

An Exit from the Garbage City: Resistance and “Chikonko” in Zambian Waste Management

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Everyday resistance is a grass-roots practice enacted by citizens across different societal contexts to voice displeasure. One such context is solid waste management. In Mtendere township in Lusaka, Zambia, the management and disposal of waste has become a form of grass-roots politics of everyday resistance. In our study, residents are disappointed with the ways they are treated by their City Council and its units overseeing supposedly new ‘participatory’ solid waste management processes, which do not work as they should. Instead spaces meant for participative processes are closed, distorted, or controlled by the power elite.

Through interviews and field studies with Lusaka residents, our study demonstrates the ways citizens voice their displeasures with the waste management regime. The logic of their resistance is one of ‘everyday’ hidden resentment and withdrawals from the public sphere and spaces they see as unjust or exclusionary. We describe this phenomenon in terms of exits from public spaces and retreat into counterpublics. Exiting and possible re-entries into the public sphere are influenced by distrust and trust of the public regime. Residents resist the regime for managing waste mostly in disguised patterns or exits. Although Lusaka residents sometimes protested via the media against poor waste management, typically they voiced displeasure by everyday direct action of dumping waste: resulting into huge heaps of garbage that earned Lusaka a cynical garbage city name. The Lusaka City Council is shown to respond to their resistance with arrests and legal threats. All in all, actions by residents and City Council

have replaced a public participation over waste with non-deliberative actions on either side.

In particular, residents respond to actions of the City Council by keeping things to themselves, circulating rumors, going to [social and mainstream] media or communicating through *chikonko* (acts of displeasure). They have partly exited the public sphere and formed counterpublic spheres where they collude in resisting the system, but also secure everyday liveability apart from it. Their exit from the public sphere also becomes breeding ground for further rumors and distrust. In this way, their resistance has widened the gap between citizens and authority and resulted in conflicts between neighbors around reporting noncompliance.

The ‘*chikonko*’ acts of displeasure in the context of waste management add to everyday resistance literature. The phenomenon describes how an everyday practice (taking one’s trash out) transforms into a political practice as the actions taken by citizens draw them in out of the public. . The waste management situation in Lusaka also shows how residents leave the public platforms offered to them and create informal networks in their counterpublics to cope with the situation. When understood in a Habermasian framework, the acts communicate injustices in the systems and the will of residents to correct them. We argue that resistance scholars should understand exits from repressive regime as the drive towards openings for more inclusive politics.