The social, anthropological and political questions posed by the provision of a public urban-sanitation and waste-management service appeared to me to offer an excellent opportunity for the analysis of an everyday situation of urban governance. Indeed, far from the normative or ideological approaches to governance, conveyed inter alia by the World Bank, this paper attempts to explore empirically the implications for local governance of the complex social relationship between urban dwellers and the cleanliness and healthiness of the city’s public spaces. A social-anthropological study conducted over a period of two years in Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso made it possible to identify and describe in detail the local actors involved in the area of urban sanitation, their concerns and interaction. However, in this chapter I would like to focus on a particularly interesting point that emerged from the study, i.e. the symbolic political legitimacy that the management of the urban public space by the services representing the municipal authority has for urban dwellers. In the social exchange underlying this political bond, the municipal services division is responsible for the provision of public sanitation services and, in return, citizens must show appropriate public spirit in relation to the disposal of their waste. However, the study revealed that this civic exchange has long been characterised by a systematic failure to meet expectations on both sides. It emerged quickly from the fieldwork that the relationship with the city’s sanitation system and general cleanliness had become one of the main modes of expression of a latent political confrontation between a municipal power, whose legitimacy is disputed, and the citizens, who are apparently determined to resist the latter in the same way that they previously resisted state despotism:

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Because the Town Hall has difficulties in paying for sanitation services, it cannot have the septic tanks emptied regularly. Thus, infuriated residents throughout the city started setting the contents of the tanks alight and, as a result, rendered them unusable. H.Y., Sanitation Service, Municipality of Bobo-Dioulasso (study 2001).

The process of the democratisation of political life and decentralisation of state power has not yet produced the expected effects; nothing appears to have changed:

It used to be the state, today, it is the municipality, but nothing really appears to have changed in terms of power! (Resident of sector 17)

First and foremost, you try to ‘establish your reputation’ here. You get involved in politics to fulfil your own aims, not those of the city! B. school principal, sector 12 (Niénéta), former Municipal Councillor (General Secretary of the RDA (Rassemblement Démocratique Africain, i.e. African Democratic Rally).

Nowadays, people consider—rightly or wrongly—that the various means of political expression (party membership, the electoral procedure, recourse to the courts, organisation of ideological debate) remain largely under the direct or indirect control of the local authorities and the majority party, the CDP (Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès, i.e. Congress for Democracy and Progress):

The choice [of candidates] for the elections is not always based on ability or competence; we still have a single-party logic and political candidature is motivated by daily expense allowances (per diem) and other advantages. I belong to the PDP. People have no political conviction—perhaps because of religion and fatalism it teaches. Within families, the father, the head of the household, still decides on behalf of all the family who it will vote for. S. retired official of the Abidjan-Niger Railway (RAN), spokesman of the residents of the “Brakina” canal, member of the opposition PDP party (Parti pour la Démocratie et le Progrès, i.e. Party for Democracy and Progress), candidate in the general election of 1998 (Study 2001).

Moreover, the majority of local elected representatives (parliamentary deputies, mayors and municipal councillors) were discredited by their involvement in various forms of misappropriation of public property, the most spectacular being the stockpiling of housing plots in recent municipal developments. This capital in the form of “urban residential plots” became the main source of resources for the local elected representatives and for the officials in charge of the decentralised administrative services affected by the allocation of plots (land register, urban development, public works etc.). It also feeds and maintains the