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# From urban congestion to political confinement: collecting waste, channelling politics in Lagos

Côme Salvaire

## ABSTRACT

Looking at the formalization of solid waste management in Lagos, Nigeria, this paper seeks to re-embed the concept of informality within institutional structures of political confinement, as well as in the situations in which exit is negotiated from the waste infrastructure. It examines how waste congestion in the West African metropolis has translated into a higher degree of political confinement and the occlusion of exit strategies in the waste sector. Through an empirical study of the city's state-recognized and alternative waste channels, it looks at the new political instruments deployed in order to secure impermeable waste channels managed by state-recognized actors. Such instruments have had a stark impact on the control of the waste sector as well as on that of monetary flows extracted from the management and situational mobilization of solid waste. The intrusion of institutional boundaries in the waste sector has pushed workers to renegotiate their positions amid new constraints, mobilizing new discourses to negotiate the tolerance of their activities. While leaks in the waste infrastructure are negotiated on an ad hoc basis, the limitations imposed by the Lagos state on exit strategies have triggered political instability and demand the development of new forms of political mobilization.

## KEYWORDS

environmental governance; urban governance; urban political ecology; urban policy; urban infrastructure; waste management; informality; African cities

## INTRODUCTION

Since its formulation in the early 1970s, the notion of informality (Hart, 1973) has gained considerable conceptual autonomy. First used as a counterpoint to the then prevailing notion of 'urban unemployment' in order to reopen a field of anthropological inquiry onto actually existing economic practices in cities of the South, the concept of informality has gradually come to characterize and define a wide variety of economic, urban and political phenomena. The success of the concept of informality can partly be explained by the necessity to find epistemic liberation from northern politico-industrial narratives of social and political integration. In gaining importance, the category has nonetheless increasingly been treated as self-sufficient, uprooted from broader conceptual systems, sociopolitical structures and situations. This paper argues for the need to re-embed the notion of informality, to re-inscribe it both within institutional structures and the situations in which it is negotiated and assigned as an emic category.

In our attempt to re-embed informality, we look at the specific case of waste management in Lagos, Nigeria. To understand what the informal condition (as seen through waste) implies in contemporary Lagos, we shift the focus to the institutional structures through which it is produced, as well as the situations in which it is assigned. Under conditions of environmental stress, we analyze how shifting institutional structures affect the modalities of encounters between informal actors and regulators. These structural and situational changes, we argue, transform the 'informal condition' of the city's most marginal residents.

How does solid waste congestion in Lagos transform the megapolis' political structures of confinement and exit together with the situated encounters between informal waste workers and regulators? In seeking answers to this question, this paper develops an alternative to the main trend of urban political ecology and its polarization around the notion of 'metabolism' (Heynen,

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Kaika, & Swyngedouw, 2006; Swyngedouw, 2006). The effort here undertaken is to pay closer attention to institutional processes in Lagos which translate into transformations in its polis, and to articulate them with an environmental dynamic at play in its local urbanism (Magnusson, 2011). The main shortcoming of the approach developed below, relatively to a metabolic approach, is that it does not politicize the environmental phenomenon under study in itself, and rather attempts to grasp its political effects. We resort to a conceptual system reassembled from threads of theory that can be traced back to the work of Hirschman (1970). The first main thread in which we ground this exploration can be termed a Rokkanian tradition, which will give us the tools necessary for an understanding of the processes of institutional restructuring at play in Lagos. The second main thread is associated with French pragmatist sociology, and will enable us to make sense of the test to which Lagos' institutional structures are put by solid waste accumulation and congestion. Both traditions bear considerable influence from the work of Albert Hirschman, yet have seldom been connected. While both trends have mainly operated in a European context, we bring them together here in a different terrain, at an urban scale. This displacement might not be so novel, however, for Hirschman himself first formulated his theory of exit in Nigeria (Hirschman, 1970, pp. 44-45).

The argument we develop is twofold. First, we emphasize the effect of waste congestion on the closure of Lagos' governmental arena, leading to a tighter control of exit and entry by the political centre. Second, we engage in a detailed study of the processes through which the firmer control of the Lagos state onto the waste sector is operationalized, and how it impacts the capacity of informal waste workers to exit state regulations and exist outside of the formal waste infrastructure. We build on the notion of 'channelling' in order to account for the formation of new institutional boundaries that have defined state-recognized circuits for the circulation of solid waste across the city. We proceed to a superposition of the fields of waste management and street-level patronage politics to show that the process of institutional boundary-building has implications far beyond the waste sector, and has triggered great political instability at the metropolitan level. The ad hoc negotiation of leaks in the waste infrastructure signals, rather than a failure in implementation, attempts to mitigate the political costs induced by the occlusion of exit-based political production.

This paper draws on data collected in Lagos in 2015 and 2016. During two fieldworks, 60 interviews with actors involved formally and informally in waste management were conducted, as well as nine non-participant observations of street-level bureaucrats in their waste-related undertakings on the streets of the city. The engagement with a broad variety of actors was required by the necessity to account for all existing solid waste channels and explore the instability generated by the local state's attempt to control them.

## RE-EMBEDDING INFORMALITY

Re-embedding informality within institutional structures first demands that we conceive the notion in relation to processes of institutional boundary-making and the possibilities of exit they delineate. The political structuring of governmental arenas has been faded in recent years by the circulation of concepts that focus on the insurgent character of informal urban processes. As noted by Kate Meagher, 'earlier representations of informal politics as "weapons of the weak"' – in the form of James Scott's notion of *infrapolitics* (Scott, 1990) – 'have given way to more dynamic images of 'insurgent citizenship' (Meagher, 2014, p. 421). The concepts of 'insurgent citizenship' (Miraftab, 2009) or 'occupancy urbanism' (Benjamin, 2008) have portrayed informal politics as a powerful contestation channel for the urban poor. Meagher's empirical study of informal professional networks in Nigeria (Meagher, 2014) has put forward, instead, their fragmentation

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and instability, their incapacity to ‘provide the political connections necessary to translate large and dynamic informal economies into political voice’ (p. 435). Although emphasizing the centrality of such networks in ‘reproducing life in the city’ (Simone, 2004, p. 408), AbdouMalik Simone has further depicted their flickering and provisional character. While they have allowed for the maintenance of ‘flexible patterns of adaptation’ to institutional structures in low-income districts, they have not translated in changes in the ‘urban system as a whole’ (Simone & Rao, 2012, p. 325). Informal networks can hardly be conceived as ‘univocal’ and ‘stable’ formations. Rather, they constitute a ‘momentous possibility’, and exist centrally in the constant renegotiation of the possibility of ‘stepping outside’ of what Simone and Rao (2012) term the ‘regulatory structure’. Solomon Benjamin’s notion of ‘occupancy urbanism’ (Benjamin, 2008) appears in this regard particularly problematic when the exit strategies characteristic of urban patronage or machine politics are conceived as political voice channels which testify of the ‘evidence of a popular political consciousness’ (p. 724). Indeed, it instils a confusion between, on the one hand, political contestation addressed at the political centre (voice) and, on the other hand, ‘escapist’ forms of political production (exit) (Bayart, 1993). Following Pieterse (2008), Lindell (2010) has called for attention to be paid to the plurality of political agencies and practices that one can find in between voice and exit. She argues that voice and exit need to be understood as a continuum rather than as a dichotomy (p. 7). While this perspective finds great resonance in the study of political practices and politics from below, it is not fit for grasping processes of institutional formation and political confinement: institutional boundaries – despite their thickness – do establish clear ruptures between voice and exit, although voice and exit strategies can be combined. Accounting for the formation of this binary together with that of urban institutions, however, does not mean that exit must be considered as devoid of any political implications. Unlike what was initially thought by Hirschman (1970, p. 15), exit needs not be considered as a way out of politics (towards the realm of economics), but rather as a central source of political production and mobilization, ‘one of the constituent strategies of the production of politics and social relations’ (Bayart, 1993, p. 259). Such political production translates notably in the building of political networks through forbearance, or the granting of derogations from the law (Holland, 2015). Yet, when it comes to waste management, the binary distinction between voice and exit turns out to be crucial on the ground, in the very concrete dispersion of solid waste across space.

Further, as noted by Jaglin (2014), conceptualizations of ‘collective action by the have-nots’ have the tendency to portray informal basic services as operating in a world separate from that of conventional services. The reading of alternative services as ‘manifestations of an inventive economy self-organized by and for the poor, in the interstices of the developed city’, misses ‘the multiplicity of [their] connections with the legal/capitalist world’ as well as their integration and mobilization in the political arena (pp. 437–438). Indeed, as put forth by Björkman (2014), part of the urban studies literature has had the tendency to leave unquestioned the empirical standing of formal/informal and legal/illegal categories, to treat them as an ‘outside reality’ largely disconnected from local political processes. She has shown, on the contrary, the necessity to pay careful attention to the localized formation of such binaries and the ways they are mobilized by institutions. Samson (2017) has further insisted on their utilization within the informal sector through the notion of ‘social uses of the law’.

There is, in sum, a need to rearticulate the notion of informality with processes of institutional boundary-making and the possibilities of voice and exit they open. Bridging Rokkian political sociology with pragmatist sociology may offer us a way to conceive of this relationship in a systematic manner, where the situations in which actors find themselves in their confrontations to institutional boundaries are put at the core of the analysis. What we seek is to relocate the

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categories of ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ in the analysis in such a way that they do not cover up the complex interactions between actors designated as informal and institutional structures of political confinement. Indeed, while the notion of informality is used abundantly both to formulate critiques of urban inequalities and to justify specific ways of governing disadvantaged segments of urban populations (Chatterjee, 2006), we tend to lose sight of the ways it operates situationally in the interactions between ‘informal actors’ and institutions of government (Boltanski, 2009). Displacing Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre’s pragmatic theory of prices (Boltanski & Esquerre, 2017), we here consider the categories of formal and informal as metacategories mobilized by actors in the definition of the ‘price’ to be paid for the crossing of an institutional boundary. Formality and informality are fictive categories in that they bear few chances of being realized as such in the transgression of an institutional boundary. Rather, they are potentialities brought to the test of reality in situations in which an actor encounters an institutional boundary, and the costs of loyalty, voice and exit associated to it. Every situation in which, in our case, an actor negotiates the circulation and disposal of waste objects across institutional channels constitutes both an event, in the sense that it is unique and non-generalizable, and a test in that it brings to the test of reality a set of expectations regarding the cost of exit. In each situation, formality and informality are in competition with other metacategories that refer to the value (here always negative) of the activity being performed (transporting or disposing of waste in public space). Alternative metacategories are similarly organized, either in relation to an institutional boundary (legal/illegal) and/or on the basis of an ideal (of cleanliness, citizenship or order) in reference to which the negative value of the activity being performed is evaluated. The metacategories of formal and informal are themselves produced from a plurality of points of reference, which may include legal texts, bylaws and procedures, individual experience and imaginaries. Each encounter with the apparatus through which the institutional boundary is implemented – which may vary depending on whether the actor encounters a street-level bureaucrat or a policy instrument – brings about a bargain that will result in the definition of a ‘price’ to be paid for exit.

In studying the formation of institutional waste channels, we thus analyze how informality and formality are used – amid other metacategories – in the process of negotiation of exit from the waste sector. As the Lagos state government engages in a process of political confinement, metacategories defined in reference to institutional boundaries take on a renewed importance in the definition of the ‘value’ of the activities carried out by waste workers in public space. After defining the conceptual language on which the analysis relies, the paper analyzes the role of regulations in establishing institutional waste channels in Lagos through the control of the activities of the ‘informal’ waste sector. Close attention is paid to the contradictory effects of the development of a regulatory state together with that of an ‘environmental’ field of intervention. Second, the paper then analyzes the role of new tax instruments in institutional channel-building, and the political tension it has generated in Lagos.

## POLITICAL CONFINEMENT AND THE RE-NEGOTIATION OF INFORMALITY

Having clarified the orientation, we must carefully define the conceptual language on which we will build throughout this paper. Solid waste can be conceived as a determination that imposes itself within the physical fabric of the city. As it accumulates, solid waste congests, and stresses the very functioning of the urban arena. By ‘urban arena’, a notion diverted from Mario Stopino’s ‘natural arena’ (Stopino, 1983/2015; quoted in Bartolini, 2005, p. 27), we designate an urban area taken as devoid of a central governmental actor and political boundaries, yet which can

experience a degree of environmental confinement. In this case, as solid waste turns into a constraint, a pressure exerted onto other urban flows, we consider its effect of congestion on the urban arena, meaning that it limits circulation across the city (of humans, water, capital) and thus increases the confinement of actors and resources within it. The aim of this paper is to understand how this environmental pressure exerted onto the urban fabric and its dwellers translates into a political force. In so doing, we borrow another concept from Stopino: that of ‘governmental arena’. The term ‘governmental arena’ designates, rather than the physical fabric of the city, the polis itself, that is, the set of constraints imposed on the circulation of actors and resources by a political centre (in this case, the Lagos state) in order to increase the institutional confinement of the city and be able to sustain a political system. We can thus artificially distinguish two types of confinement: an environmental confinement, produced by the congestion of the urban arena, and an institutional confinement, which enables the formation of a governmental arena and the strengthening of a central governmental actor. Institutional confinement is a process produced by institutional boundary-making. Institutional boundaries, a concept developed by Rokkan (1999), whose relationship with Hirschman’s exit alternative is revisited by Stefano Bartolini, ‘are ‘locking-in’ mechanisms that increase the cost of exit and set differential incentives to stay within the system’ (Bartolini, 2005, p. 13). Put differently, institutional boundaries are barriers to exit designed by institutions to enclose a set of actors and resources within a political system, in which voice and loyalty will tend towards becoming the only options available to locked-in citizens. Owing to the increasing cost of exit, actors and resources within a given political system find themselves increasingly confined within it, meaning that the exit alternative is increasingly out of reach. Actors and resources within an urban arena thus become increasingly dependent on the political production of a governmental centre which is set to ensure behavioural conformity within the confined governmental arena. In this paper, we examine the link between these two forms of confinement to understand how solid waste congestion triggers further confinement of the governmental arena of Nigeria’s largest city, Lagos. In other terms, we look at the effect of urban congestion in triggering a process of locking-in of actors within the governmental arena through the occlusion of exit strategies.

Before moving into the empirical detail of the institutional boundaries developed in Lagos’ waste sector, a word should be said about how the concept applies to its specificities. We adapt the notion of institutional boundary to that of institutional channel, moving away from its territorial dimension to an understanding that relates more closely to urban space. Institutional waste channels, delimited by institutional boundaries, can be defined as locking-in mechanisms that confine the actors of waste management as well as their resources (solid waste itself as well as monetary flows related to its management) to an official circuit. On this basis, institutional waste channels are meant to increase the cost of exit from the official waste infrastructure, for both residents and actors involved in waste management. Institutional channel-building, for residents who rely on waste services and disposal sites other than those operated by the local state and local governments, translates into a higher price to be paid. Similarly, the actors who organize and carry out such services through alternative channels will see the cost of maintaining their activities rise. In principle, institutional channel-building – an increased political confinement in the waste sector – will push residents towards the loyalty or voice options, as the exit option becomes unavailable or is estimated as costlier than the former. While, in the case of the market, voice is considered by Hirschman as generally more ‘costly and conditioned’ (Hirschman, 1970, p. 40) than the exit option, the relation is usually reversed in the case of political institutions which have developed costly barriers to exit.

A simple question that might arise at this stage is the following: Why would exit from institutional waste channels be favourable to any type of actor, under any circumstances, given

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the discarded value of the material under consideration? Effectively, in Lagos, the local state is far from being the only actor interested in the capture of solid waste. As we will explore, solid waste is – in itself (as a resource) as well as in situ (in given spatial configurations) – a valuable asset for a myriad of actors, from informal waste workers to local politicians and street-level bureaucrats. Waste management distinguishes itself from other urban basic services for it is commanded by a logic of collection rather than one of supply, as is the case for water and electricity (Debout, 2012). Local authorities must manage a resource that they do not produce, and maintain systems of collection that operate along a bottom-up logic. Whereas water flows within a hard infrastructure composed of pipes, solid waste must be channelled – in the case of Lagos – from millions of points of production along a soft infrastructure composed of a number of fixed nodal points (transfer stations, treatment facilities and landfills) (Debout, 2012, pp. 8–11). Under conditions of competition over the capture and situational mobilization of solid waste, how can the impermeability of waste channels be ensured in between each step of the collection process?

Although the figure has raised much controversy (Fourchard, 2011; Potts, 2012), the population of Lagos is estimated at roughly 13 million inhabitants (UN-Habitat, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Solid waste is thus to be collected from millions of point of production, within a mostly unplanned urban environment – where 70% of the population live in ‘extremely poor environmental surroundings’ (World Bank, 2006) – and channelled, through two operational transfer stations, towards three main landfills in the north of the metropolitan area (Solous, Olushosun and Abule Edgba). While the operational challenge posed by solid waste channelling – in one of the most congested cities in the world – is stark, the main obstacle lies elsewhere. The state agency for waste management is indeed far from being the only actor interested in the management of refuse. Before the state’s reinvestment in waste management, numerous independent actors had developed and organized their own localized waste channels. I here mainly look at the case of the Mushin local government area (LGA), long known as Lagos’ largest slum, before gradually gaining access to the metropolis’ circuits of redistribution through patronage politics (Barnes, 1986).

In Lagos, the building of institutional channels for waste management was re-engaged in 2005. Following the collapse of public waste management by the city’s 20 local governments in the early 1980s, in a context of drastic cuts in public spending and economic downturn, the sector was taken over by independent waste pickers, known as ‘cart pushers’. At the time, federal investments in infrastructure were further driven away from Lagos. The latter was seen by federal leaders as an irrevocably unfit capital for the building of a modern Nigeria (Bigon, 2005; Immerwahr, 2007). Upon his arrival at the head of the state, General Murtala Muhammed, together with the Supreme Military Council, decided on the transfer of the federal capital to a new modern city to be built in the middle of the country – Abuja (Immerwahr, 2007, p. 17). The withdrawal of the state led to the complete abandonment of the delivery of basic services in Lagos, offended in 1991 after being named as the dirtiest city in the world by the United Nations (Gandy, 2006, p. 390). Meanwhile, massive poverty-driven urbanization was fuelling its population, which nearly doubled between 1990 and 2005 (UN-Habitat, 2013). The early 2000s, despite Nigeria’s return to civilian rule in 1999, testified to a form of continuation of the chronic disinvestment of the federal state in Lagos’ infrastructure. Political conflicts between the two main national political parties restrained the access of the Lagos state to the federal oil rent (Fourchard, 2011). For local politicians, restricted access to federal funds meant that a central vector for the maintenance of strategies of extraversion (Bayart, 1993) was jeopardized. Amid numerous conflicts between Lagos and Abuja – notably regarding the extent of Lagos’ population – the flow of oil money could not mitigate the electoral impact of the waste crisis. The exit options

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of south-western political leaders were relatively blocked, and institutional escapism (Vitale, 2009), at the metropolitan level, obstructed. The metropolitan area found itself in a dramatic situation of solid waste saturation and the issue at stake could not be escaped by the Lagos government. Its reality had to be confronted.

This confrontation resulted in the re-foundation of the Lagos Waste Management Authority (LAWMA), in 2005. Twenty-eight years after its creation by the military regime in 1977, the state agency for waste management, with 63 waste-collection trucks at its disposal, was not operational on the ground (De Gramont, 2015). In a situation of financial scarcity, the LAWMA appealed to the private sector, and contracted out 246 local private service providers (PSPs). The latter were put in charge of the collection of domestic solid waste, as well as that of the waste management fee from each household. By 2010, the agency had increased its own fleet of compactor trucks to 250, and, together with the PSPs, had at its disposal over 1000 vehicles.

Beyond compactor trucks, the formation of a solid waste infrastructure in Lagos has mainly relied on immaterial components. Urban technical systems cannot be solely conceived in their materiality, as pipes, cables and sewers (Lorrain, 2011). Physical infrastructure on its own cannot ensure the delivery of basic services; rather, it is combined with a number of institutions and policy instruments that enable its daily management. The policy instruments (Lascoumes & Le Galès, 2004) developed together with physical infrastructure can be more decisive to the (re)formation of urban institutions than purely technical components (Le Galès & Lorrain, 2003). Each technical system can be considered as a hybrid of material components and policy instruments. In the case of a soft infrastructure developed for the management of solid waste, policy instruments appear particularly decisive in structuring the technical system. In the absence of physical channels for the conveyance of waste, policy instruments act as pipes. In ensuring that waste is disposed of through the chain of public and private operators designated by the local state, they constitute the institutional boundaries of waste channels.

The policy instruments deployed do not have a direct, material effect on the establishment of solid waste channels in the city. They proceed, through new regulations and tax instruments, by (1) preventing the access of competing actors to the management of solid waste as well as (2) limiting their capacity to extract financial resources from its management or situational mobilization. Such policy instruments thus have a meaningful impact beyond the resource itself: they are pivotal in controlling informal activities as well as monetary flows. Crucially, in the case of Lagos, the role of such instruments is to secure an impermeable avenue for the establishment of a direct and exclusive tax-service relationship between the local state and the population. Institutional channels thus cut across the field of waste management together with that of local patronage politics, in which they seek to ensure behavioural conformity (Bartolini, 2005, p. 28). For solid waste to be channelled within a recognized circuit, the political centre must ensure that local informal processes do not interfere with its circulation. Securing behavioural conformity at the street level thus requires a tighter control of exit and entry that limits the possibilities of evasion of the rules and processes defined by the political centre. Policy instruments ensure such locking in of waste as well as of local actors. In sum, the determinant posed by solid waste congestion is articulated by the local state in the formation of institutional boundaries, which translates into a higher degree of political confinement.

Since 2005, however, the process of formation of institutional channels for waste management has been anything but linear. State-led waste collection in Lagos remains partial and incomplete, totally inexistent in the most marginalized neighbourhoods of the city. The soft infrastructure being deployed in Lagos for waste management is primarily defined by its leakages. Each leakage in waste channels signals not only an escape of waste but also an intersection of institutional boundaries with various exit strategies and alternative forms of political production. Each leakage



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the paper here analyzes constitutes a hotspot where the formation of institutional boundaries and the degree of confinement of the governmental arena are negotiated among a myriad of actors. Leakages in the waste infrastructure thus cannot solely be analyzed as mere failures in implementation: they enable the maintenance of exit-based forms of political production and allow for the mitigation of the political costs induced by political confinement. In other terms, they open up situations in which informality is renegotiated.

#### Occluding alternative waste channels

Following the collapse of Lagos' solid waste management system in the 1980s, the informal sector filled the vacuum and started collecting waste from residents. Cart pushers were central to the alternative service developed. Cart pushers in Lagos are, most of the time, young Hausa men who have emigrated from the north of Nigeria. Upon their arrival to the big city, the job of cart pusher, considered as one of the most socially degrading occupations in the city, is one of the easiest to access (Mitchell, 2008; Moreno-Sanchez & Maldonado, 2006). Cart pushers collect solid waste directly from residents and unload their carts in local open dumps.

In Idi Araba, one of the most deprived neighbourhoods of Mushin, home to a large Hausa community, one of such dumps is still active. The heap of rubbish, located by an open area used by mechanics for the refurbishment of cars, is far from an abandoned space. Amid the waste pickers collecting and gathering plastics, cans, electronics and metals, the cart pushers painfully pulling their carts to the top of the hill of trash, the toxic smokes emanating from burning waste. A group of young men controls access to the site. The men, commonly referred to as 'thugs', are members of the Oodua People's Congress (OPC), a Yoruba nationalist organization formed following the 1993 national elections to defend the interests of the ethnic group. The involvement of the OPC in waste management does not appear to be central in the group's organization, which has become of key actor of security in Lagos (Akinyele, 2007). It is, rather, the result of an initiative of some of its members in search for new revenues, and other open dumpsites in Mushin are controlled by groups of 'thugs', not necessarily affiliated to the OPC.<sup>2</sup> The group extracts a rent from the dumping ground by charging the cart pushers who come to empty their loads, sharing the rent extracted among themselves.<sup>3</sup> As will be shown, the role of the OPC men does not limit itself to the control of the site, but also involves the protection of cart pushers, within a tight alliance between the members of two ethnic groups otherwise regularly opposed in violent clashes.

Valuable waste, such as scrap metals, is directed, from the source, through a different channel. Scrap metals are particularly abundant in Mushin – where is located, at Ladipo, the city's largest car parts market – and are handled by scrap dealers. Like cart pushers, scrap dealers are most of the time Hausa men who have emigrated from the north of Nigeria. In each scrap-dealing business, the boss sends out his 'boys' to buy scraps, mainly from mechanics. The 'boys' push their trucks around the neighbourhood in search of any waste metals. Other men then dismember the parts at the depot and sort out the different types of metals, which are then resold, by the kilogram, to Chinese and Indian recyclers.<sup>4</sup>

When the Lagos state reinvested in formal actors in 2005, such was the landscape in which the new PSPs were to operate (for a detailed mapping of solid waste channels in a Kenyan settlement, see Gutberlet et al., 2017). The plurality and localized nature of waste circuits had led to the saturation of drainage canals, empty spaces and of the air, that is, to an increase in the environmental confinement of the city. Alternative waste channels were still in place and operational, and the heaps could grow higher. How was this situation to translate into a higher degree of political confinement, that is, how could the local state even impose a formal circuit amid such numerous alternatives?

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In 2010, the Lagos government issued a regulation forbidding the activities of cart pushers. The ban on cart pushers is only one central example of the development of a regulatory state in the environmental sector. The Lagos Environmental Protection Agency (LASEPA) was set up to take care of the design of such regulations, notably with regards to industrial and electronic waste. The primary aim of the ban on cart pushers was to seal off the main alternative to the state service. While the use of a policy instrument such as regulations can appear unspectacular to the outside observer, it stands in stark contrast to other modes of control of the informal economy mobilized in the recent history of Lagos. In 1984, General Muhammadu Buhari – Nigeria’s president since 2015 – after his arrival at the head of the Nigerian state following a coup, launched a vast ‘War Against Indiscipline’ (WAI) that aimed at restoring order in Nigerian society. The programme particularly targeted Lagos’ sprawling informal sector. The coercive methods used by the WAI brigades to ‘discipline’ the informal sector and restore order in the ‘filthy’ city were based on violent repression, yet did not entail the development of any public policy, as the waste management service was precisely being abandoned. In other words, the policy instrumentation deployed under the WAI, which served a similar aim of ‘sanitation’, did not entail the formation of any kind of institutional boundary. The recourse to regulation has also entailed repression, targeted on the specific group of cart pushers. Yet, it has primarily sought to define a boundary between an accepted waste management service, a recognized waste channel and a forbidden one. The LAWMA and LASEPA repeatedly insist on the fact that they are ‘regulatory bodies’, that work on convincing people to adopt the right behaviour rather than on coercing them.<sup>5</sup> Effectively, ever since the beginning of the formalization of the waste sector in 2005, cart pushers have been subject to repeated attacks in the media by the Lagos state government. They were accused of being responsible for the dumping of refuse in unauthorized places, particularly in the clogged drainage system. Since their ban, the LAWMA has heavily circulated within the city the demand that residents ‘stop patronizing cart pushers’ and rely on the formal service instead.

The enforcement of the ban on cart pushers began two years later, in 2012. That year, they suffered a city-wide crackdown operated by the Kick Against Indiscipline (KAI) brigades – inheritors of the WAI – and the LAWMA enforcement unit, assisted by private security firms in the surveillance of the city’s main roads. Scrap dealers – although centrally involved in recycling – were also affected by the ban, because they rely on cart pushers. The regulation was nonetheless implemented unequally across Lagos’ territory and depending on the type of actors. Indeed, the establishment of recognized waste channels through the exclusion of the alternative circuit maintained by cart pushers engendered the formation of gatekeeping positions, at which numerous leakages in the infrastructure under construction were negotiated between various actors.

#### Leaks in the infrastructure: the formation of gatekeeping positions

In Lagos, sanitation exercises were put in place together with the WAI in the early 1980s. Such exercises are addressed either at the entire population – on a monthly basis – or to market traders – on a weekly basis. Sanitation days have come to epitomize the situational mobilization of waste as a means of collection of an ‘urban rent’ (Fourchard, 2014) by street-level bureaucrats and local politicians. They are an occasion for these actors to patrol the streets and encounter the population, in a demonstration of authority and control over street cleanliness, in what John Manton has termed a ‘political spectacle’ (Manton, 2013, p. 619). Beyond the performative aspect of such exercises, they form the basis for the deployment of a ‘rent-seeking apparatus’ (Manton, 2013, p. 618) whereby the prohibited circulation of residents as well as ‘dirtiness’ are sanctioned through fines. Such rent-seeking must, however, always remain carefully measured, particularly on the highly politically powerful markets (Barnes, 1986, p. 159), and must serve the recognition

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of the authority of the local government by market leaders, as well as their support of local politicians.<sup>6</sup> The latter will reinforce this support following each sanitation exercise through the granting – on a personal basis – of exemptions from the penalties imposed on traders, thus reproducing their role of political protectors and securing political support.<sup>7</sup> Manton notes the ‘clear disjuncture between the political performance and ... the environmental health of the city’ (Manton, 2013, p. 618). Indeed, sanitation days are, above all, political exercises from which the monitoring of solid waste disposal is altogether absent. As for the repression operated in the 1980s by the WAI, sanitation days do not entail a reference to an established institutional boundary between the legal and the illegal, the formal and the informal, between recognized and unrecognized waste channels. Rather, authority is performed in reference to metacategories of civility, cleanliness and ‘probity’ (Manton, 2013, p. 618). In such situations, traders negotiate with environmental officers the price of carrying out their deemed ‘polluting’ activities in public space in reference to such points of reference, through which their negative value is discussed. Such bargains are unavoidable for, in the absence of actual institutional waste channels, the only option available to them is exit (which is why we speak of ‘rent seeking’). The only way for traders to diminish the share of the price to be paid in monetary form is to resort to higher political integration within patronage networks, thus to turn to ‘political payments’.

The implementation of a solid waste policy, of an avenue for the establishment of a direct and exclusive tax–service relationship between the local state and the population, disturbed the situational mobilization of waste by street-level bureaucrats and local politicians, the politics of street sanitation. With the takeover of waste management by the local state, the establishment of direct relationships between residents and the LAWMA around the management of institutional waste channels, the legitimacy of their interventions has diminished. During a speech in front of the Environment and Road Maintenance Committee (Enron), the administrator of the Mushin LGA appointed by the Lagos state insisted that the local politicians who make up the committee ‘must complement the efforts of the state government’. ‘Do not interfere with what does not concern you,’ he urged them, with one goal in mind: ‘We want to make sure that the first prize of the best local government [awarded by the state government] comes to us.’ The executive secretary was insisting on the behavioural conformity and performance of the members of the committee within the policy implemented by the state, rather than on their political role.<sup>8</sup> After gradually losing importance within the institutional apparatus, city-wide sanitation days have been abrogated in November 2016.<sup>9</sup> Local politicians and street-level bureaucrats have had to displace their political apparatuses out of the institutional waste channels set up by the local state. They have repositioned them onto their borders, within new situations, as gatekeepers.

The case of scrap dealers – who rely on cart pushers for the collection of scrap metals – serves as a good example of the negotiation of exit from the regulation. Following the enforcement of the ban, Ibrahim, who manages over 100 cart pushers, as well as Bashir and his 25 cart pushers, started to see their ‘boys’ getting arrested by the KAI brigades.<sup>10</sup> The KAI is an agency placed under the control of the Ministry of the Environment, in charge of the enforcement of environmental regulations. Every week, the two scrap dealers had to go to the KAI office and pay important bribes to free each of their arrested employees. During the weekly negotiation, the activity being performed by the scrap dealer must first be qualified through a process that can be summarized as follows. Since a regulation that participates in the definition of an institutional channel has been produced by the Lagos state, the epicentre of such qualification moves from references to ideals of cleanliness and civility to the metacategories of ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’, which are, however, not strictly bound by the regulation itself. The scrap dealer argues for the legality of his business (his depot), while the KAI officers point to the illegality of cart pushers themselves, who carry waste across the neighbourhood. Where the scrap dealer will hardly be

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able to argue against the illegality of the activities of his cart pushers, he will resort to metacategories which bear no reference to the institutional channel, such as the positive 'environmental impact' of his recycling activities (in this case, borrowing points of reference heavily circulated by environmental agencies in recent years). Officers will counter this valuation in a language of uncleanness. Moving across these categorizations, environmental officers will have the last word in determining the price to be paid to exit the regulation. Tired of the weekly bargaining and financially strained, Ibrahim negotiated an agreement with the brigade. After an initial down payment, he agreed to pay the officers 20,000 nairas (US \$63) per week. In exchange, the latter agreed to let his 'boys' go about their business without arresting them. Ibrahim gave identity cards to each of his employees in order for KAI officers to recognize them. Hence, despite their illegal character, the activities of Ibrahim's cart pushers are granted, through artefacts (the IDs, that he himself produced), a degree of formality. He is thus mobilizing yet another category in his defence, which is expressed less as a vocal discourse than as an artefact that ought to be recognized as 'formal'. The metacategory of 'formality', however, only comes as a secondary resource in the negotiation of exit.

For the Hausa man, however, national politics quickly appeared as a mean to secure a better treatment from the environmental police, or in any case, to limit the monetary dimension of the price to be paid for exit. In 2013, the northern All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), then headed by Muhammadu Buhari, concluded an agreement with the south-western party Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), dominant in Lagos, which led to the formation of the All Progressives Congress (APC). The nomination of Buhari – a Muslim Fulani from the north – as the party candidate for the 2015 presidential elections raised hopes, amid the northern scrap dealers, of increasing their political weight in the metropolis. Ibrahim supported the party during the presidential campaign, sending his 'boys' to rallies in favour of the candidate. The head of the Lagos branch of the Association of Scrap Dealers – which extends all over West Africa – also brought his support to the APC, in the name of Lagos' scrap dealers. In his office sits an award freshly received from Abuja to thank him for his endorsement of Buhari.<sup>11</sup> Following the elections, Ibrahim did get a return for his support: his weekly fee to the KAI was reduced fourfold.<sup>12</sup> Opportunities of political patronage emanating from networks commanded at the federal level enabled him to renegotiate the value of his activities and to translate monetary payments through bribes into political support.

For Mushin's scrap dealers, however, the KAI was not the only actor with whom a derogation from the regulation was to be negotiated. Another actor that sought to reposition itself as a gatekeeper of waste channels is the Revenue Committee. The Mushin LGA Revenue Committee operates along the same lines as the Enron committee. Its members are part of the APC, appointed by the executive secretary of the local government.<sup>13</sup> The committee took advantage of the scrap dealers' search for toleration in the LGA by delivering 'wheel truck and barrow' permits. Such a permit, to be stuck on each cart, indicates that the truck pusher is formally registered with the local government, although their activities are prohibited by law.<sup>14</sup> The apparatus here put in place by the Revenue Committee goes beyond simple derogation: it creates a new layer in the negotiation of exit. A policy tool – the permit – is mobilized by local politicians in order to counter an institutional boundary and establish a 'legitimate' exit channel to the local state regulation. Acting as political protectors, the members of the committee hence have the possibility to grant additional derogations to their clients. For the latter, the crossing of the institutional boundary becomes a sequential process through which he is gradually able to claim a degree of 'formality' which will nonetheless not be recognized equally by all segments of the street bureaucracy. Here again, the metacategory of formality is mobilized through an artefact (the sticker), and remains secondary to the negotiation of his 'legality'.

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For independent cart pushers, the negotiation of exit has proved more arduous due to their lack of organization and highly limited financial resources. In Idi Araba, nonetheless, cart pushers have received the protection of the OPC group in control of the neighbourhood's main open dump. After several threats to the local private security officer in charge of arresting cart pushers around the dump, the local seriki and baale (respectively traditional leaders of the Hausa and Yoruba communities) – anxious to appease the situation and avoid further violence – settled an agreement and ordered the officer to stop arresting cart pushers. Remaining cart pushers have started operating at night, and residents try to keep their contacts with them discrete, for fear of being seen by the authorities. The renegotiation of the acceptability of these relatively isolated workers in the waste sector has relied less on political bargaining than on the unilateral resistance of a group in capacity of violent destabilization.

In sum, the establishment of institutional waste channels has relied on the deployment of regulations. The ban on cart pushers, in particular, has played a crucial role in establishing institutional boundaries by enabling the control of the 'informal' waste sector and dismantling alternatives to the state service. The cost imposed by waste congestion has been redirected by the local state onto waste workers and local middlemen. For the latter, nonetheless, the formation of institutional waste channels has also engendered the decongestion of exit strategies in the waste sector, and they have been able partly to sustain their political networks through the negotiation of leakages in the infrastructure. They have moved to the margins of waste channels, of which they have become the gatekeepers. In the interactions with waste workers, this displacement has translated in the increased mobilization of the metacategory of legality, as well as secondarily, of that of formality. In order to limit the political costs of the new regulations, local middlemen have mitigated the increased political confinement driven by the Lagos government.

## CONTROLLING MONETARY FLOWS

The formation of institutional channels further relied on the development of another policy instrument, for taxation. The new tax instrument set up has facilitated the financial draining of alternative waste circuits, and contributed to the displacement of middlemen to the frontiers of channels by rendering their interventions on monetary flows impossible.

The imposition of fees and fines by local governments, as we have seen, opens the possibility for local middlemen to intervene at the implementation stage in order to defend their clientele and obtain the granting of derogations (Holland, 2015). Such instrumentation of taxation is characteristic of urban patronage and machine politics (Barnes, 1986; Scott, 1969), and enables the formation of exit-based forms of political production (Bayart, 1993), whereby political clienteles can be constituted and inducements distributed. The process of exit-based mobilization is clearly put by a Mushin politician:

We go see the official: 'this is my person, they will clean up, please, I beg, oga [boss], I beg. Ok, what is your fine? 5000? Ok let him pay 1000, or 2000.'<sup>15</sup>

In some cases, we join money to their money to pay fines, or pay fines on their behalf. They come to you, and if they come to you, definitely during the elections, if you tell them 'vote for me' they will, because they need to keep you in power, for you to keep helping them.<sup>16</sup>

The new tax instrument put in place rendered these interventions impossible at the local level. Indeed, for the past decade, Lagosians have had to get used to a new routine. Every month or every other month, they find, tapped on their door, a bill for waste management. Such bill is

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signed both by the LAWMA and the private contractor in charge of the collection of rubbish in their ward. Whilst the fee imposed is an official and mandatory state fee, it is collected directly – for domestic waste – by the PSP. Residents must then present themselves at their local bank, where the fee is paid through a bank transfer, and a receipt is issued. Not a single civil servant is involved in the billing and transaction: both are operated by private actors acting on behalf of the local state. The bill, the dematerialized payment and the receipt are three tools at the core of the change of instrumentation: for taxpayers, their implementation discards the possibility of negotiating the price of exit with a street-level bureaucrat or elected official upon implementation in exchange for their political support.

Once residents have entered the tax–service relationship with the local state, it is thus difficult for them to withdraw. They will be charged the waste management fee regularly, and any reliance on alternative waste circuits will come at an extra cost. Faced with the inconsistencies of the service provided by PSPs in many areas of the city, the local media regularly echo the complaints of Lagosians as well as calls for the reintegration of cart pushers.<sup>17</sup> Yet, to the exit from institutional waste channels, they will tend to favour the voicing of their complaints, either directly to their local PSP or to the LAWMA, through the hotline it has put in place.

The cost imposed on middlemen by both the regulation of the waste sector and the deployment of a tax instrument on which they cannot intervene has triggered political instability around the lagoon. While they have found new positions as gatekeepers, as we have seen, their marginalization has triggered strong resentment. As put by a local politician in Papa Ajao, Mushin:

The morals are down. It is the job of the politician to mobilize, and this is the way it works. Each and every one of us have a particular location, and people in your area look up to you. If there is any problem, on refuse collection, on anything ...<sup>18</sup>

Beyond resentment, the limitation of the capacity of middlemen to intervene comes at a cost for the Lagos government. If, indeed, they see their capacity of ‘mobilization’ of clientele limited, how are they to secure support for the ruling party? Can the state government afford – politically – the occlusion of exit strategies?

The Lagos government’s attempt to tighten its hold on local middlemen has heightened factional conflicts within the dominant party. During the implementation process, it has appointed administrators of its choosing at the head of each local government, who stayed in place until 2017. To a high official of the LASEPA, these appointments were motivated by the will ‘to see how leakages could be blocked in the administration’.<sup>19</sup> For the leaders of the Lagos APC, they were also a way to maintain their control over local governments in a context of weakening of exit-based mechanisms of political mobilization.

If the Lagos government is to sustain its efforts at limiting institutional leaks, the political cost engendered by the confinement of the governmental arena can only be mitigated through the formation of new political circuits. The closure of bargaining possibilities at implementation stage must be answered with the opening of a new field of bargaining, upstream. In other terms, the formation of institutional waste channels can only be sustained politically if it is met with the opening of new voice channels. For now, however, the state government seems to persevere in its attempt at limiting political participation. During the 2017 local government elections, a combination of political intimidation – particularly in Mushin – and flooding secured a very low turnout.<sup>20</sup> The ruling party in the Lagos state swept every local government, amid accusations of fraud from the opposition.<sup>21</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

In Lagos, the determination posed by solid waste congestion has translated in the formation of institutional waste channels. The local state has sought to confine waste management to a recognized circuit, establishing new institutional boundaries that have further structured the urban arena into a governmental arena. The two policy instruments on which it has relied to secure the impermeability of the soft infrastructure have had effects beyond solid waste itself, leading to a tighter control of the waste sector as well as of related monetary flows. Many points of leakage have nonetheless been negotiated on an ad hoc basis by local middlemen, who have repositioned themselves as gatekeepers. It is at each of these points of leakage that the political sustainability of the waste infrastructure is being negotiated, at the intersection of institutional boundaries and exit strategies.

Such transformations in Lagos' institutional infrastructure can only be made visible if informality is not taken as point of departure of the analysis (Björkman, 2014), but rather re-embedded within institutional structures of exit and confinement as well as within the situations in which it is negotiated and assigned. This paper has sought to resituate the role of formal/informal and legal/ illegal binaries in the analysis to show how they are mobilized by street-level bureaucrats, local politicians and waste workers, transformed by the process of political confinement, and put to the test every time institutional boundaries are crossed and the cost of exit has to be bargained.

Working from institutional boundaries allows us to account for the actually existing governmental arena and to distinguish between the internal voicing of claims and exit-based strategies of survival and mobilization. Urban politics do not exist in a vacuum: they are channelled, confined and evaded. Here we have shown that such channelling has been congruent with that of solid waste.

Matthew Gandy has questioned conjointly the lack of water infrastructure and the absence of a 'viable public sphere' in Lagos (Gandy, 2006, p. 387). How could a public realm structure, how could Lagos begin 'articulating itself as a city' within a context of highly segmented interests, where the majority of the population has 'never experienced functional public services' (pp. 387–388)? Through the case of waste management and a focus on the structure of the political and governmental arenas, we see how the formation of such a public sphere is in fact likely to come at the cost of increased political exclusion. Urban congestion – in a context of relatively limited possibilities of institutional escapism – has triggered the formation of institutional boundaries, which have in turn engendered a political instability in which a new balance has yet to be found. The stabilization of these institutional developments demands the building of new voice channels. While, depending on the capacity of the Lagos government to maintain low political participation, the development of these new channels could translate into the expansion of the 'public sphere', it might not come as a panacea for the city's most marginalized residents. If Lagos' political organization gradually moves towards more confinement, stronger institutional boundaries as well as 'greater political visibility' (Simone & Rao, 2012, p. 327), what will the consequences be on the lives of those – such as cart pushers – for whom the possibility to exit so often corresponds to the right to exist in the metropolis? If the weakening of exit-based forms of political production is to be mitigated by the formation of new voice channels, new spaces of bargaining, who will they exclude? Will the inhabitants of those areas of Lagos not reached by institutional waste channels, such as Makoko, also get a voice?

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## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## NOTES

1. The last official census conducted in 2006 by the federal government established it at 9 million, a number contested by the Lagos state. After conducting its own census, the latter reached a number of 17 million (Fourchard, 2011, p. 47). Today, the local state puts forth estimates that range from 21 to 25 million. It appears, nonetheless, that such a number, while imposing itself as the reference figure, has been widely overestimated. The Africapolis project – funded by the French Development Agency – cross-referencing censuses, satellite imagery and density studies, established a number that brings credit to the federal census of 2006 (Potts, 2012): for 2010, it puts forth a figure of 10 million inhabitants. We settle with UN-Habitat's (2013) revised estimate for 2015 at 12.4 million, in line with that of Africapolis.
2. Interview with local politicians in Papa Ajao, Mushin, February 24, 2016.
3. Interviews with a 'LAWMA police' officer in Idi Araba, Mushin, February 23 and 25, 2016.
4. Four interviews were conducted with two scrap dealers, July 2015 and February–March 2016.
5. Interview with a special advisor of the general manager of LASEPA, Alausa, Ikeja, March 10, 2016.
6. Observation of a market sanitation exercise with the Mushin LGA sanitation brigade, July 2015.
7. Interview with the head of the Mushin LGA sanitation brigade, Mushin, February 19, 2016; interview with local politicians in Papa Ajao, Mushin, February 24, 2016.
8. Observation of a symposium of the Environment and Road Maintenance Committee of the Mushin LGA, March 6, 2016.
9. 'Lagos state government cancels monthly environmental sanitation', Governor of Lagos State (press release), November 23, 2016. Retrieved December 6, 2016, from <http://akinwunmiambode.com/lagos-state-governmentcancels-monthly-environmental-sanitation/>.
10. Names have been changed.
11. Interview with the Lagos chairman of the Association of Scrap Dealers, July 21, 2015.
12. Interview with Ibrahim, a scrap dealer in Idi Araba, Mushin, March 7, 2016.
13. Online interview with a local politician, Papa Ajao, Mushin, March 17, 2016.
14. Interview with Ibrahim, a scrap dealer in Idi Araba, Mushin, July 2015 and March 2016.
15. Interview with local politicians in Papa Ajao, Mushin, February 24, 2016.
16. Interview with local politicians in Papa Ajao, Mushin, February 16, 2016.
17. All Africa (originally published in the Vanguard), 'Nigeria: Lawma's ineffectiveness leads to clamour for return of cart pushers', March 6, 2015. Retrieved December 6, 2016, from <http://allafrica.com/stories/201503061147.html>; All Africa (originally published in the Daily Independent), 'Nigeria: between PSPs and banned cart pushers – Lagosians complain', June 2, 2015. Retrieved December 6, 2016, from <http://allafrica.com/stories/201506020591.html>.
18. Interview with local politicians in Papa Ajao, Mushin, February 16, 2016.
19. Interview with a special advisor to the general manager of LASEPA, Alausa, Ikeja, March 10, 2016.



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20. Premium Times, 'Lagos Council polls: fear of violence, heavy rainfall, others cause low turnout', July 23, 2017. Retrieved from March 1, 2018, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/top-news/237820-lagos-council-polls-fear-violence-heavy-rainfall-others-cause-low-turnout.html/>.
21. Naij, 'PDP accuses APC of rigging Lagos elections', July 2017. Retrieved from March 1, 2018, <https://www.naija.ng/1117152-pdp-accuses-apc-rigging-lagos-elections.html#1117152/>.

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