale.

For *barbéchas* who are professionally mobile, interactions with other players in shared spaces, such as the neighbourhood or recovery areas, reinforce both, social transactions and conflict relations, often through gender differences. Women are sometimes forbidden to rummage in areas that have been appropriated by other male *barbéchas*. Hence, they adopt other forms of sociability with their neighbours: neighbourhood residents who keep the rubbish – bread, plastic bottles – or solidarity by collecting together and sharing the proceeds.

The collection of waste by the *barbéchas* can be seen not just as a survival strategy, but also as a means of 'resistance' (De Certeau 1990), as an answer to processes of social marginalisation. Resistance tackles institutional (i.e. state driven) and social exclusions. Ordinary resistance is practiced by those who are considered weak, but who still do not give in. It takes the form of grassroots opposition in a globalised world, and includes the ability to take action in everyday life 'to resist the demands of instrumental rationalisation made by the market system' (Dobré 2002: 6). It is thus on the basis of 'their daily lives, their little struggles, that these ordinary acts can be described as resistance' (Florin 2016:

100). Resistance is a capacity, a skill that the *barbéchas* build every day to achieve their ultimate goal of living in dignity (Nussbaum 2011), which they see as intimately linked to their economic independence.

Resistance and conflicts are entangled: Major conflicts have arisen around waste collection, illustrating the vital importance of controlling the routes and territories involved. These conflicts exist between the *barbéchas*, as well as between the *barbéchas* and the municipal workers who also collect waste. For example, objects left in trashcans take on a new meaning for these players, as its appropriation becomes a central issue. The municipal refuse collectors have assets and resources at their disposal to exercise their powers and appropriate the object. They have the transport means to move around quickly and can fill several big bags at once. Lacking the assets and resources to negotiate or settle, *barbéchas* often opt for the strategy of withdrawal to mitigate disputes. They adjust their collection times before the public refuse collectors arrive. They collect from early morning until 8 am, in the evening before 8 pm, or after midnight. Conflicts also arise between *barbéchas* over the objects they collect. The *barbéchas* then adopt a preventive strategy of reducing the flow of information between them so as not to divulge the 'tricks of the trade'.

Gender relations are also an important factor, reflecting the power relations and disadvantaged position of women *barbéchas*, both inside and outside the dumps. Women earn less than men, on average they receive between 5 and 15 Dinar a day. This precariousness and low incomes are not due to a reduced amount of work compared with men; it is linked exclusively to a social construction resulting from unequal power relations between the sexes in the workplace (Maruani 2005; cf. Garraoui, this volume). At the Borj Chakir dump site, these relations materialise in the appropriation of space, where women, as a form of resistance, have staked out a small area for themselves away from the collection area in which to sort waste in peace. Lacking the resources to buy a means of transporting the waste (cart, wheelbarrow, motorbike), the women made arrangements with the buyers to sell directly at the dump. Outside the dump, women are also sometimes assaulted or humiliated by men. To protect themselves, they develop bonds of affinity and cooperation between themselves, but also adopt strategies of withdrawal to make themselves less visible to the men and avoid conflict. On this subject, a *barbécha* woman in Ettadhamen exclaims:

> Four years ago, I was collecting at 2 am when I was attacked by two men. They hit me on the head with an object and I was seriously injured. […] I was left traumatised. […] Look, now I have this iron bar and I put it under my pushchair to defend myself […] and sometimes my neighbour and I go out together to collect at night. She has no means of transporting her goods and I have a pushchair and trolleys, so I offer her a means of transport and we share the winnings.

In addition, a sense of belonging and a strong identification with their activities have developed among *barbécha* women. In their work on *cartoneros* (waste pickers) of Buenos Aires, Laura & Sainz (2007) describe the forms of solidarity that emerge between the actors, evolving in relation to the organisation of trade, in order to improve their situations and assert their identities. A similar situation can be observed in Tunis, even if the *bar-*

béchas' expectations were initially somewhat divergent. Between 2015 and 2018, engaged *barbéchas* in the Ettadhamen district founded an association (Association des Barbéchas de Tunisie) with the help of GIZ and the municipality of Mnihla. Since, collective actions have been organised within this framework in order to better structure and organise the work. A primary recycling unit has been set up as part of the projects related also to a state induced project, the Circular and Solidarity Economy. This unit has brought together former *barbéchas* who sorted, recycled and marketed the goods. Other *barbéchas* in the neighbourhood also contributed to the project by collecting and selling their goods to the recycling unit. However, the project eventually failed, due to problems linked to poor sorting, and problems of responsibility in the context of shared agency. Workers had sometimes put non-recyclable waste in the shredding machines, which lead to returns of goods from the buyers (i.e. the processing plants). That contributed to generating a financial deficit. These problems ultimately led to the closure of the unit and the workers had to go back to their old jobs: being again 'unemployed' *barbéchas*.

As part of the activities of the Association des Barbéchas de Tunisie, the members of the association, whose elected president is a *barbécha* woman living in Ettadhamen, have organised selective sorting awareness campaigns for households in the district, offering badges stuck on the doors of residents who commit to sorting in their homes. The municipality of Mnihla initially provided the association with premises, but in 2018 began using the premises themselves . Since then, the members of the association hold their meetings in a youth centre in Ettadhamen. The president of the association explains:

> It was like a dream come true, and it's very rewarding to be part of this association. We've done a lot of work and since then my life has had meaning. But since the local council took over the association's premises, we're not as active as we used to be.

A sense of belonging and identification with the recycling activity also emerged in the players' discourse. A cognitive perception built up an image as *barbéchas*. Those who collect waste using a lorry, or building caretakers, are not perceived by *barbéchas* as people in the trade. Belhassan, a *barbéche* in the Ettadhamen district, proclaims:

> Now they're everywhere with their big lorries and their 60,000-Dinar D-Maxes … and what's left for us? […] It's our livelihood.

This non-identification of the *barbéchas* with the threatening newcomers is the basis for the construction of their own professional identity, despite the fact that it is not officially recognised. These norms of belonging and recognition as a *barbéche* are similar in Borj Chakir, where *barbécha* work is often passed down from father to son. The *barbéchas* of Borj Chakir perceive people from Sidi Bouzid and Kasserine as intruders who threaten their professional activity, which has been rooted in the dump spot for generations. A 54-year-old man exclaimed:

> I've been a *barbeche* since I was 12, and I'm exhausted … Today I'm taking my 14-year-old son with me, so that he can learn the job and take my place. This dump is my life

> and there are those who come from 'who knows where' to dig and leave again, […] what do I do with my years of working experience.

This professional identity is based on learning and passing on the know-how and experience of elders, including tricks of the trade, such as applying successful criteria for assessing recyclable waste or the skills to identify which skips could contain the most valuable waste. This self-identification is linked to a dimension of self-representation. A dual self-perception emerges from the *barbéchas*' discourse, tipping the balance between self-recognition and a strong sense of exclusion, or even contempt for oneself. On the one hand, they see themselves as excluded, unwanted and invisible. Collecting waste by rummaging through other people's rubbish is demeaning and does not fit in with social norms. On the other hand, self-recognition and self-worth are the result of a long struggle against marginalisation and surviving poverty by the sweat of one's brow. The *barbéchas* thus value the fact that they manage to provide for themselves in a situation of social rejection and non-recognition by the public authorities.

As a result, *barbéchas* see themselves as 'outsiders' through the exclusionary and discriminatory eyes of others. And yet, they are contributing to developing the circular economy sector and thus to solving part of the problem linked to urban waste and the saturation of landfill sites in Tunisia. This is what Bénédicte Florin (2015: 89) describes as the 'perverse inclusion' of the *Bouâra* (waste pickers in the Moroccan dialect) in a study carried out in Morocco, because they are both useful and undesirable in the city. Zouhaier, a 48-year-old *barbéch* in the Ettadhamen district, explains:

> Although it's my livelihood, it bothers my daughter, and she's become very sensitive and depressed, because I collect rubbish. She's ashamed of me. But I love what I do, it's my job, I feel in control of myself and nobody tells me what to do.

A *Barbéche* woman, aged 61, adds:

> Sometimes the way people look at me, kills me; they look at me as if I'm not a human being. But it's my job, I earn my living with the sweat of my brow, I don't steal from anyone *hamdulillah* and I feed my family and help my husband.

Socio-Spatial Dynamics: Use and Reconfiguration of Space

The use of space and the anchorage of the *barbéchas* in the urban territory, i.e. the spatial dimension of their practices, is central to understanding their work and everyday strategies of resistance. These socio-spatial dynamics can be understood in two stages: firstly, through their appropriation of the collection territory and the conflicts that ensue; and secondly, through the special configuration and use of the *barbéchas*' living space.

The isolation and compartmentalisation of the *barbéchas* in their neighbourhoods, which constitute the outskirts of the city, reinforces the social inequalities and segregation created by the disengagement of the public authorities. And yet, the mobility of *barbécha*-residents from poorer to wealthier neighbourhoods to collect waste shows the

important role they play in solving waste problems. Numerous daily routes link the *barbéchas*' neighbourhoods with the more affluent areas of Tunis as the waste produced there represents a potential source of wealth for them. Moreover, these movements enable ways of reestablishing their connections with the city and escaping from the confinement of their neighbourhoods (Cirelli & Florin 2015: 14). The choice of route is never arbitrary; on the contrary, it follows a well-defined rationale, and requires great dexterity and know-how. The *barbéchas* first familiarise themselves with the area by walking through the streets, alleys, and neighbourhoods near where they live, to identify areas rich in rubbish. They generally choose densely populated neighbourhoods and the choice is influenced by the search for more profitable waste, such as aluminium or copper, which are rare materials. Little by little, the *barbéchas* then extend their collection territories to more affluent neighbourhoods where consumption is higher. This strategy of identifying and mapping out routes eliminates uncertainty and ensures that the work is well organised. The routes taken by the *barbéchas* depend on the type of waste collected. Objects that are suitable for reuse are often disposed of in illegal landfill sites.

Waste collection by the *barbéchas* has prompted residents to reconfigure the space in front of their houses: the window fronts are used to hang bags of sorted waste and bags with bread, while large bags of sorted bottles or utensils are placed on the small pavement in front of the house. This use of objects and space reflects a bond of sociability that has developed through the daily itinerary of the *barbéchas*. The daily passage through the neighbourhoods has helped to create a network of actors who are a component of the system and 'this is the very principle of an action without which the system would not exist' (Passeron 2002: 21). The *barbéchas* make arrangements with residents who keep high-value waste such as old engines, irons, hairdryers, new utensils, etc. for them. Sayda, a *barbéch* from Ettadhamen, has built up a network of residents whose homes she visits every Saturday to collect bottles and other items free of charge. Sayda's itinerary starts in Ettadhamen, and extends from there to the Intilaka neighbourhood, and the middle-class Ibn Khaldoun district. Zouhaier, also a resident of Ettadhamen, follows a route that starts from his neighbourhood, Intilaka, towards the affluent neighbourhood of Jardin Elmenzeh, and extends as far as the road leading to Cebalet Ben Amar.

The routes and their expansion raise another problem, namely the rift between practical and legal appropriation of a collection area. The collection areas are public spaces, which leads to conflicts between *barbéchas* and municipal waste collection companies. The municipal companies see themselves as the only institutional and legal actors that represent the proper application of the law, which imposes the prohibition of informal waste collection; their representatives and workers are convinced that only they have the right to dispose of the waste. The public companies mobilise this return to institutional norms, because what is at stake is the negotiation of legitimacy and territorial access. In this situation, the *barbéchas* opt for a strategy of withdrawal, as they are an erratic group with no assets to negotiate collectively (Crozier/Friedberg 1977). Internal conflicts, generated between the *barbéchas,* are resolved however differently. In fact, the *barbéchas* have developed norms that regulate relations and organise social transactions in cases where their routes cross, when digging in an unauthorised dump, or in a street. One man in Borj Louzir underlines:

> When we meet in the same place while we're working, we change places straight away, I go the other way. It's better than arguing over a bottle or a bag of bread.

The other problematic aspect is the measures put in place by local authorities to encourage residents to sort their waste at home, in particular the installation of closed bins in neighbourhoods and apartment blocks. According to the head of the health and environment department at the Soukra municipality, these measures have been introduced to restrict access to the area by *barbéchas*, who are perceived as pests and troublemakers by the authorities and some city dwellers. *Barbéchas* consider these devices as obstacles, excluding them and threatening their access to their territories; so they have cut holes in the boxes to be able to remove the bottles collected inside. This calls into question the government's environmental protection reforms, which totally ignore the vital role played by *barbéchas* in sorting and recycling valuable waste in Tunis.

Waste collection involves, however, a complex recovery process, with activities taking place both in the public space (the collection site) and in the private space (the living space). The home takes on a new meaning, and changes the way it is perceived by its users. The homes of the *barbéchas* are often refurbished for a series of activities that complement waste collection. This involves dedicating a room to one of the activities, such as sorting, storing, or maintaining work tools. Sometimes *barbéchas* are creative and make savings. They build their own space by adding a room or a small garage where they store or sort merchandise and make small sales. A couple of *barbéchas* in the Ettadhamen district divide up the tasks as follows: suffering from a chronic illness, the wife has set up a space in the hall of the house to receive the rubbish brought in by neighbours. Another corner of the hall is reserved for sorting the goods collected by her husband. In the same space, reused objects destined for sale at markets are piled up against a wall. In the Ennassim neighbourhood, the 26/26 housing estate hosts a very poor population and most of the inhabitants work as *barbéchas*. The interiors of their half-built houses are filled with plastic bottles, chairs and other collected objects. Their trolleys and pushchairs are placed on the ground floor or hang in front of the houses with an iron chain and padlock. In Cherifa's house, which she rents for 150 Dinar a month, the unfinished space is used as a storage area. Additionally, in a small hall between the two bedrooms of the house, she reserves a corner to keep an old motorbike from which she will extract spare parts that she will sell, and a washing machine from which she will extract copper in times of need.

The studies carried out by Florin in Manshiét Nasser in Cairo reveal the emergence of a whole autonomous recycling circuit. In the neighbourhoods of Tunis, semi-wholesalers' and primary recyclers' depots were set up in residents' places, in garages or abandoned premises. These places have become primary recycling units or storage depots in the heart of residential areas. Their location is strategic, as they must first and foremost be included in the itineraries of the *barbéchas*.

Arranging one's home can be seen as a strategy for making oneself less visible and protecting oneself from the scornful gaze of neighbours. A 71-year-old woman in the 26/26 housing estate explains how she had built a small room at the back of her house so that she could bring in her large bags of rubbish discreetly, away from the neighbours' gaze. Making oneself invisible in the neighbourhood by rearranging the living space is thus also a form of resistance to a degrading and stigmatised self-image. A key problem

resulting from these living conditions are health risks. The *barbéchas* are continuously exposed to the (toxic) smells of the waste stored at home, and during excavation work. Moreover, smelly and sometimes poisonous vapours escape from the illegal dumps located near the poor neighbourhoods where they live. This is due to the disengagement of the local authorities and the malfunctioning of official waste management in the capital. This again represents the inequalities between poor and well-off neighbourhoods, although the *barbéchas* play a central role in maintaining the waste circuit of the city.

Conclusion

In this chapter I investigate the work of waste collection and recovery of valuable materials by an emerging professional group that self-identifies as *barbéchas* in Tunisia. Paradoxically, the crisis context characterising Tunisia today has led to the expansion of informal and unregulated work, which is proving to be an opportunity and a resource for securing livelihoods for marginalised people. Through activities linked to the collection of household waste this vulnerable social group, often invisible to the public authorities, use waste as a resource and transform it via their work into a commodity. The *barbéchas* are the essential suppliers of recyclable waste, extend the life cycle of products, and thus contribute to a circular economy. While they live a form of ordinary resistance against inequality, injustice and contempt, the professional engagement of the *barbéchas* and their role in the community does not come without social costs.

Their life trajectories are characterised by processes of marginalisation, exclusion, and stigmatisation rooted in their histories, feelings, and social interactions. This is exacerbated by the failure of state institutions and local authorities to recognise their need for support and integration into the formal labour market. The lack of recognition of this group has given rise to survival strategies based on asymmetric economies that takes the form of unregulated entrepreneurship. The working practices and know-how of the *barbéchas* inside and outside the dump spaces are marked by conflicts over the appropriation of territory, materials, and objects. Live and work are inseparable. Even the intimate living space of the *barbéchas* is configured through waste collection and the recycling activities that emerge from it. The chapter thus shows how the *barbéchas*' value-creation activities shape its own social world in the city. It is characterised by distinct norms and logics of action, and is reflected in new meanings attached to urban territories and networks of actors. Simultaneously, *barbéchas*' aspirations reflect ordinary resistance and the striving for recognition and dignity. Through their identification as a professional group that contributes to urban waste management, they claim a right not just to survive, but to live fully in society and to be recognised as equal social individuals. This reveals the complexity of Tunisia's waste management system – a sector proving to be problematic: involving, as it does, dysfunction at a policy and management level, and tensions between public actors and associative and local actors, as corroborated in following chapter.