

Dossier

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L'ENVIRONNEMENT PAR LES SCIENCES SOCIALES

Introduction

Studying waste and environment from a social science perspective in the contemporary Maghreb

Jamie Furniss

When I arrived at the IRMC in 2019, I was mainly a specialist of Egypt, and Cairo's waste collectors, which I had studied from a variety of angles, in particular the history of development projects implemented for their benefit, and different economic and social aspects of their profession. Whereas in Egypt the Zabbaleen, as the waste collectors are called, were an established topic – even an “over-researched” one according to some – I was unable to find an equivalent body of work on waste and waste collectors, or even environmental topics more broadly, when I arrived in Tunisia. A few notable exceptions to this were the early and excellent articles of Michèle Jolé, who wrote about Morocco (1982, 1991), but also Tunisia (1984, 1989), and the more recent work of Chiara Loschi (2016), Siad Darwish (2018, 2020), Ridha Boukraa (2014) and Hassane Mouri (2016). A number of factors explain this difference, for example the Zabbaleen are a spectacular and “charismatic” social group that has no equivalent in Tunisia. The simple fact that in Cairo you can walk into a single neighbourhood where more or less everyone works in waste and recycling is a major facilitator of research on the subject. It is also a reflection of the general paucity of research on Tunisia compared to Egypt, and the fact that “environment” has not been a category of interest for regional scholars, eclipsed by politics, religion and the other dominant threads of classic Middle East and North Africa scholarship, as described by Lila Abu-Lughod in her 1989 *Annual Review* article, and in many aspects reiterated by Deeb and Winegar in their similar 2012 piece. Environment isn't even

among the “emerging” areas referred to in the latter article, notably studies race and ethnicity, secularism, law, human rights, science and technology, and queer studies. Where Tunisia is concerned, much recent work that reflects European political priorities and the country's recent history, thus addressing issues such as migration, “security”, transitional justice, youth disenfranchisement, etc. Within Tunisia (and Egypt, as well as many other settings, within and beyond the sub-region), the environment in general, and waste in particular, are mostly addressed in and through applied sciences, in particular schools of engineering, technology, etc. In Tunisia, for example, there is an *Institut supérieur des Sciences et Technologies de l'Environnement* with over 700 students in undergraduate and graduate programmes, as well as specialised options in waste management at the *École nationale des ingénieurs de Sfax*.

While these institutions and programmes are indispensable, they are not mirrored by an interest in environmental issues from a social science perspective. They reflect a predominantly technical approach to environmental problems and a degree of what might be called technology fetishism or an engineering mystique. My position, constructed through often depressing fieldwork experiences, is that a great many of the environmental problems in a country like Tunisia are primarily attributable to, and resolvable through, governance, funding, politics and society – more so, anyway, than off-the-shelf technical fixes. In my four years in Tunisia, I had ample opportunity to attend events where the debate

consisted of trying to decide whether it was in fact the “German technology”, “Japanese technology” or “American technology” that would save us. The stream of engineers and economists proclaiming the circular economy and announcing Mechanical Biological Treatment, incinerators that power cement factories, and so forth as the once and future solution

attempt a kind of “from-the-bottom-up” relativisation or deconstruction of “environment” as an analytical or universal category. The aim of this line of research was to show that environment must be seen as an emic or ethnographic category of variable content and significance depending on the historical and social setting. My goal here is to encourage a



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to the environmental crisis never seemed to tarry. However, I also visited sites such as the “uncontrolled landfill” in the region of Monastir, a location where one level of government (the municipality) has been dumping waste into a protected wetland for over 10 years, since the engineered site was blocked by protesters in 2011. Meanwhile the authorities who are supposed to approve and tender for the construction of the new site ([the National Agency for Waste Management, ANGED](#)) have been – depending on whom you ask – too busy, corrupt, inept, or structurally prevented from doing so. Another example of this kind of kicking the ball back and forth in a “blame game” was a waste transfer station (a centralisation point for household waste prior to transporting in larger vehicles to landfill) that was itself becoming an uncontrolled landfill because municipal collectors frequently found the site either closed or full when they arrived to offload the waste from their collection round. Not wanting to wait around at the end of their shift for someone to fix the problem, they had opted to tip their loads on the open ground and head home. And so on. Of course, “the environment” is a much broader topic than waste, and I specifically wanted to diversify my *entrées* while in Tunisia. To this end, I sought to

comparative anthropology of “the environment” that asks what exactly “environment” refers to in Tunisia (or elsewhere) today. The question first emerged from the political and social history of the instrumentalisation of environment as a propaganda tool during the Ben Ali regime, which I then attempted to follow down other avenues, such as the analysis of discourse in public signage pertaining to waste, the political semiotics of waste, or the way the topic of “the environment” is integrated into the national school curriculum. The heavy emphasis on waste here is not merely a product of my own interest in the topic – as I said, I actually made a deliberate effort to move away from it – but rather comes from the fieldwork itself, which revealed environment as being characterised by visibility and proximity, making garbage, and in particular its visual accumulation in public space, a kind of archetypal “environmental problem”, often to the detriment of issues like air or water pollution, climate change or water shortage. The rapid political telescoping of waste crises into political crises, the connection between waste and corruption (e.g. during the “Italian waste scandal”, when several hundred containers of household waste were exported from Italy to Tunisia under the pretext that they were recyclable materials destined to be

sorted and re-exported, but were in fact being dumped in the Tunisian countryside) and the use of clean-up as a political idiom (e.g. during the *halit wa'i* [State of Awareness] movement following Kaïs Saïed’s election as president, the topic of one of the articles that follows) are indicators of the ongoing political overtones of issues of waste, cleanliness and the environment more broadly in contemporary Tunisia. One of the most common comments I received from people in Tunisia when I told them I was working on the environment and waste was “you really have your work cut out for you”, in reference to the ubiquitous accumulation of waste in the country. It often seemed ironic to me that waste could be so ubiquitous in public space and people’s minds at the same time. You’d think that such an awareness of and sensitivity to the waste issue would be incompatible with such a massive unaddressed problem. But from another point of view, it makes perfect sense, since it is precisely the ubiquity of waste that gives it its preponderance in people’s environmental imaginary: the more something is a problem, the more people think about it and discuss it.

But I always sought to relativise the critical and unfavourable comparisons with “Northern” countries in which people – especially Tunisians themselves – were engaged. First of all, I have always tried to encourage people to consider carefully what accumulations of waste are a sign of. Typically, people conclude that they reflect a “lack of education and awareness”. However, as a municipal councillor put it during a workshop on waste I facilitated with local government and NGOs in a provincial Tunisian city: “sure, we can write ‘cleanliness is part of faith’ and ‘God damn you if you put trash here’ on the walls, but do you think that will solve the problem? We need trash pickup operations organised by the municipality, not slogans”. Are waste accumulations a reflection of failures of personal responsibility, or infrastructural deficiencies? Or indeed something more radical and fundamental, such as our modes of production and consumption, and predominant forms of industrial design?

Secondly, I have always tried to remind people that, on a kilo per capita basis, a country like Tunisia produces considerably less volume of waste than all of the apparently “cleaner” countries of Europe and North America, and that, moreover, official recycling rates can be deceptive. The absence of a state-

planned and coordinated system for source separation does not mean that there is no recycling in Tunisia, where the so-called informal sector (in which many municipal collectors also participate, as Hanen Chebbi’s article below nicely demonstrates) sorts and ensures that huge volumes of materials are recycled. In fact, the state also does support plastic recycling through a scheme called [Ecolef](#), which subsidises the purchase of collected PET bottles with funds from a tax on imported virgin plastic. Meanwhile, recycling rates in Europe and North America are often not as high one would expect, and sometimes lower than the separation system implies, as when sorted materials find no takers and are ironically landfilled. This has been documented in a number of cases, particularly after China’s closure to imported waste in 2017. Even the question of education and awareness is not so clear-cut, since a large proportion of Tunisians spontaneously sort out their plastic bottles and stale bread quite without the municipality providing them with the coloured bins.

The IRMC encourages its staff researchers to organise thematic seminars that can generate papers for publication in in-house edited volumes. This was a challenging proposition given the extent of currently ongoing research on environmental topics from a social science perspective in the country and the Maghreb region more broadly. It was possible to identify a small number of researchers, such as Mustapha Azaitraoui in Morocco, Madani Safar Zitoun in Algeria, as well as Hassane Mouri and Maha Bouhleb in Tunisia, who had worked on environmental issues as human geographers and sociologists. Hanen Chebbi also launched a project on informal sector waste collectors in Tunisia around 2020, along with masters students such as Alice Carchereux, Simon Gielis, Ines Naimi, Menna Soundani, Marwa Glaa and Maria Messaoudi. We were able to support some of them through scholarships created specifically for that purpose with the [Institut Français de Tunis \(IFT\)](#) and the [Forum tunisien des droits économiques et sociaux \(FTDES\)](#). I also set up a “Traveling Masterclass” where we organised a series of one-day events for groups of research students in sociology, anthropology, human geography, waste engineering, environmental technologies and management. These consisted of a morning of theoretical and fieldwork-based lectures and an afternoon field visit. The two were articulated in such a way that the morning was supposed to provide a comparative and



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analytical framework for understanding what we would see in the field, and the field visit a concrete illustration and extension of what had been discussed. In doing so, I hoped to stimulate more social science interest in environmental topics in two ways. For those in social science disciplines, the hope was that they would consider choosing an environmental topic for their research and future work, and acquire a better understanding of how their discipline and methods could be applied to the area. For students on engineering, technology, and management programmes, the hope was to instil an elementary recognition that social, political, historical and other factors are worth taking into consideration alongside the technical and scientific ones with which they are familiar. Although the former project corresponded more closely to my personal interests as a researcher, the second objective probably has greater potential impact, as the future of environmental topics in the region is largely in the hands of those professionals. Virtually every former political figure or civil servant who had worked in the environmental field whom I had the opportunity to interview for my work on the political history of the environment in the country was a scientist or engineer of one kind or another, and I don't see much sign of that changing, even if a new generation of environmental activists with humanities and political backgrounds and approaches to the environment is emerging.

Naturally, there are many colleagues in social sciences who have worked on themes such as water and agriculture, but rarely with problematisations and questions that allowed much of a dialogue with the approach I favoured. One possible link between the questions I was hoping to ask and ongoing research done by others seemed to be environmental social

movements. Thanks to the [A*Midex Foundation](#) and the efforts of Chantal Aspe and Marie Jacqué from [Aix-Marseille University](#), we were able to organise a series of seminars around this theme. I learned a lot about the field of research that aims to describe and analyse environmental movements sociologically, but despite a great match with the doctoral fieldwork of Diane Robert (see Robert 2021), who was conducting a Ph.D on this very topic in Tunisia, we were not able to locate enough existing research or mobilise enough new work to produce a coherent research product – or even an agenda. We ended up with a series of contributions on waste, mostly from the southern Mediterranean countries, with a heavy emphasis on livelihoods, juxtaposed with a series of sociologies of environmental activists in Europe. The two constellations of work failed to really speak to one another, partly because a conscious commitment to the “cause” of environmentalism, saving the planet, *etc.*, had a limited role in the case studies from the southern Mediterranean. While this does point to an extremely important point that I am quite interested in trying to demonstrate – namely, how conceptions of the “environment”, its relative social and political appeal, and the sociological profiles of the persons attracted to it vary across settings – we did not have quite the right mix of cases to make a cogent demonstration of this point. More importantly, our discussions along those lines tended to fall into the trap of adopting a belittling and teleological viewpoint, one that seemed to imply that the environmental preoccupations in the southern Mediterranean have a quaint and dated aspect, as though people in Arabic speaking countries are just beginning to discover the issues that mattered in Europe in the 1970s, and haven't yet grasped the key issue of climate change. The normative, and progressive-to-radical views of a number of us on the

climate issue and how it should be addressed – views which are probably quite correct if one is thinking purely about how to position oneself politically – led to kind of disappointed, critical (in the sense of judgemental), and at times deprecatory reading of the field sites from the southern Mediterranean. This thematic issue of *La Lettre de l'IRMC* is therefore intended to give a sense of some of the work that has been identified, catalysed and supported over the past few years. While the disciplines, questions, fieldwork locations, and analytical objectives vary, all of the people published in this volume have shared in the common effort of applying social science methods to the study of contemporary environmental topics in the Maghreb, and have, in addition, been affiliated in some way with the IRMC or have participated in one of the events it has hosted over the past four years. It is a source of particular encouragement and satisfaction (even if the amount of credit I deserve for inspiring their work is often limited) that the majority of the researchers published here are at the beginning of their careers, and/or have only recently started working on environment-related projects. As an academic anthropologist of the Middle East and North Africa, with a particular but not exclusive interest in environmental topics, relevance to “solving” environmental problems in the region is not the only yardstick by which I would have my work valued. But an ecological crisis from which no one can today remain aloof threatens us existentially, and I firmly believe that if way out there be, it shall not to be found through technological mastery alone.

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