



Who Cleans Paris? Garbage Collectors in Their Own Words

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Translated from the French by Oliver Waine

Who are Paris's garbage collectors? Coline Ferrant and Marie Mourad highlight the diverse working conditions covered by this job title, which includes both municipal and private-sector employees.

“Paris City Hall has an image to convey on a global level. France too, of course, but on a global level,” says Ahmed,¹ a garbage collector employed by a private contractor that provides waste-management services to the city of Paris (hereafter “the city”). From “zero-waste” objectives to its “*Paris du tri*” recycling campaign, from trucks running on natural gas to elegant litter bins that match the rest of the street furniture, the city has established an ambitious waste-collection and street-cleaning policy. More than 4,800 garbage collectors² ensure the implementation of this policy through work that is as arduous as it is essential (Corteel and Le Lay 2011), but often invisible to local inhabitants (Nagle 2013). In New York, park cleaning, previously the exclusive responsibility of civil servants, has gradually been delegated to volunteers, private service providers, people serving community-service orders, and temporary employees (Krinsky and Simonet 2017). How does the situation compare when it comes to cleaning Paris’s public spaces? How do changes to urban cleanliness policies transform the work of garbage collectors?

Loaders and drivers, civil servants and private service providers

Mechanized waste collection involves two main professions: truck drivers; and loaders, responsible for depositing the contents of bins into the rear of the garbage truck. In half of Paris’s 20 *arrondissements*,³ these tasks are performed by civil servants employed by the city, via a dedicated agency responsible for waste collection and street cleaning.⁴ In the remaining 10 *arrondissements*, waste collection is subcontracted to private companies that mainly employ temporary workers (see Figure 1).

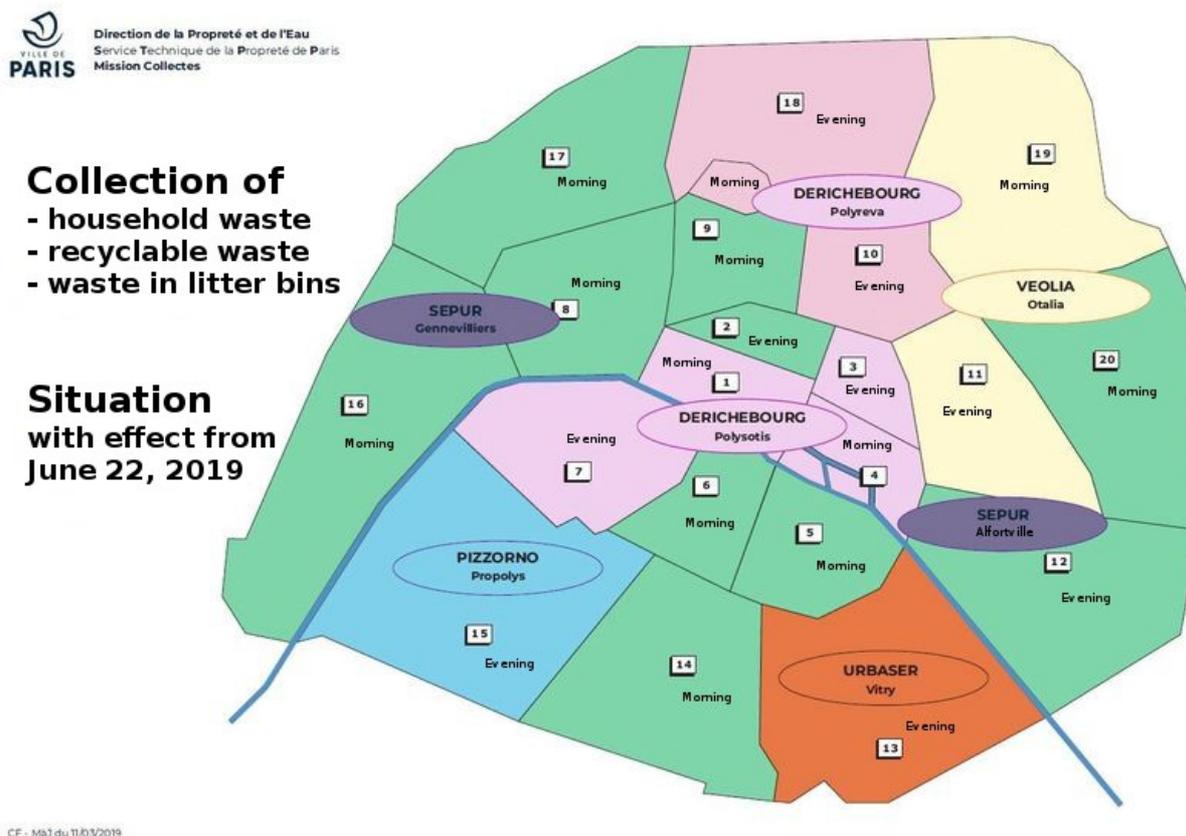
¹ All first names have been changed to preserve respondents’ anonymity. We would like to thank Lucile Quéré and Didier Demazière, who respectively participated and supervised the field survey on which this article is based. We also thank Stéphane Tonnelat for his valuable comments.

² Source: Mairie de Paris, Direction de la Propreté et Environnement (City of Paris, Environment and Sanitation Department).

³ The city of Paris is divided into 20 administrative districts called *arrondissements*, which spiral out from the center of the city. The central *arrondissements* (1st–4th) are considerably smaller and less populous than the outer ones. Note that the city of Paris proper (population 2.2 million) covers only a small part of the wider Paris metropolitan area (population 12.6 million).

⁴ See (in French): www.paris.fr/services-et-infos-pratiques/environnement-et-espaces-verts/dechets/la-collecte-44.

Figure 1. Current organization of waste collection in Paris



Source: www.paris.fr/services-et-infos-pratiques/environnement-et-espaces-verts/dechets/la-collecte-44#la-collecte-des-ordures-menageres_5.

Our field survey, conducted in the fall of 2013, is based on interviews with loaders and drivers.⁵ Before June 2014, the organization of garbage collection in Paris was as follows: the 2nd, 5th, 6th, 8th, 9th, 12th, 14th, 16th and 17th *arrondissements* were managed by the city, while collection in the rest of Paris was at that time subcontracted to three private companies: Derichebourg (then responsible for seven *arrondissements*), Veolia (two *arrondissements*), and Pizzorno (responsible at the time for one *arrondissement*). Regular changes in the organization of waste collection explain the variations over time in the geographical distribution of garbage collectors' work, which we detail here based on their narratives.

While those workers employed by private service providers typically report taking these jobs on a temporary basis, owing to a lack of alternative work, those employed directly by the city value the job security this work provides and in some cases are committed to forging a career in this sector. All the garbage collectors interviewed are male, and the majority are first- and second-generation immigrants from North and sub-Saharan Africa, especially in the private sector.⁶

Depending on whether they work for the city or private service providers, garbage collectors go about out their "rounds" differently. In the public sector, rounds always last seven hours regardless of circumstances, whether early in the morning or late in the evening, and includes street-sweeping duties, and sometimes even snow-clearing duties in winter. In the private sector, the principle of "finished then home" applies: the round lasts as long as it takes to collect all the garbage in a given

⁵ We conducted eight in-depth interviews (with six loaders and two drivers), as well as informal conversations in the streets, workshops and depots with some 20 other garbage collectors (in the 2nd, 3rd, 7th, 8th, 10th, 16th, 18th and 19th *arrondissements* of Paris, and in the inner suburb of Ivry-sur-Seine, immediately to the southeast of Paris proper).

⁶ As a basis for a comprehensive and qualitative analysis, this sample does not claim to be representative of the gendered and ethnoracial composition of the Parisian garbage-collector population, nor of their employment conditions in the public or private sector.

sector. Garbage collectors are subject to rules designed to preserve Paris's image, and service providers risk their contract with the city if they fail to abide by them. Mehdi, who had been a driver for a year after previously having been a loader, explains the system of checks (and sanctions) set up by the city for subcontracting companies, and how it affects employees:

If we don't change the bags in the litter bins when we see they're full, if we don't change them, we all lose points; if we don't have gloves on, we lose points; if we're not wearing our [high-visibility] vests, we lose points; if we don't follow all the safety rules, we lose points... Then there are the fines: 500 euros, 1,000 euros... the cheapest is 250 euros. That's if you forget a glove—right or left.

Parisians' attitudes to the "green uniform"

In contradiction with the idea of invisibility that is often attached to service personnel (Arborio 2012; Goffman 2013 [1963]), our respondents recall lots of discussions with inhabitants, who most of the time are friendly and grateful, but sometimes less courteous. Mehdi, who works in the 10th, 18th and 19th *arrondissements*, talks about the variety of contact he has had with residents and emphasizes the consideration and recognition he receives:

Well, we talk with everyone: shopkeepers, security guards, sometimes passersby stop to ask us questions... We're really respected, we're liked, and people talk to us a lot—a lot. People talk to us all the time, you know. I didn't think it would be the case either, but people do. They like it, you know. You can tell that... they really take notice of what we do. We come into contact with everyone. Sometimes you even get hit on, that's how far it can go.

Fabrice, a city employee in the 2nd *arrondissement*, highlights a social utility to his work, pointing out that, in the early morning, prostitutes are reassured by his presence when his round passes them. A former police officer, he jokes about people's preference for his green uniform over the blue one he used to wear. Nicolas, a city employee in the 2nd *arrondissement*, confirms this: "Yeah, in terms of likeability, I think we're just below the fire brigade. Yeah, it's the outfit that does it, I think, the color..."

The job also offers an opportunity to experience a level of diversity that our respondents appreciate. Saïd, of Algerian origin, works for a service provider in the 10th, 18th and 19th *arrondissements*. He talks positively about encounters with "all types of races, all types of people." Bouna works for a service provider in the 10th *arrondissement*. He emphasizes his ability to adapt to all sorts of interpersonal situations: "I'm a simple person. I'm... with everyone. I'm, uh... all-terrain, you know, like a 4×4! (*laughs*)"

Relationships are more ambiguous with people who, like them, collect waste. Loaders talk about both "homeless people" and "people in suits," who collect objects as part of a militant approach against waste. Mehdi recalls an "old lady," who would empty and rifle through the garbage in front of his team throughout their round, all the time "a building ahead of us. She would go through all the bins, from six or seven apartment buildings. It was a pain; she would tip everything out onto the street!" Even though they insist that it does not affect them and that they take no notice of looks they might get, loaders mention situations of conflict. From Dominique, a city employee: "Uh... I think there are also a lot of people who don't like us. We block the streets, we piss everyone off"; and from Bouna: "Say you encounter someone on the street, and then they insult you, it may well be that you haven't done anything. Especially us, we work in public places. You know, you might come into contact with a guy, something like that, and he's not quite right in his head... he gets angry over nothing. But you mustn't take it to heart."

Hierarchies of neighborhoods and bins

Through their refuse-collection work and their contact with residents, garbage collectors form part of a specific geography of Parisian neighborhoods in terms of culture and wealth. Bouna lists the nationalities of the 10th *arrondissement*⁷ based on observations of its inhabitants:

Black people, we're not all the same. We can tell, we know who is who. When I see a Zairian, I know he's Zairian. An Ivorian's an Ivorian. Well, there are also some Malians, but not many. It's mixed, but the majority are Ivorians. OK, there are some Malians here, some Guineans there, some Zairians, but most of them... around Rue du Château d'Eau, Boulevard de Strasbourg, all that... most are Ivorians.

Loaders perceive wealth levels through the prism of garbage. Ali, a city employee, sometimes salvages items from the garbage (despite this being prohibited), especially in the neighborhoods he considers to be rich:

It depends on the area. There are neighborhoods where you'll find beautiful things, and there are neighborhoods where there's rotten things. You go to the 16th or the 8th [affluent *arrondissements* in the west of Paris], to the rich neighborhoods, to Marne-la-Vallée [a new town in the east of the Paris metropolitan area], places like that, I've worked there. I'm telling you, the people there, they're unbelievable: cell phones, brand-new stuff, iPhones, all kinds of things... You find all sorts. All sorts, all sorts, all sorts.

Conversely, the garbage collectors highlight certain neighborhoods whose more "difficult" bins reveal the poverty that exists there. They mention the hardship of working in certain parts of the 18th *arrondissement*,⁸ which they try to avoid. Alhassane, who works for a private service provider, regrets not being able to escape the streets littered with rubbish in the Château Rouge neighborhood, known for its markets:

But the 18th, wow... no, no, jeez, there's some shit there. There are people who don't want to work there. Oh yeah, since we're temps, we don't have a choice. Whenever we're needed at Château Rouge, we work. Because it's hard there. There's a lot to clear up. So that's why there are people who don't want to.

A city employee for eight years, Fabrice previously worked in this neighborhood, which he describes as "hell" during night-time rounds: "So, later, well, I got to know the 18th, one of the most difficult areas, a lot of... how to put it... a lot of drug addicts, people who are...". Mehdi prefers to respect the ban on salvaging items from the trash because of how much the poverty of the neighborhood was reflected in its bins: "You really don't joke around with that. And I won't lie, in districts like the 18th, I'm not sure what you could possibly salvage. On the contrary, we want to get that stuff in the truck as quickly as possible without looking too closely..."

As the rounds progress, moving from bin to bin and truck to truck, the garbage collectors contribute to the life of the city just as much as they clean it. They do small favors for residents, give directions to passersby, engage in impromptu conversations, enjoy a coffee with local traders. They participate in neighborhood life by playing a reassuring role, especially at night. City employees and temporary staff with heterogeneous social and professional statuses share this work with each change to the city's service contracts. Automatic collection systems, such as underground containers and pneumatic pipes, would have difficulty replacing this human presence, which can be likened to "public characters" (Jacobs 2011 [1981]). Paris's garbage collectors are more than just cleaners that can be replaced by machines; ultimately, they are caretakers of the public space.

⁷ The 10th *arrondissement*, immediately to the north of central Paris, includes the Canal Saint-Martin, two major rail terminals (Gare du Nord and Gare de l'Est), a number of *faubourgs* (old working-class districts developed along a main street) such as the bustling Faubourg Saint-Denis (described here by Bouna) and Faubourg du Temple, and the areas bordering the north side of Place de la République and the south side of Place Stalingrad.

⁸ The 18th *arrondissement*, in the north of Paris, includes relatively well-off neighborhoods in the west (such as Montmartre and Clignancourt) and significantly poorer neighborhoods in the east and north (such as La Goutte d'Or, Château Rouge, La Chapelle, and the areas around the various "Portes" ("Gates") along the city boundary).

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