Citizenship, Marginality and Urban (In)security in Contemporary Africa

Edited by

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Citizenship, marginality and urban (in)security in contemporary Africa: introduction

Kieran Mitton and Ibrahim Abdullah

Abstract: We introduce four contributions to this special issue exploring insecurity in contemporary African cities, drawing on case studies from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Somalia, and South Africa. We problematise alarmist and decontextualised discourses surrounding Africa's rapid urbanisation, identifying common findings across empirically rich contributions ranging from gangs and vigilantes to migration, mobile phone technology, and community (dis)connections to basic services. We show that marginal residents traverse blurred boundaries between formal/informal, legal/illegal, and acceptable/subversive in their quotidian struggle for survival, arguing that by reifying rather than reducing structural inequalities, Africa's growing cities force many into 'insurgent' forms of citizenship. Importantly, this is rarely entirely oppositional or supportive of the state and status quo: it occupies ambiguous social space as both resistance and collusion. The complicity of some state elements in producing transgressive or informal modes of urban governance and services underlines our key conclusion: addressing Africa's urban insecurity requires political change: technological and infrastructural progress alone is insufficient.

Keywords: City, citizenship, contestation, insurgent citizenship, marginality, transgressive citizenship, social movements, urbanisation, Africa.

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Introduction

In the early 21st century, humanity crossed a threshold to become a primarily urban-dwelling species for the first time in its history. Over recent decades, a series of predictions for the near future have provided jaw-dropping statistics that point to unprecedented growth in cities. Such forecasts have fuelled a resurgence of work that has sought to revisit fundamental questions concerning human security and development, reviving Malthusian debates over the potential impacts of mass migration, resource scarcity, and over-population. What challenges, alongside the many benefits, does urbanisation present? Where will these be felt most acutely, and how might they be met?

Africa has the fastest-growing urban population in the world; it grew from 27 million in 1950 to 567 million in 2015 (OECD 2020: 14). By 2050, sub-Saharan Africa is expected to add a further 1 billion to the world's population—more than half of the world's predicted total growth—with most of that growth absorbed by cities (UN DESA 2019: 1, 37). It is little surprise then that Africa stands at the forefront of concerns over rapid urbanisation.

In many respects, the challenges of rapid urban growth are already being felt in the world's youngest continent. Media reporting of Lagos, Nigeria—the go-to example—habitually warns of the potentially dire consequences of the mega-city's unchecked urban growth (for example, see Princewill 2021; Vidal 2018). Already estimated to comprise a population of between 15 and 21 million in 2021, most predictions expect Lagos to double in size by 2050 and it could ultimately become the world's largest metropolis, prone to flooding, criminality, and in large swathes ungovernable. Unlike in other parts of the world, urbanisation in Lagos shows no sign of slowing. Growth has been largely unplanned, driven by rural-to-urban migration, and epitomised by booming informal 'slum' communities (Gandy 2006). This is where the majority of the young urban population live, eking out their survival through informal economic activities. Is this the fate of African cities and their residents?

The defining characteristic of much reporting and scholarship on African urbanisation is the stark observation that, unlike in many parts of the northern hemisphere, the cities in sub-Saharan Africa have grown much faster than their infrastructure (UN DESA 2019: 3). In fact, urbanisation has taken place without the benefits of economic and infrastructural development, and so, the warnings go, Africa's urban future is one fraught with risks (Hove *et al.* 2013). Already, 189 million sub-Saharans live in the continent's slums where they experience pronounced disparities in life expectancy, health, and well-being (UN DESA 2019: 4). Gaps between the rich and poor, the elites and the marginalised, may grow wider; African cities may become bifurcated worlds of downtown high-rises surrounded by sprawling, ungovernable slums.

While scholarship is increasingly turning to the question of how Africa is being affected by urbanisation, and the articles in this issue are a part of this contribution, there remains a tendency to approach this topic through reductive pre-set frames that have long characterised analysis of Africa. Peace and conflict studies, for example, have tended to remain state-centric and overlook urban insecurity when not directly linked to civil conflict or armed groups. This is epitomised in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where—as Hendriks (2021) notes in this issue—analysis typically reproduces a 'standard imagery of violence', which views it as taking place in rural areas, involving armed groups. This has led to pronounced neglect by peacebuilding research of significant forms of insecurity and everyday criminal violence affecting urban Eastern DRC (see also Verweijen 2019). Recent work on Sierra Leone bears similar findings: a preoccupation with peacebuilding and 'post-conflict' discourses has left the growth of street gangs largely untouched by scholarship and policymakers (see Abdullah 2020; Mitton forthcoming).

A related challenge in scholarship and reporting is the almost reflexive default to urban pessimism, with discussion intersecting with concerns over the so-called 'youth bulge' and neo-Malthusian predictions of criminal anarchy, following Robert Kaplan's infamous 1994 'The Coming Anarchy' essay. As such, urban pessimism has tended to converge with Afro-pessimism to paint nightmarish pictures of sprawling African slums, rife with disease and danger (Warah 2011). A major criticism of much of the environmental security and New Barbarism work of the 1990s was its tendency to depoliticise conflicts and contexts in favour of a reductive material determinism, compounded by dehumanising portrayals of marginalised youths. In focusing on the material impacts of urbanisation, particularly of resource scarcity, climate change, and migration, much recent literature may be challenged for the same tendency: vitally important underlying social and political conditions are frequently obscured. Forms of informal order and bottom-up governance are missed due to a fixation on state absence and use of misleading catch-all terms such as 'ungoverned spaces'. What has been lacking in such accounts is deeper engagement with and understanding of local historical, social, and political conditions across Africa's varied urban spaces.

More nuanced analysis need not gloss over the challenges that urbanisation presents (see for example Olajide *et al.* 2018). Indeed, it would be equally reductive and misleading to reimagine African cities as uniform engines of progress and development. Rather, analysis can help to better qualify the challenges, countering the tendency to essentialise insecurity and under-development as an inherently African problem for which few solutions can be found. As with cities across the globe, African cities are both potential drivers of economic development and sites at which pronounced inequalities and political fault lines come into stark relief. A glimpse of the cities under discussion in this issue will quickly dispatch any inclination towards naive urban optimism. These contributions provide empirically anchored insights into the

everyday challenges that exist in cities across Africa. They temper optimism around urban development (including technological progress—see Chonka & Bakonyi 2021) by exposing the extent to which urban trajectories are intimately tied to underlying political and social structural configurations, which growth may entrench rather than challenge. In its detailed exploration of cases from Ghana, the DRC, Somalia, and South Africa, this issue contributes to addressing the lacuna in knowledge of how contrasting African urban spaces affect everyday security and development for their citizens, and how cities and 'citizenship' are being made and remade by those surviving on the margins (Holston 1999; Simone & Abouhani 2005; Brown 2015).

African cities and contested citizenship

The increase in population, largescale rural-to-urban migration, and rapid urbanisation and proliferation of mega-cities—all post-colonial markers—continue to shape and re-shape African cities in complex and contradictory ways. If urbanisation had historically hinged on economic growth and rapid industrialisation, the veritable push factors that arguably made that equation possible in the Global North have not been replicated nor reproduced in the Global South. This unintended decoupling of urbanisation from economic growth and industrialisation has resulted in the growth of a ballooned parallel economy, the now infamous informal sector, within which the ever-increasing numbers of migrants to Africa's booming cities make their living. Thus, the 'size of the city's economy', Mike Davis pointedly observed, 'often bears surprisingly little relationship to its population size' (Davis 2006: 13). It is within this crucible of a ballooned parallel economy alongside a formal economy, not tied to the creation of employment, that the struggle for citizenship in Africa's numerous cities takes place (Cooper 1983). How this struggle unfolds in the single city nation, as in Sierra Leone or Botswana, compared to the mega-city nation, as in Nigeria or South Africa, is immaterial (Freund 2007). In the words of the youths who constitute the bulk of those who troop to Africa's numerous cities—those who subsist cheek by jowl in informal settlements without modern amenities—life has become an intricate activity centred on the existential reality of *se debrouillage /desenrascar a vida/ getting by* (Honwana 2012: 4, 62, 86).[1]

It is this hustling in the city—from Accra to Baidoa from Durban to Kivu—which connects all the interventions in this special issue. And these four interventions reveal disturbing aspects of what the city has become all over Africa: swathes of urban spaces occupied by city dwellers who rent them out to migrants struggling to become

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[1] For a comprehensive survey of African cities see the following: Mabogunje (1990) and Coquery-Vidrovitch (1991). The most recent survey is Freund (2007); see also Simone & Abouhani (2005).

insiders/citizens, as in Somalia; well-to-do shopkeepers, struggling hawkers, and afflu-
ent traders, willing to finance a counter-force, the anti-gang, to protect them from
maibobo (street boys) who rob and assault them, as in Goma, Eastern DRC; citi-
zens on the edge in post-Apartheid South Africa who cannot access the wherewithal
of modernity, water and power supply, except by subverting the normative order of
civilised society; and in Ghana, party toughs, financed and supported by leading pol-
iticians, masquerading as an alternative to state apparatus to protect sectional party
interests. These all too familiar transgressive instances reference the conundrum that
is contested citizenship in contemporary Africa and lay bare this existential reality in a
crucial site, namely the city, the very abode where citizens are consistently being made,
remade, and unmade (Holston 1999: 3–7). The making and unmaking of citizens and
citizenship, with and without rights, constitutes the story of African cities writ large.

Thus at issue here are the overlapping public concerns of security, law and order,
and the ultimate authority of state officials. Multiple transgressions as in the case
of the *maibobo* invoke the total breakdown of formal law and order and the acqui-
escence by state officials of an alternate order: 'street authorities' that take over, if
only temporarily to replace an errant state. Such concessions from above, if not total
abdication, underline the informality and extralegality that defines and even rules
over certain urban spaces in contemporary Africa. That the anti-gang machine could
offer protection and also punish 'offenders' speaks to the existence of multiple areas
of counter-authority in Africa's insecure urban spaces that are subjected to multiple
contestations. Similarly, the illegal electoral and security role of vigilantes in Ghana's
deadly bi-polar politics, a four-year do-or-die ritualised performance around power—
the electoral contest between the National Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National
Democratic Congress (NDC)—could be read as a brazen attempt to re-make order
and 'legality' in their own interests by subverting state authority during the demo-
cratic electoral cycle. As in the Kivu case, such subversive acts are undertaken with the
consent of certain state officials who recruit and arm these men, and in both cases the
intervention is not intended as a replacement of legitimate authority. Rather, they are
instances of tempo-spatial displacement of constituted authority in favour of subal-
tern interests in alliance with officialdom from above. Such subversive interventions
not only undermine state authority but also create patronage openings for marginal
actors with sectional interests aligned to state officials. Subverting the law has become
a normative pathway to another form of citizenship—subversive, or insurgent—in
contemporary Africa (Brown 2015; Holston 2008).

There is room here for disorder—an underlying feature of most African cities,
from Lagos to Kinshaha to Brazzaville and Johannesburg. If state officials in Ghana
refuse to accept the findings of a legally constituted commission of inquiry, set up to
probe the activities of a security outfit that operates outside the law, what does this tell
us about the state and the rule of law? And if informal settlement dwellers in South

Africa court assistance from bona fide power sector workers to assist in providing 'legitimate' power and water connections, what does this say about bottom-up transgression to access basic human needs? Here are two examples of transgressions from above and below—the Ghanaian state disavowing its own findings in favour of sectional party interests and citizens in South Africa transgressing to access basic human needs. The city is not only the veritable site where the acceptable and unacceptable overlap and play out, irrespective of the normative order; it is also the milieu where state officials switch sides to undermine or re-shape the normative order from above. Understanding the subversion of the normative order from above is therefore central to understanding the dynamics of subalternity from below.

Barriers to belonging and connection

In each of the articles in this issue, we are moved to consider the nature of belonging in the modern African city and question how such key terms as citizenship, (dis)connection, and legitimacy are understood, achieved, and contested. It is clear that paradoxes and ambiguities abide in many of these terms. In her study of vigilante groups in Accra, Bjarnesen (2021) notes that young party soldiers tend to be drawn from marginalised sections of the population; their political mobilisation is an attempt to connect with political patrons who might bring them closer to participation in mainstream social and economic life. Their frustration at broken promises shows that, perversely, the result of their labour is typically greater marginalisation as they are demonised as a threat to national security. Nevertheless, they often do achieve a degree of 'local legitimacy' as they cast themselves as protectors of the community. In his discussion of the anti-gangs of Goma, Hendriks (2021) likewise carefully unpacks the self-image of members—similarly drawn from among marginalised youths—as they portray themselves as protectors of local communities against everyday crime and violence committed by the *maibobo*. They claim legitimacy both as providers of security and as *watoto ya Goma* (children of Goma)—a more easily acquired notion of local citizenship than origin-based 'sons of the soil' that incorporates the diverse origins and ethnicities of the urban poor, which is a dynamic seen elsewhere in Africa (Diouf in Holston 1999).

In the cities of Baidoa, Bosaaso, and Mogadishu, the issue of belonging and connection is critical to the survival of the displaced in the new urban Somalia. Chonka & Bakonyi (2021) explore the ways in which these populations, defined in many respects by their marginality, utilise mobile phone technology to mitigate these challenges, connecting to social and financial networks locally as well as globally. However, their interviews with those on the margins reveal a critical point: possession of a mobile phone alone does not automatically empower the socially excluded. Essential here,

and across the cases discussed in this issue, are the underpinning social relations, power differentials, and economic and political constraints that may act as barriers to attempts to connect and overcome marginality. The transformative potential of new technologies, as with urban growth more broadly, is contingent on more fundamental political change.

In Durban, South Africa, notions of citizenship and belonging are linked directly to access to basic services. Mottiar (2021) shows us that a legacy of resistance to Apartheid remains in the perceptions of Umlazi township residents that access to water and electricity is more than simply a means of survival; it is a means of claiming 'genuine citizenship'. The case of Umlazi impels us to question not only the legitimacy or legality of 'insurgent' self-connecting to utilities, but also the very legitimacy of the state that may itself represent a barrier to belonging or connection. As Schnitzer (2016) has demonstrated in her study of 'Democracy's Infrastructure', the denial of poor citizens' access to basic necessities like water takes several forms in South Africa: from the introduction of water meters to the non-existence of legal connection because of residents' inability to pay. Likewise, the local legitimacy claimed by, and in many respects afforded to, self-imposed 'street authorities' cannot be understood without reference to the perceived failures of the state and establishment. In Accra, Bjarnesen (2021) notes that public support for vigilantism often reflects popular resentment over the perceived procedural injustice of the nation-state and its legal apparatus. Likewise in Goma, when talking about state security services an anti-gang member puts it simply to Hendriks (2021): 'we are there because they fail'. The failings or sheer absence of the state is not only the central issue around which the Somali case revolves; it is also the key variable that unites all the cities examined in this special issue. Thus, for the ubiquitous marginalised population, taking action, whether as self-protection or self-connection, becomes a means of both mitigating and resisting the neglect of the state.

This issue also cautions against taking the failures of the state as evidence that informal and illicit actors are purely oppositional; each context belies a far more ambiguous situation than state versus non-state, formal versus informal authority. The cases from the DRC, Ghana, Somalia, and South Africa show that these boundaries are fluid and often blurred. Goma's anti-gangs do not so much propose a new political order as seek to be included within it; their collaboration with the law suggests their yearning for inclusivity. Similarly, Accra's vigilantes may often challenge the state and the rule of law, yet they occupy an ambiguous space in which the establishment is complicit in, and seeks to prosper from, their activities. In both contexts, marginal urban youths do not seek revolution so much as escape from their marginal status and incorporation into the mainstream of political life. In rejection of their exclusion, urban actors in the cases discussed in this issue seek to change, rather than replace, the political status quo that has marginalised them. Drawing on Foucault in

her discussion of self-connecting in Umlazi, Mottiar (2021) brings this out through the lens of 'counter conduct', helping us to see how illegal actions by residents should be understood as forms of subdued protest and resistance.

Contesting marginality

Multiple transgressions define the activities or way of life of subaltern/marginal citizens in African cities, and subverting the normative order constitutes a key pathway to contesting marginality in their everyday existence. This 'counter conduct' to use the Foucauldian framing should not be read as implying that subalterns/marginals are inherently criminal, but rather that making a living or eking an existence in the ballooned informal sector without license, without 'owning' a shack in an informal settlement, or without power or water supply, seemingly puts one outside the law. Internally displaced individuals in Somalia's urban landscape inevitably crisscross the legal and the illegal unconsciously in their everyday life. Marginals are therefore those whose existence compels them to embrace a mode of making a living in the city not built for them that borders on transgression. This is conveyed to varying degrees in all the case studies here: *maibobos* and the anti-gang in Goma, Eastern Congo; vigilantes in Accra; internally displaced city dwellers fleeing from drought, war, and poverty in Baidoa, Mogadishu, and Bosaaso; and urban residents below the poverty line in South Africa.

There are many forms of contestation covered in this issue, among them the striking adoption or idealisation of forms of hypermasculinity surrounding assumed rebel identities: the insurgent, the bandit, the gangster. In Ghana we meet the 'macho men' who trade their capacity for violence for political sponsorship, an attempted counter to poverty, powerlessness, and marginality (Bjarnesen 2021). In the DRC, as in many urban contexts around the world, we find similar notions surrounding hypermasculinity among the anti-gang members, who seek to embody and practise the strength, fearlessness, and fearsomeness of martial artists and heroes from action movies. Yet Hendriks (2021) deftly shows us that the popularity and identification of some marginal urban youths with these ideal rebel figures is not simply about their capacity and reputation for violence, though it is certainly a significant factor; they are also symbols of restraint, discipline, paternal protective care, and self-control in a treacherous and disorderly world. Once again, we find that the ways in which urban insecurity affects and shapes identity, including around the expression and reimagining of gendered roles, refuses simplistic reduction. This sensitivity to nuance is strongly conveyed in Chonka & Bakonyi's (2021) discussion of the relationship between mobile phone ownership and gender, both in Somalia and more broadly. Whereas hypermasculinity may be instrumentalised by youths to escape or challenge exclusion in Accra

and Goma, in cities such as Mogadishu, Baidoa, and Bosaaso, gender norms may severely deepen the marginality of internally displaced women and girls. While mobile technology may be seen by external humanitarian actors as a potential way to overcome, or at least contest, structural gender inequalities and power imbalances, placing the world—and in particular, access to financial services—into the hands of marginalised urban African women, the voices of such women tell a different story. Use of phones, and access to the knowledge required to operate them, is itself gendered and often exclusionary. Phones can extend forms of control and surveillance of women by male family members and partners, and as Chonka & Bakonyi's interviewees recount, some internally displaced women may be more likely to go unpaid for their work—a matter of surviving pronounced precarity—when receiving payments over a mobile phone rather than in person. This research thus underlines the importance of listening closely and carefully to what those living on the margins have to say about how they do, and do not, contest their marginality.

Acts of resistance by subalterns are hardly ever seen or interpreted as such—this no doubt constitutes a fundamental flaw in our understanding and interpretation of the individual and collective actions of those whom history might rather forget. Their actions, subtle but not so subtle responses, the stuff of infra-politics, are occasionally dismissed as weapons of the weak. Others are labelled acts of criminality because they challenge established norms and regulations by stretching the boundaries of what is acceptable in society (Thompson 1993; Scott 1990). Their existence in the informal sector, and in some instances as groups of neighbourhood 'toughs' organised to patrol the market and provide protection for traders, may not sit well within the norms of society but is accepted in certain contexts where state power is on the retreat and insecurity is rife. Similarly, a political party in power may allow their 'macho men', as in Accra, Ghana, to flex their muscle in furtherance of party interests in an electoral competition so as to access resources and job opportunities. And citizens in informal settlements would bind together to undo their collective marginality by forcefully accessing water and electricity as of right. Even displaced urban dwellers in Baidoa and Mogadishu might assert their individual and collective right to a decent life in a precarious context in a way that begins to question established norms in their favour.

This transgressive milieu within which marginal and not so marginal actors operate is a spatial context within which the legal and the illegal coalesce in a fusion that is not always easily understood. This quotidian swing, traversing the legal and the illegal, the unacceptable and the acceptable, defines the everyday life of the subaltern or marginal in Africa's cities. Boxed to the periphery, mostly in informal settlements without basic amenities, power and water, sanitation and good roads, schools and hospitals, their existence is individually and collectively contoured by acts that seemingly border on the unacceptable. Thus, they are housed in informal settlements without title deeds; they access basic necessities, power and water, via the back door; and

they engage in illegal activities to garner votes for their political parties. Their continued existence in such precarious circumstances raises fundamental questions about the state in which they live and how they get by and continue to reproduce themselves. Precarity, as profoundly clear in the case of Somalia, defines their everyday existence.

A cursory examination of the historicity of the state in these four case studies would complicate the narrative—none of these countries are similar in terms of citizens' rights and state functions. From the extreme there is Somalia and the Congo on the one hand, and Ghana and South Africa on the other. Somalia and Congo have been going through a period of extended state and societal crises during which the state ceased to function in the capacity of a state in particular periods of its existence and in certain areas within its boundaries. Thus, whereas Somalia had been partitioned, and the state ceased to exist in the sense of performing its basic function of law and order, the Democratic Republic of Congo remained as a single entity but with certain regions existing as semi-autonomous entities within the Congolese nation-state. The seeming disintegration and lack of a central authority does affect citizens' livelihoods and responses to occurrences in their immediate environment. This post-colonial trajectory provides the context within which the *maibobo* and its counter-force, the anti-gang, evolved. It also underlines the consequent actions of citizens in exercising their alleged rights within the constraints of a seemingly distant and occasionally non-existent state. Here then is the ideal context for deprived citizens to stretch their actions in making sense of their everyday existence in the absence of a legitimate state authority.

Ghana and South Africa arguably exhibit more functional states with control of their territory, law, and order, but riddled with the obvious shortcomings of non-functional liberal democracies in which those on the periphery do not get to share in the dividends of democracy. The South African state is still grappling with the legacy of Apartheid, and the ANC government is widely seen by its citizens as having woefully failed to right the wrongs of the Apartheid state in material terms. This failure has in turn provided the justification for popular claim-making by Africans around meaningful citizenship in their individual and collective existence (Mottiar 2021; Brown 2015). Their individual and collective resistance, subversive 'counter conduct', could therefore be read as acceptable and legitimate even as they transgress the borders of the unacceptable in accessing basic amenities as of right.

The Ghanaian situation is completely different. Here, in the name of democracy the two major parties have set up similar extra-judicial outfits to provide protection during their competitive four-year electoral cycle. The formation of so-called vigilantes by both parties was clearly outside the normative design. Even so there were contested claims and counter-claims to justify their existence even when their names and modus operandi were a giveaway—they were political gangs established outside the law in the service of their respective parties (Bjarnesen 2021). The NDC had the

Azorka Boys and the NPP had the Bolga Bull Dogs; both claimed they were legitimate party outfits and refused to disband. Here were two parties alternating in governing a state but with no faith in the neutrality of the security apparatus that supposedly exists for the common good. Even when a commission of inquiry's findings ordered that these vigilante groups should be disbanded, in conformity with the established rules, both parties refused.

Maintaining these groups not only empowered the 'macho' urban youths who were recruited and armed by politicians but it also underlined the multiple and conflicting pathways within which marginal youths could access power and patronage by subverting the laid-down democratic process. They therefore embrace the unconstitutional party apparatus to challenge their individual and collective marginality. Operating outside the normative boundaries was clearly socially unacceptable, as articulated by the commission of inquiry; yet, as articulated by those in positions of power and influence who had mobilised them, it was politically tolerable and practically doable because they could get away with it.

Structure versus agency: from transgressive to insurgent citizenship

Displaced citizens eking out an existence on the edge of cities in war-affected nations; gangsters offering protection to merchants constantly harassed by street crime in which the local regular police are arguably complicit; marginal youths aligned with unscrupulous politicians, playing political musclemen and openly violating laid-down rules and procedures; and the peri-urban poor in makeshift abodes, struggling to access the wherewithal of modernity—power supply and drinkable water: what all these disparate actors tell us about the nature of the state, security, and law and order in the city is not unique to Africa. These subaltern actors individually and collectively reference occurrences that have come to symbolise the fallout from globalisation and the now dominant neo-liberal order (see Holston 1999; Armano *et al.* 2017). It is doubly important that these are voices from below—those who are left out, who subsist on the margins, and who employ alternative means to make their voices heard—those knocking on the door of modernity, asking to be allowed to participate as citizens.

Modernity defines and re-defines the city, the abode of the citizen where citizenship has become an intense everyday struggle for the basics of life. Cities are where employment is available, where modern health services are more easily accessed, where education, at whatever level, might be obtained, and where cultural activities are concentrated (Salahub *et al.* 2018). Cities are also the central hub of economic growth generating approximately 80 per cent of global GDP (Salahub *et al.* 2018: 1). In the context of the Global South this translates into a socio-economic powerhouse, a gigantic magnet that attracts migrants from within and across nations. The

UN-Habitat, the key institution within the global body responsible for urbanisation, records a staggering 3 million souls migrating to cities in the Global South every other week (Salahub *et al.* 2018: 1). This mass movement to cities in Africa and Asia is as much the product of internal dynamics within specific nation-states as the product of the overarching external dynamics keyed to globalisation and neo-liberalism in the Global North.

Thus, the impact of globalisation and the hegemonic stature of neo-liberalism as the only viable vehicle to modernity have conduced to form a complex structuration from above that continues to generate poverty, precarity, and crisis in Africa and other areas of the Global South. Structural adjustment policies in Africa have reconfigured development in complex ways that privileges the market against human needs; and market dogma against basic needs now contours everyday life—from education to health to sanitation to infrastructure and housing. Put differently, Africa entered the 21st century at a time when a new global order had enveloped the world in the aftermath of the collapse of the Berlin Wall. This period also coincided with the rolling out of a new liberal democratic project popularly referred to as the second wave of democratisation (see Young; Bates; Van de Walle; Mkandawire in Joseph 1999). It is to how neo-liberalism has reconfigured the political economy of Africa, and how and why the expected growth rate has not translated to trickling prosperity for Africa's growing youth population and urban poor that we must now turn.

The overarching precarity, which the market-driven ideology of neo-liberalism generates, connects easily to Africa's already ballooned informal economy. The massive retrenchment occasioned by structural adjustment has not only streamlined the traditional working classes but has also affected the multiple ways in which labour could flex its muscle or engage capital.[2] So many of Africa's impoverished pastoralists and retrenched workers have headed to major cities in search of making a living. The urban insecurity that this kind of movement generates is visible across contemporary Africa—from Nairobi to Lagos to Addis Ababa to Bamako to Johannesburg.

To understand this trajectory in contemporary Africa we draw on urban theorists who have explored the intersection between urban marginals seeking to access housing, education, health, and other wherewithal of modernity in Africa's cities, and the broadening of those existential struggles around basic rights and entitlements in the city in the form of social movements. From Asef Bayat's notion of the 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary', focusing on everyday forms of resistance in Tehran, to James Holston's insurgent citizenship in Brazil's major city, Sao Paulo, where the housing issue became a central pillar in the struggle for citizenship, we see a bottom-up movement around which social movements emerge to unsettle the urban space by

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[2] The traditional labour unions are only active in few countries in contemporary Africa—Nigeria, South Africa, Egypt, and to a lesser extent Tunisia and Kenya.

agitating for basic rights as citizens (Bayat 2010; 1997; Holston 2008). Here, defiant and popular agency from below confront and occasionally unsettle age-old tradition and structures that gradually give in to demands from NGOs and social movements. Such popular agitation from below underlines the transition from transgressive to insurgent citizenship.[3]

It is tempting at this stage to begin to theorise what could happen if this transition becomes the norm in contemporary Africa. Suffice it to note here that such a transition is already taking place in South Africa and Nigeria—two countries in Africa where this urban unsettling is arguably far advanced. Julian Brown (2015: 6) elaborates on this transition—from transgressive to insurgency citizenship—in South Africa by evoking the existence of two models of citizenship—'one respectable, and founded on the willingness of citizens to participate, and the other disreputable, and insurgent'. The strategies employed by these insurgent movements in South Africa include public protests sanctioned by law—The Regulations of Gatherings Act—which state officials distort by using extra-legal powers to criminalise political expression. Pushed to the wall, popular movements, or 'insurgent citizens' in Brown's formulation, have either aligned themselves with NGOs who occasionally 'provide legal representation' or 'engage in parliamentary and electoral politics' (Brown 2015: 9). The emergence of Abahlali BaseMjondolo,[4] a shack dwellers' organisation in Kwazulu Natal, is representative of the new kind of movements that are transitioning from transgressive to insurgent citizenship.

Abahlali BaseMjondolo (ABM) emerged in 2005 as a response against the high-handed action by state officials against shack dwellers around Kennedy Road in Durban, Kwa-Zulu Natal Province (Brown 2015; Gill 2014). Animated by popular national issues central to the existence of South Africa's wretched of the earth—land, housing, basic services, and the dignity of the deprived—the movement quickly gained traction as it sought to confront violence from above and the absence of municipal governance in Durban. The movement echoed some of the issues around the provision of water services, connection and disconnection, that had gripped Umlazi township discussed in this special issue (see Mottiar 2021). Arguably, the emergence of popular community-based bottom-up movements in South Africa were a direct fallout from the promises made by the African National Congress, which has ruled South Africa since 1994. A million houses was what the ANC promised South Africa's unhoused and shack dwellers in its first term. The goal of completely eradicating slums and informal settlements would be achieved by the end of its fourth term (Gill 2014: 212).

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[3] See the following on social movements in Africa: Mamdani & Wamba-dia-Wamba (1995); Beinin & Vairel (2012); Sylla (2014); Paret *et al.* (2018).

[4] Abahlali BaseMjondolo is a Zulu word meaning 'people who stay in shacks'.

The failure of the ANC to deliver on the housing front together with the constant intimidation and harassment of its members pushed the ABM to experiment with electoral boycott. In a situation where the ruling ANC was a de-facto one-party state, electoral boycott could have been embraced as a mark of anger in the face of their extreme powerlessness to vote the government out of power. As a popular mobilising tool, the slogan 'No Land! No House! No Vote!' could have attracted a massive '99 per cent of nearly thirty thousand local residents' to abstain in the 2006 elections (Dwyer & Zeilig 2012). This in itself does not translate to any substantial win in their favour, but it does suggest the new ways that bottom-up movements were beginning to think and act in their quest for a meaningful alternative to a government not responsive to their basic needs in a supposedly democratic state.

The sustained assault on its membership and leadership—incessant arrests and lawsuits for alleged murder—did not dampen the resolve of the ABM movement or lead it to abandon its principled campaign of electoral boycott. In 2008 they took a bold organisational stride by setting up an office in the Western Cape—the seat of the biggest opposition to the ANC government. From their base in Durban and Cape Town, the movement affirmed its commitment to continuous boycott of local and national elections. 'We are not fooled by party politics. We are very well aware that party politics is a battle between different factions of the elite. ... We remain determined to reject party politics and to build the power of the poor from the ground up' ('Abhalali Western Cape, cited in Brown 2015: 121). Three years later, on the eve of national and provincial elections, the movement would abandon election boycott and declare its support for the opposition Democratic Alliance in Zwa-Zulu Natal. Support for the opposition party, the DA, against the hegemonic ANC would eventually open the democratic space, paving the way for coalition and alliance politics at both local and national levels.

Of the four countries covered in this special issue, South Africa is arguably among the most, if not the most, democratic. But that democracy, which allows for regular free and fair elections, unlike Congo and Somalia, remains trapped in a post-Apartheid trajectory that has made it impossible for the ruling party to deliver on its successive electoral promises. This failure to deliver key dividends of democracy has triggered organised and spontaneous mass movements from below. The emergence of such insurgent movements in a supposedly functioning democracy raises fundamental questions about liberal democracy and the space it accords marginal citizens furthering their individual and collective interests. If an insurgent social movement could coalesce around the dire need for decent housing, then evolve to demand land, and from there graduate to politics by electing to stay away or throw in their support for the opposition, how functional is that democracy? Perhaps there is something to be learned here, namely, that 'social movements are an integral part of functioning

democracies because democratic regimes often do not function well' (Johnston 2014: 159).

Conclusion

The OECD has rightly noted the critical need of 'tailored policies connected to the realities of urban Africa' (OECD 2020: 4); this issue brings some of these realities to light in the hope that greater understanding will lead to better responses to associated challenges. In doing so, it asks us to be wary of broad-brush strokes when using such terms as 'urban Africa', given the importance of local context and the variety of actors and aspects involved across the continent's many different cities. Nevertheless, key themes emerge across the articles of this special issue that, taken together, underline that Africa's urban populations share many similar challenges around contested citizenship and marginality. What citizenship constitutes, and where the boundaries lie between formal and informal, legal and illegal, state and non-state, are called into question. In many instances, subversion of the law has become a normative pathway to a form of insurgent citizenship. This subversion is not solely the action of those at the margins, coming from the direction of 'below'. Rather, this issue shows that we must understand how elites, and those in positions of formal power and authority, are complicit in the creation of informal urban (dis)orders. By extension, a common finding is that simple binaries that split urban actors between 'state' and 'non-state' fail to grasp the interlinkages between those who may on the surface appear in opposition: the street gang and the police, the criminal and the lawmaker. Nevertheless, we must understand the degree to which transgression of law and order in African cities does engender protest, resistance, and counter conduct. Even those who seek incorporation into an existing system through transgressive means, rather than seeking revolution, are in many respects engaged in a critique of that system and its exclusionary nature.

The everyday precarity which those on the urban margins face in the DRC, Ghana, Somalia, and South Africa is undeniable. And it points in no uncertain terms to the limitations of treating urban Africa's problems as fundamentally those of urban growth alone, as technical problems resolved by greater technological and developmental progress. Rather, at the heart of the issue lies the deeply entrenched political and economic structural inequalities that have shaped and continue to shape the landscape of the modern African city, as across much of the Global South. To address the insecurity of those who have been left behind by urban growth, those masses on the margins dwelling in informal settlements, it is necessary to address how those at the 'top'—locally and globally—play central roles in perpetuating and exploiting urban insecurity. In short, only through political change can there be real transformation of Africa's growing cities into engines of progress for all.

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Agents of urban (in)security: contextualising the banning of political vigilantism in Ghana

Mariam Bjarnesen

Abstract: In 2019, a new law banning vigilantism was adopted in the West African nation of Ghana. The law followed years of debate and violent incidents related to the presence of informally mobilised so-called 'political vigilantes', charged with providing security during political events. At first glance, the ridding of such state-competing elements through legal measures appears unproblematic and in line with democratic values. However, as this article argues, by drawing on the case study of Ghana and the pre-2020 election phase, such legal actions against non-state actors can be problematic and, in the worst case, constitute a threat to security and stability if public trust in authorities and formal state security providers is not sufficiently solid. Grounded in a broader discussion on security in fragile contexts and urban centres on the African continent, this article analyses the consequences of banning vigilantism where formal security provision is weak or not fully trusted.

Keywords: Political vigilantism, foot soldiers, Ghana, election-related violence.

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Introduction

No matter whether formal security providers are weak, unable, or perhaps even unwilling to cater for their citizens' everyday protection, people will not linger in a security vacuum. In such a context, people will turn to others who seek to fill the void. Non-state security actors, including those at times referred to as vigilantes, are often accused of undermining the state, causing mob violence and furthering insecurity. At the same time, vigilantism has been acknowledged as a justifiable alternative for citizens seeking protection in weak or predatory states (see for example Abrahams 1987; Buur 2006; Kantor & Persson 2011; Kyed 2018). While questions of impunity and the lack of rule of law are not easily overlooked, such groups can, and do, form symbiotic relationships with state institutions and unofficially provide security alongside formal security actors (Buur & Jensen 2004; Abrahams 1987; Buur 2006; Chabal & Daloz 1999; Baker 2008; Kirsch & Grätz 2010). Regardless of their composition or grounds for mobilisation, vigilantism is undoubtedly a complex phenomenon and the actions of vigilante groups and their effect on security remains highly contested, not least in urban African settings.

The complexity of vigilantism is visible in the findings of Helene Maria Kyed (2018), who uses the concept of 'street authority' while studying community policing in Mozambique and Swaziland. Kyed argues that street authority relies on the capacity for swift, direct actions, often through violent means, to enact order on the streets. The phenomenon emerges in urban contexts where poor urban citizens mistrust the state and where there is a preference for immediate outcomes due to livelihood uncertainties, low security and difficulties expressing grievances through official political channels. However, as Kyed points out, informal security providers can constitute more than an alternative to state police. They can also become politically significant, for instance to politicians who enrol the groups to advance their own political agenda (Kyed 2018: 19). This unavoidably leads to questions of whether, or perhaps when, such actors are best understood as agents of security or insecurity, with their often illegal, yet sometimes perceived as legitimate, practice. In emerging democracies, tensions are often particularly heightened during times of elections. Certain groups or minorities, perhaps tied together by ethnic background, religious or political views, or socio-economic status, may feel especially vulnerable. During such occasions, the mobilisation of informal groups by political actors is not uncommon. As noted by Burchard (2015: 19), in her analysis of electoral violence in Africa, there are many instances in which political actors mobilise supporters or hire gangs to terrorise electoral actors. Yet as addressed in this article, even if electoral victory is the ultimate aim behind such mobilisation, the use of these groups varies and may or may not include violence or intimidation. Against such a backdrop, a discussion of if, when, and how states should respond to these non-state actors becomes relevant. At first glance, the

ridding of such state-competing elements in the security sector through legal measures appears unproblematic and in line with democratic values, based on the state's monopoly on the use of legitimate violence. However, this article draws on the case study of Ghana and the pre-2020 election phase—combining a review of existing scholarship and analysis of media reporting—to argue that such legal actions against non-state actors can be deeply problematic. In a worst-case scenario, such measures could present a threat to security and stability if public trust in authorities and formal state security providers is not sufficiently solid. Grounded in a broader discussion on security in fragile contexts and urban centres on the African continent, this article analyses the consequences of banning vigilantism where formal security provision is weak or not fully trusted.

Located in a sub-region historically plagued by civil wars, mercenaryism, authoritarianism and political instability, Ghana has stood out as a powerful exception when it comes to peace and stability, economic growth and democratic development. One often-praised factor is the country's record of successful elections; Ghana has experienced seven consecutive elections without large-scale violence (Ayee 2017; Graham *et al.* 2017). This makes Ghana rather unique in an African context. Yet despite these achievements, Ghana has not been spared from threats to its continued consolidation of democracy and stability. A frequently raised concern are the groups locally known as *political vigilantes*. Recruited by the major political parties or individual politicians, political vigilantes are informally mobilised groups of largely unemployed male youths. They have been charged with providing security during electoral campaigns and political events, and used to promote their political patrons (Bob-Milliar 2014; Gyampo *et al.* 2017). However, in mid-2019, Ghana adopted the new *Vigilantism and Related Offences Act*, banning vigilantism (Republic of Ghana 2019). The law followed years of debate and violent incidents related to political vigilantes, especially in the capital Accra and other urban centres of the country. In early 2019, more than twenty vigilante groups, connected to the main political parties in different ways, were reported active across Ghana (Myjoyonline 2019b). From an electoral security perspective, such mobilisation is, more often than not, deeply worrying. The political vigilantes in Ghana had also increasingly been accused of causing insecurity and violent riots (Kwarkye 2018). With an upcoming election in late 2020, they were believed to constitute an acute threat to stability and were accordingly banned.

Nevertheless, vigilantism is a highly relational phenomenon that must never be taken out of context. As emphasised by Kirsch & Grätz (2010), what is needed in the analysis of vigilante action in sub-Saharan Africa is attention to its embeddedness in social contexts, and its relation to state agencies and other socio-political actors. As expressed by Gyampo *et al.* (2017: 113), vigilante groups do not arise in a vacuum. Following Abrahams' observations, vigilantism tends to occur on the edges of state influence and control (Abrahams 1987: 179). Vigilantism is accordingly a phenomenon

best understood in the context of the state. Therefore, the overall aim of this article is to assess the banning of political vigilantes through a holistic approach, keeping in mind that these groups may not be the only security challenge Ghana is faced with, especially during elections. One incident that illustrates the complexity of such legislative actions is the shootings at the parliamentary by-election in the Ayawaso West Wougon constituency in the capital of Accra in January 2019. Masked men, which later investigations proved to be national security operatives of the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team, stormed the residence of the main opposition candidate and opened fire on party activists. Video footage of the violent scene, which included armed men, bullet holes, bloodstained walls and wounded civilians, soon went viral, while the opposition accused the government of orchestrating the attack (Bjarnesen 2020b). The incident revealed, as argued in this article, that political vigilantes, in all fairness, have not been Ghana's only security concern. Vigilante groups may act in predatory ways, but so too may formal security actors, perhaps especially in emerging democracies. In this light we can ask: does banning political vigilante groups actually solve Ghana's problem?

In this article, Ghana's history of political vigilantism is first addressed. While both violence and positive contributions of such groups will be acknowledged, the phenomenon of political vigilantism will be related to a broader discussion on vigilantism where security is fragile and where people, despite its perils, may find vigilantism a legitimate alterative to formal state action. The Ayawaso West Wougon violence and the legislative actions that were taken against political vigilantes after this incident will thereafter be further scrutinised. As concluded in this article, the banning of political vigilante groups does not offer a holistic solution to political instability and fragile urban security in Ghana, as such measures fail to address the reality of state complicity in violence and insecurity. Legislative measures must therefore also be assessed in the light of the actions of state-sanctioned security providers, as highlighted by the 2019 Ayawaso West Wougon shootings.

Ghana's history of political vigilantism

Following two and a half decades of military rule, political instability and multiple coups, Ghana consolidated its multi-party democracy through a number of electoral reforms implemented after 1992.[1] Having gone through seven presidential and parliamentary elections resulting in three turnovers of political power in 2001, 2009 and 2017 between the two dominant parties, the National Democratic Congress (NDC)

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[1] For an in-depth discussion on Ghana's past elections and post-independence political processes, see Ayee (2017).

and the ruling National Patriotic Party (NPP), Ghana is now seen as a thriving African democracy (Gyampo *et al.* 2017: 24). What has further contributed to the praise of Ghanaian stability and democratic achievements is that these elections have been considered generally free and fair, spared from outbursts of large-scale violence. Ghana also has a vibrant media and civil society (Gyampo *et al.* 2017: 25). However, the issue locally known as political vigilantism or *footsoldierism* has haunted Ghanaian elections over the years and has been at the centre of political discussions of security, especially during elections. As noted by Bob-Milliar (2014: 126), competition between the two main parties has been relatively free of the high-intensity violence that has characterised multi-party elections in some parts of Africa. Nevertheless, the country has witnessed violent clashes between party activists. In Ghana's party system, foot soldiers—that is, rank and file party members—play a very important role in the electoral process. Political office-seekers have increasingly relied on the mobilisation abilities of these young men and women, raising questions and controversy over their central role in Ghana's democracy (ibid.).

Political vigilantism is by all measures not a new phenomenon in Ghana. Political vigilante groups mobilised by the political parties have been involved in all of Ghana's seven elections and three transitions since independence, and have had an active presence in all regions of the country (Gyampo *et al.* 2017: 118). The rise of the foot soldiers can be traced to the 1980s and 1990s and the emergence of door-to-door campaigns in rural areas and smaller cities throughout the country. This mass mobilisation of youth turned out to be a successful electioneering strategy, in which the party foot soldiers themselves were perceived to have contributed significantly to party political successes (Birikorang & Aning 2016: 89). In cooperation with other party activists and youth wings, political vigilantes have also been active in election-related matters such as serving as polling agents or helping with voter registration. In providing these services around elections, they may be said to have encouraged fairness and transparency during all seven general elections in the Fourth Republic (Gyampo *et al.* 2017: 120).

Despite the positive roles that political vigilante groups can (and do) play in Ghana's elections, their involvement in violent incidents is what has recently drawn attention to them. Even though Ghana has been spared from large-scale election-related violence over the years, incidents of violent vigilantism have occurred before, during and after elections in the post-independence era (see for example Kumah-Abiwu 2017), particularly when supporters of the main parties have clashed with each other. Supported by party representatives, they have threatened, intimidated and assaulted opponents. They have also been guilty of assaulting electoral officials and vandalising registration centres (Kwarkye 2018). However, even though these violent incidents have led to the condemnation of political vigilantes, they have also highlighted the ambivalence of perspectives on the existence of such groups in Ghana, not

least in political circles. For instance, in 2015 during a by-election in the Talensi con-stituency, the NPP-associated political vigilante group the 'Bolga Bull Dogs' clashed with the NDC-mobilised 'Azorka Boys' vigilante group after both sides accused each other of preventing party members from visiting the polling station (Emmanuel 2015). Sporadic shooting was also recorded around the NPP constituency office during the same event (Modern Ghana 2015). The incident caused the police to publicly con-demn the actions of the political vigilante groups in a statement which emphasised 'that it is unlawful for political parties, groups, organisations or individuals to encour-age the formation of vigilante groups and other associations that assume the char-acter of a security organisation, unless that person, group or organisation has been granted a licence for that purpose under Police Service (Private Security Organisation) Regulation, 1992 (LI 1571)' (Myjoyonline 2015). Meanwhile, the Interior Minister, Mark Woyongo, instead indicated that the best way to solve the problem of vigilante groups was to legalise them. With an official licence as a security company, political vigilante groups such as the Azorka Boys and the Bolga Bull Dogs could be regu-lated, since they had in fact been operating as security companies, the minister frankly admitted in an interview (Citifmonline 2015).

In 2018, the opposition NDC announced its endorsement of the formation of new political vigilante groups through statements by the NDC General Secretary, Johnson Asiedu Nketia. The Greater Accra-regional organiser, Anthony Nukpenu, further stated that the NDC were to recruit 200 000 'boys' into its newly formed vig-ilante groups (Mubarik 2018a). The endorsement was immediately condemned by the independent non-partisan governance institution, the National Commission for Civic Education, who took the opportunity to remind all political parties that they had a responsibility towards the preservation of peace, law and order, and should therefore disband all existing vigilante groups with immediate effect (ibid.). Asiedu Nketia defended the formation of the new vigilante groups as a natural response to the governing NPP's refusal to disband its own vigilante groups (Mubarik 2018b).

The violence of vigilante groups has also been internal, often related to claims of neglect of foot soldiers by their political patrons. In March 2017, following the NPP election victory which placed President Nana Akufo-Addo in power, the political vig-ilante group the Delta Force, aligned with the ruling party, turned against the NPP after the president's appointment of George Agyei as regional security coordinator for the Asante Region. The Delta Force strongly opposed Agyei's appointment as they were of the opinion that he had not contributed to the NPP victory and there-fore did not deserve his new position. Delta Force members barged into Agyei's office, assaulting and ejecting him with force. Later in April 2017, when the accused Delta Force members were on trial for the incident, fellow foot soldiers entered the court, threatened the judge and freed their comrades (Kwarkye 2018). This was not the only time frustrated foot soldiers turned against their own party. Members of the NPP's

Invisible Forces in July the same year besieged the office of the Eastern Regional National Health Insurance Scheme, claiming they could not work with the Regional Manager (Citifmonline, 2017). And during yet another incident the same month, other vigilante members associated with the NPP in the Ashanti Region stormed the premises of the Metro Mass Transit Bus terminal to stop the Regional Depot Manager from doing his job as they claimed their party had appointed him to the position illegally (ibid.).

Who, then, are these foot soldiers and what motivates them to join these groups? Empirical research among Ghana's political vigilante groups suggests that their members come from marginalised segments of the population. The popular image of foot soldiers, as Bob-Milliar (2014: 131–2) describes, is of heavily built 'macho' men. As residents of poor neighbourhoods or urban slums, they often lack secure employment and are forced to make a living through casual day jobs. Bob-Milliar's research suggests that party foot soldiers tend to be youths, informally recruited directly by an executive member of a political party or a party's candidates to assist them in attaining party or public office. They engage in political activities ranging from pro- or anti-government protests, political meetings, canvassing for votes, and exercising public authority by providing security for their communities. The more ambitious recruits are likely to formalise their membership with a political party. Those with exceptional mobilisation abilities and leadership qualities have a chance to move up the party ladder, either as youth or constituency organisers, or as local chairmen. Yet in general, the activism of party foot soldiers is very mobile and their engagement with the main parties is largely informal and highly personalised (ibid.).

Underlying reasons for party mobilisation and acceptance of vigilantism

As can be seen from Ghana's electoral history, there appear to be various and complex reasons behind the existence of vigilante groups and their continued use by politicians. Before going further, it should be noted that not all party foot soldiers are necessarily violent. According to Bob-Milliar (2014: 134–5), most party foot soldiers engage in non-violent political campaigning and behave like activists elsewhere in advanced democracies. As noted above, such political activism has been vital for past election victories on both sides. Nevertheless, NDC and NPP foot soldiers have increasingly been trained to operate as security agents for the party and political leadership during times of elections. This has been especially apparent for parties in opposition due to their lack of trust in state security agencies (Gyampo *et al.* 2017: 120). As I have argued elsewhere, such informal security roles often have a degree of local legitimacy (Bjarnesen 2020b). Although the presence of increasingly armed and trained vigilante groups acting as security operatives clearly raises questions of their legality,

accountability, and their potential threat to Ghana's democratic foundations, this does not, I argue, erase the fact that even at the highest political level, the ability to cater for your own security can be vital. Such a practice may also contribute to democratic development if formal security actors are unable, or unwilling, to provide safe and secure environments for political contenders or the voting public. This argument is based on the historically ambiguous status of vigilantism in contexts where the state has had limited ability or will to protect its own citizens. As Bruce Baker (2008: 5–6) notes, the governance of *policing*, as an organised activity that can be conducted by both state and non-state groups seeking to maintain communal order, security and peace, is a contested terrain. Herein various nodes of governance bargain and negotiate between themselves over the nature of the order to be established and how protection is to be accomplished. On the African continent, multiple authorities and providers form a complex set of choices for ordinary people as they seek to negotiate a measure of protection from crime and abuse in their daily lives. Therefore, a focus on government agencies only tends to draw attention away from the full range of actors involved in security provision that exists, particularly at local levels (ibid.).

In other words, formal security providers are not the only ones citizens consider for their everyday protection. Nor are non-state alternatives always considered second best or morally wrong in the eyes of the public, whether legal or not. As Daniel Nina (2000: 20) notes, normative definitions of 'good' and 'bad' are historically bound and as such, they have a relational meaning. Accordingly, both what is 'good' and 'bad' is relative to who determines the social meaning of a community's behaviour. As a result, Nina argues, communities that engage in vigilante practice do so at the risk of being labelled 'bad' by the state, even when the state is unable to provide a safe and secure environment for the community. On the other hand, as found by Pratten (2008: 6) in his research on Nigerian vigilantes, most vigilante groups do invoke notions of themselves as the protectors of a 'moral community'. How these communities are constructed through vigilantism, and especially through the processes of boundary making in which they are engaged, is a central question, Pratten further suggests. As Tankebe (2009: 247) notes, when people believe that procedures are fairly administered, and that legal authorities are trustworthy, they are more likely to comply with the law and cooperate with legal authorities. On the other hand, perceptions of unjust procedures and untrustworthiness can lead to public unwillingness to cooperate with state security providers and general non-compliance with legal decisions. Accordingly, as Tankebe (2009: 249) argues, the public tendency to support vigilantism reflects, at least in part, public resentment against the perceived procedural injustice of the nation-state and its legal apparatus.

The mobilisation and acceptance of political vigilante groups in Ghana is better understood in such a light. Trust in the state's ability or will to deliver security and justice to all citizens, including those opposing ruling parties, is far from a given in

many societies. This has been the case in Ghana, where political party representatives, and particularly those in opposition, have often stated that they would not demo-bilise their foot soldiers due to fears the other side would not follow suit. In March 2019, for instance, Joseph Yammin, NDC party representative and former Ashanti Regional Secretary, who has been identified as the main financier of the political vig-ilante group known as the Hawks, stated that the NDC had no plans whatsoever to disband their vigilantes. The Hawks, Yammin stated, was a taskforce recognised by the party, assigned to provide security during the elections for its party members (Ghanaweb 2019a). Other party representatives, however, reacted strongly against Yammin's statement. A public statement signed by NDC General Secretary Johnson Asiedu Nketia underlined that the position of the former deputy Ashanti regional minister did not represent the views of the party on the vigilante menace. Instead, the General Secretary stated that the party wished to reiterate its unwavering commit-ment to the process of disbanding all political vigilante or party militia groups in the country (Ghanaweb 2019b).

These statements provide further evidence of the ambivalent feelings many Ghanaians have about politically mobilised vigilantism. They reveal the internal power struggles around these groups and how they should be perceived and publically spoken about. Are these groups private protectors, ensuring the safety of the political opposition, or are they simply thugs or party militias, used by the political elite to terrorise the electorate and intimidate voters in order to attain state power? When it comes to how we define, frame and understand vigilantism, it is necessary, as noted by Sen & Pratten (2007: 8), to account for the politics of language and how labelling is employed to legitimate or oppose vigilante activity. In the case of Ghana, the power dynamics of such labelling has been brought to light with the government's adoption of the recent law against political vigilantism. Political vigilantism has thereby been publically condemned. But the ruling party, just like the opposition, nevertheless has a long history of mobilising such groups. Therefore, it cannot be excluded that at least elements of the political elite will continue to do so in the future.

As much research on vigilantism has shown, the boundaries between state and non-state security actors are indeed very fluid. Buur & Jensen (2004: 140) argue that even though vigilantism in different forms challenges the state and the rule of law, it cannot be reduced to expressions of the mob or antidotes to formal law. This is very much evident in the case of Ghanaian political vigilante groups who, as described above, have been more than simply a tool of the political opposition. Mobilised by the current governing political party, or by individual political representatives within the ruling party, they have had an undisputable direct link to the state. Against such a backdrop, to categorise these groups as entirely non-state actors is a mistake. Rather, they have been unofficial, yet highly controversial, state- as well as oppositional-instruments used to preserve or gain state power. Given this logic of vigilantism, it

is rather obvious why opposition parties might feel the need to mobilise their own informal security structures in times of elections. Ruling parties, however, could be seen as not sharing this incentive for this type of mobilisation, given their links to formal security providers who could defend them against election-related harassment. However, Ghanaian elections have historically been extremely close between the two dominant parties. In the 2000 elections, the NDC just barely lost to the NPP, with an even closer race in 2008 as the NDC retook power. As Whitfield (2009: 622) has argued, the competitive nature of the Ghanaian elections is linked to the fact that both the NDC and the NPP serve as credible opposition and both parties have established institutional networks in all regions of the country. But as Whitfield (2009: 623) further notes, the outcomes of elections have been determined by swing regions, which contain large numbers of floating voters who are not party loyalist and may cast their votes based on government performance. Given such circumstances, and given the rather unpredictable power balance between the two leading parties, it is perhaps not surprising that both would go to extremes to win voters, including the mobilisation—sometimes violently—of political vigilantes.

As argued by Paalo (2017: 6), the risk of election-related violence may be higher where there is intensive political competition and parties have real opportunity to change existing power dynamics, as in the case of Ghana. Given such a political landscape, the issue of political vigilantes becomes even more relevant. In Ghana it is ordinarily expected that the more effective the youth machinery of a party, the more sympathisers it will attract, and ultimately the higher its chances of acceding to power (Paalo 2017: 5). Therefore, despite official rhetoric during the pre-election phase in 2020 in which both parties stated their willingness to abandon engagements with political vigilante groups—which were attracting potentially influential youth—there was good reason to suspect that at least some party elements would hesitate to do so. In the next section, we turn to the Ayawaso West Wougon incident to further illustrate why the banning of political vigilantes is an insufficient response to Ghana's fragile security environment, especially in times of elections.

The 2019 Ayawaso West Wougon violence and its aftermath

It was only an hour or so after the commencement of voting at the La Bawalashie Presbyterian School Polling Station that chaos erupted, during the by-election for the Ayawaso West Wuogon Constituency in the Ghanaian capital Accra on 31 January 2019. Pulling up in SWAT-branded vehicles, masked men wearing national security apparel allegedly stormed the residence of the NDC candidate Delali Kwasi Brempong, not far from the polling station, and opened fired on NDC activists who had gathered for the elections in support of their party (Bjarnesen 2020b). The

incident, leaving at least six people critically injured from gunshots, was one of many shedding new light on electoral insecurity in Ghana. The turbulent by-election also gave the already widely debated issue of political vigilantism new energy. The passing of the *Vigilantism and Related Offences Act* was directly linked to the violent turn of events at the Ayawaso West Wougon by-election. But why was this the only substantial consequence of the incident? The investigations that followed shed light on Ghana's problem with party foot soldiers. Yet the presence and actions of masked gunmen in national security apparel and state-branded vehicles at the scene reveals that Ghana's security challenges go beyond political vigilante groups and cannot be understood in isolation from the state.

The Ayawaso West Wougon incident underlines that vigilantism, political vigilantism and the phenomena of all forms of informally mobilised security structures must be analysed in relation to the state. The question of the state is always present in these issues, whether by its absence, its silent approval or usage of these structures, or its fight against the very existence of these informal actors. Policing in such a context furthermore becomes a major concern. In Ghana, the status, performance and legitimacy of the police force is very much related to the activities of informal security providers, including the political vigilante groups and especially in urban centres. As noted by Tankebe (2009: 250–1), vigilantism is commonly seen as a direct outcome of chronic policing failure in the provision of physical security. Accounts of vigilantism on the African continent also illustrate the importance of different forms of police corruption as explanatory factors. Violent self-help, as Tankebe calls it, becomes an attempt to compel the police to bridge the gap between what people might consider to be their socially established entitlement to procedurally fair treatment and their perceived abusive or neglectful treatment by the police (ibid.). When it comes to the Ghanaian police force, it is clear that major problems have had a bearing on the climate of political vigilantism in the country.

As noted by Aning & Albrecht (2020), Ghana is showing signs of tension in the political system that is reflected in increasing political interference in how the police operates. Recruitment into the police, Aning and Albrecht find, depends on knowing a person who has political connections. This, they argue, was not the case in the past. As their informants state, only those affiliated with the party in power have a chance of employment within the police. This development has been accompanied by interference by powerful individuals, often politicians, over who can and should be arrested, investigated and ultimately prosecuted. As a result, confidence in the Ghanaian police is at an all-time low, both among politicians and in the wider population. According to Aning and Albrecht, political vigilantism in the country and the situation within the police force are intimately linked. The increasing public distrust of police due to their politicisation has resulted in political parties' mobilisation and consolidation of political vigilantes. Not only have these groups been better equipped than the average

police unit; the police are under such considerable political control that they have been unable to confront these politically motivated and controlled security groups (Aning & Albrecht 2020).

Accordingly, any assessment of the threat to stability, security and the overall democratic process in Ghana that political vigilantism and the militarised party foot soldiers constitute must be conducted from a holistic perspective, also taking the composition and actions of formal security providers, especially in times of elections, into consideration. The Ayawaso West Wougon shooting is a vivid example of this. In an attempt to calm the Ghanaian population, and perhaps as a show of force when it came to electoral security, the NPP government set up the Emile Short Commission, a three-member committee tasked with conducting a full and impartial inquiry into the events and associated violence of the by-election. The commission was to identify any person responsible for or involved in the incident and to inquire into any matter it considered related to its causes (Myjoyonline 2019a). Public hearings followed in mid-February 2019, with the commission given one month to complete its work. The NDC, who from the start had accused the government of unleashing the violence, expressed great distrust in the process. General Secretary of the NDC, Asiedu Nketia, remarked that the commission was only a ploy to protect the real perpetrators and a smokescreen used by the president to protect his own appointees. Nketia further underlined that his party was concerned that no arrests had been made despite video evidence of brutality by security personnel (Adogla-Bessa 2019). Despite opposition fears, the formal security institutions were scrutinised during hearings. It became clear that the presence of politically assigned foot soldiers in times of elections were not the only elements with the potential to disturb the democratic process. The actions of the SWAT team and its lack of coordination with other security institutions were clearly problematic. As noted by security analyst Kwesi Aning during the hearings, the creation of militias was very worrying, but even more disturbing was the undermining of the statutory functions of the National Security Council. According to Aning, the formation of a non-recognised quasi-statutory SWAT posed a danger to security services and undermined loyalty, and it was particularly concerning that statutory forces did not know of the existence of other forces who can be commanded to perform in the public space (GBN 2019). Rumours about who the individuals of the SWAT team were and on what grounds they had been recruited also came to factor in the debate about the Ayawaso West Wougon violence. Sam George, Member of Parliament and NDC representative, was attacked and reported that his assailants were members of the NPP vigilante group 'Invincible Forces' in National Security Council attire (Peacefmonline 2019). During the commission's hearing, National Security Minister Albert Kan-Dapaah denied that the masked men behind the Ayawaso West Wougon shootings were members of the NPP vigilante group but admitted that some may formerly have been members. (Modern Ghana 2019).

The Short Commission Report and the government response

In mid-March 2019, the commission of inquiry submitted its report with recommendations for further actions due to the violent abuses committed during the Ayawaso West Wougon by-election. Yet it was not until September that the government made the report public after much pressure by the opposition. According to NDC representative Sam George, the government was trying to avoid incriminating itself given what he believed was the damning nature of the report on the national security apparatus. He further added that he expected nothing but a 'cover up' by the government as hooligans had been incorporated into the state security apparatus to perpetrate violence (Prime News Ghana 2019). Nevertheless, as the report finally was made public (Short Commission Report 2019), it was clear that the national security apparatus had not been able to avoid criticism. The commission found that the SWAT team had used civilians whom they had armed and put in official uniforms but who were not subject to any regime of accountability. The Minister of National Security and his team therefore ought to explain how this force could operate outside any rules of accountability in respect of the use of firearms, the commission emphasised. Additionally, the commission found that the national security establishment is a means by which the party faithful are resettled. Whether or not these persons who perform vigilante functions are members of any known militia group, the commission stressed, their very presence within the state security machinery encourages opposition parties to counter their activities. The current situation, the commission found, reflects a transition in which members of a party militia are ordinarily appointed as national security operatives upon the assumption of power by their political party. This undermines the standing and future of the security sector, but also the individual and collective security of Ghanaians if left unchecked, the commission argued (Short Commission Report 2019).

Accordingly, the commission did not refrain from strongly criticising the Ministry of National Security establishment and individual representatives within it at different levels, and nor did they spare strong words against the actions of the SWAT team during the by-election. The commission nevertheless emphasised the overall problem with mobilisation of what they referred to as 'militia organisations' by political parties or individual politicians, recommending the immediate criminalisation of the establishment and funding of such elements in Ghana. The commission found that these groups were a challenge to state authority and a threat to the very stability of Ghana's constitutional democracy. It observed that they were maintained by the parties and private owners for a variety of purposes but were united by one overarching goal: to defend the interests of their political parties by every means, including through the use of unauthorised force. The commission further rejected the labelling

of these groups as 'vigilantes' given their lawless manner and non-cooperative attitude towards regular law enforcement bodies (Short Commission Report 2019).

As the Ghanaian government finally made the Short Commission Report available to the public, they simultaneously published a White Paper as a response to the investigations. It made clear that the government did not accept the commission's version of events during the Ayawaso West Wougon by-election. As stated in the White Paper, the government claimed that the commission had failed to follow its most critical terms of reference, which was to make a full and faithful impartial inquiry of what had occurred. The White Paper stated that the government was accordingly unable to fully accept the findings and recommendations of the report (Republic of Ghana, White Paper 2019). However, the government did underline that it was indeed committed to act against politically sponsored vigilantism, as the parliament had passed the Vigilantism and Related Offences Act (Act 999), 2019, initiated by the president to disband and prohibit vigilante groups and their activities.

The government's response to the investigation and the strong critique against the security establishment reveals how very politicised the issue of vigilantism in Ghana is. While the government's willingness to deal with the political vigilante groups could be seen as a move in the right direction, their unwillingness to acknowledge state complicity in the violence and pre-election tensions is nevertheless clearly problematic. Accordingly, the next section explores why the banning of vigilantism may not be the answer.

Why banning vigilantism may not be the answer

While the banning of political vigilantism in Ghana may appear as the only sensible response to the violence of such groups during elections, it cannot be taken for granted that such legislative measures would lead to increased electoral security and the continued consolidation of the democratic process. By using the Ayawaso West Wougon by-election as an empirical example, this article has brought to light underlying problems and complex dynamics between formal and informal actors active within the Ghanaian security arena as well as on the political scene. There are at least two key reasons, drawing from this analysis, that suggest that the legislation alone will be limited in its effectiveness.

First, the party in power may seek to circumvent the legislation by formally incorporating vigilante groups into the state security sector, leading the opposition to counter by maintaining their own groups. Despite the opposition's initial doubt that the government-appointed commission would conduct an independent and impartial investigation of the events leading up to the violent election day, the commission did not refrain from criticising the government and the national security establishment

in particular. The findings regarding recruitment into the formal security forces, such as the SWAT team, particularly speak to the argument of this article. If indeed the vigilante groups of the ruling NPP were incorporated into formal security structures based on loyalty rather than on merit, the banning of vigilantism is placed in an entirely different light. Even if both the ruling NPP and the opposition NDC were to disband their militarised foot soldiers, the NPP could in practice simply incorporate their own loyal 'macho men' into the formal security structures of the country. This would be an advantage out of reach for the opposition (whether the NPP or the NDC). Given that both sides competing for state power have a long history of distrusting their opponents, there would be little sense—from their perspective—of demobilising their informal security structures, as long as the capacity and legitimacy of the national security system is questioned, and those in power could formalise their vigilante groups. In this respect, the government's initiative to ban vigilantism may be regarded as a show of force and a diversion, which in practice could conceal a continued usage of party foot soldiers by giving them official status as formal security providers, while hindering the opposition from doing the same.

If electoral security is truly to be achieved in Ghana, the issue of political vigilantism cannot be allowed to overshadow underlying problems causing this phenomenon. If the question of the capacity and legitimacy of state security forces is one of those underlying problems, a second problem has its roots in the bigger question of why typically young, marginalised men become party foot soldiers and why they have increasingly resorted to violence and intimidation. According to Bob-Milliar (2014: 127), the normative logic of 'winner-takes-all' party politics contributes to low-intensity electoral violence. The political system where the winner monopolises all state power both comforts and discomforts political activists. As Bob-Milliar argues, this is linked to foot soldiers' aggression due to structural and partisan factors such as youth unemployment, unfulfilled electoral promises and survival strategies of elite groups. In such a political system, young party foot soldiers will place a high premium on capturing state power for the political elites. Accordingly, in political systems where so much is at stake, and so little is left for the losers, the risk of violence, particularly during elections, is indisputably high. With few other opportunities, loyalty to a political patron who succeeds in the political contest can give advantages to this marginalised segment of the population that they could otherwise only dream of. As we learn from the work of Gyimah-Boadi (2007: 24), patronage has been and remains the enduring characteristic of Ghanaian politics. As Gyimah-Boadi recalls from growing up in Ghana, one phrase repeatedly heard and associated with the political patronage system was 'unflinching support'. He has continued to hear that phrase throughout his adult life and it is always said in the context of swearing undying loyalty to the government of the day—military or civilian, authoritarian or democratic—and to the political personage, ideologies, policies and programmes they represent. Unflinching

support in this context can be seen as a currency used in exchange for political favours (ibid.) This is perhaps most visible in times of elections. As Gyimah-Boadi (2007: 29) furthermore notes, elections in Africa continue to significantly reflect the overwhelming advantage incumbent parties enjoy over patronage resources. This allows the ruling party to use subtle and crude means to disorganise and destroy opposition parties, which can include the deployment of state security agencies to harass opponents. In such a context, it is easy to see how patronage capacity becomes the single most important factor in electoral outcomes. And in this light, it is equally easy to understand why the incumbent party becomes preoccupied with building patronage capacity immediately after elections as a method of political consolidation.

In December 2020, Nana Akufo-Addo won re-election with 51.59 per cent of the vote. The Ghanaian Police Service said it recorded more than 60 incidents during the elections. Twenty-one of them were reported to be true cases of electoral violence, six of which involved gunshots resulting in the death of five individuals (Aljazeera 2020). The European Union's chief observer, Javier Nart, stated that 'Ghanaians voted freely ... While there were isolated violent incidents, both on election day and during the campaign ... fears of violence and vigilantism, fortunately, didn't materialise. They were minor isolated incidents, some of them tragic ones' (ibid.). The banning of vigilantism did at best reduce the mobilisation of groups of potentially violent young men during the elections. This may have led to less violence, threats and intimidation. The use of legislative measures thereby appears to be the most sensible way of dealing with the issue of political vigilantism. However, this article has shown at least two underlying problems the act against vigilantism will not be able to solve: the issue of distrust in the formal security agencies, and the marginalisation and lack of other opportunities to make a living which lead youth to mobilise in the first place.

Concluding remarks: who are the agents of urban (in)security?

As Kumah-Abiwu (2017: 181) has argued, the fear of violence that has been associated with almost every election in Ghana raises questions about the strength and future directions of the country's democratic institutions and its political culture. As he finds, there is no doubt that the responsibility of preserving Ghana's democratic state lies in the hands of every Ghanaian, but the two major parties—the NDC and the NPP—must take greater responsibility by deepening the trust and respect for each other and the electoral institutions. The new law from 2019 banning political vigilantism does, at least at first glance, look like such an effort as both parties have officially stated that they are ready to disband these potentially violent groups for the sake of electoral security and Ghana's consolidation of the democratic process. However, we cannot disregard the risk that by initiating this law, the government uses

democratic means in a way that undermines democratic values in the long term. Using the Ayawaso West Wougon by-election as an empirical example, it becomes clear that political vigilantes are not the only threat to further democratic gains in Ghana. The use of the national security agencies, such as the SWAT team during that day of voting, was indeed deeply concerning. Even more so was the government's unwillingness to address the criticism that followed this incident, not least the recommendations from the Emile Short Commission that implicated their own national security establishment. For young party foot soldiers, loyalty to the right political patron is vital. If they are loyal to the party securing state power, there is a chance to advance within the system, even for these marginalised youth, as evidence presented in the Ayawaso West Wougon hearings indicated. In a winner-takes-all political system this is deeply problematic for those who have supported the opposition. I have noted a similar logic in Liberia during the 2011 elections (Bjarnesen 2020a). Here informally mobilised security providers, consisting of mainly ex-combatants from the Liberian civil war, were mobilised as private security and party activists for the presidential candidates. For the ex-combatants, the elections provided them with promises and opportunities they otherwise lacked. But 'going into politics', as these men called it, was a dangerous game. If their political patrons managed to secure an election victory, this could lead to formal employment within the state security system. But if not, this would leave them even worse off than before the elections, making them vulnerable to harassment by the winners in power. The same dynamic can be discerned in Ghana.

Following the logic of vigilantism, it is not hard to understand the creation of informal security structures where the formal ones are not present, lack capacity, or are distrusted by the public. We therefore cannot take it for granted that political vigilante groups by default are agents of urban insecurity needing to be demobilised at all costs. Vigilante groups are accordingly not easily categorised as either good or bad. Their presence, actions, and their status as potential threats to, or facilitators of, security or even democracy must always be analysed and judged in relation to the state's performance and legitimacy. Hence, the question is not whether such actors should be banned or not. Rather, the question is why there is a perceived need for such actors in the first place. As the political climate in Ghana is characterised by suspicion between the main political opponents, it is not surprising that especially those in opposition have mobilised their own informal security apparatus. As noted by Kyed and Albrecht (2014), how and by whom a particular order is enacted in urban spaces is contested, and at times violently so. No one set of actors monopolises the authority or sovereign position to enact order, leading to reoccurring negotiations over the very definition of what that order is (ibid.). Informal security providers can fill an important function in fragile contexts and emerging democracies when it comes to the establishment of order, protecting the interests of those who feel they lack the protection of the state. More recently, Kyei & Berckmoes (2021: 335) even argue that political

vigilante groups allow voices otherwise not heard to be taken into account in the political field. Political vigilantism, they state, is a mark of refusal on the part of some of the citizenry to accept the political exclusion enforced on them by the state (Kyei & Berckmoes 2021: 324). Therefore, they conclude that political vigilantism enhances, rather than destroys, democratic governance (Kyei & Berckmoes 2021: 335).

However, as Ghana's political vigilantes often have acted like party militias, not refraining from the use of violence if it serves the political interest of their own party, they have drifted further away from the protectors of democracy they potentially could be. In the urban context of Ghana, where they have been particularly active, the political vigilante groups have often contributed to the insecurity they also have the capacity to challenge. Yet banning them does not solve the problem because the problem is much more complicated than such legislation suggests. As Ghanaian journalist Manasseh Azure Awuni (2020) has argued, while the 2020 elections were celebrated as a victory for Ghana, this is actually because the death and destruction were insignificant compared to other countries on the continent. As Awuni rightly points out, there is more to democracy than holding peaceful elections. And holding elections without killing or maiming or burning houses should not be a considered a monumental achievement (ibid.). As can be seen from the Ayawaso West Wougon violence, national security agencies have contributed to electoral and overall insecurity in Ghana. For this reason, the banning of vigilantism is paradoxically problematic despite the relatively peaceful elections of 2020. Such legislative measures can function as a decoy for the opposition to disband those who in theory could protect oppositional political views, while allowing the government to circumvent the ban through formalising their own informal groups. Such a scenario is a threat to peace, stability and further democratic consolidation in Ghana beyond the elections of 2020.

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Imagining the *anti-gang*: the state, the father and Jean-Claude Van Damme

Maarten Hendriks

Abstract: Empirically focusing on the so-called *anti-gang*, a civilian policing group in the city of Goma (DRC), this article examines the nexus between the workings of the imagination and the politics of everyday policing. Four forms of political imaginations through which the *anti-gang* imagine themselves as everyday policing actors are identified: political imaginations around the state, citizenship, the father, and martial arts and action movies. The article makes two main arguments. First, political imaginations are not merely fantasies. Instead, the *anti-gang* harness them to do political work and impose themselves as street authorities. In doing so, they in turn contribute to giving form to these political imaginations, by making them tangible and experienced as real in everyday urban life. Second, the article asserts that the political imaginations that shape and are shaped by *anti-gang* practices show that they do not so much propose a new political order. Instead, they seek to be included in it, escape marginalisation and become politically significant.

Keywords: Civilian policing group, everyday policing, political imagination, Goma, DRC.

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Introduction

In a rapidly urbanising global context,[1] urban (in)security presents a key challenge for societies worldwide. Broader than matters of (in)security, as Beall *et al.* (2013) assert, violent conflict has become increasingly urban, to the extent, as these authors argue in dialogue with Wolf's classical analyses on the 'peasant wars of the 20th century' (Wolf 1999), that we have entered the era of 'urban wars of the 21st century' (Beall *et al.* 2013: 3066). This is no less true for African societies and cities (see for example Büscher 2018). However, for eastern Congo—the regional focus of this article—as Verweijen notes: 'The standard imagery of violence ... is that of armed groups clashing in rural zones, conducting raids on villages and raping women' (Verweijen 2019: 11). In the shadow of soldiers and rebels fighting each other in the rural hinterlands, conflict studies have long overlooked dynamics of 'urban' insecurity and violent conflict in eastern Congo (with some noteworthy exceptions[2]). Empirically focusing on the so-called *anti-gang*, a civilian policing group in Goma, this article aims to contribute to bridging this knowledge gap. It does so by examining the nexus between the politics of everyday policing and the workings of the imagination.

The *anti-gang* are socio-economically marginalised youths from Goma's popular neighbourhoods[3] that see it as their core mission to protect the inhabitants of Goma against everyday crime and violence committed by the *maibobo* (street kids). They operate in popular neighbourhoods on the 'urban margins' (Goldstein 2012), characterised by higher levels of physical and livelihood insecurity compared to Goma's wealthier city centre (Kyed 2018). Whilst an impressive police and military force is deployed in Goma, the police stations in Goma's outskirt popular neighbourhoods are largely understaffed.[4]

In return for their offer of protection to the urban inhabitants, they hold weekly collections of 200 FC (0.20 €) per shop and vendor in their 'territory'. Besides, they carry out small jobs for the police, the intelligence services and the municipal authorities, such as evicting pirate markets, searching for wanted criminals and assisting in knocking down protests. In short, the *anti-gang* are a clear example of how urban insecurity and violent conflict, as Büscher argues, 'not only puts cities under pressure,

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[1] Whilst today around 54 per cent of the global population lives in cities, the UN has estimated that this amount will grow to 66 per cent by 2050 (Mitton 2018).

[2] See for example: Thill (2019); Verweijen (2019); Muzalia (forthcoming); Büscher (2011); Pole Institute (2009).

[3] The term popular neighbourhoods (*quartier populaires*) refers to those city neighbourhoods outside Goma's wealthier city centre: the former colonial *cité Européenne* (European quarter).

[4] For more detail, consult the report 'Insecurity in Goma: Experiences, Actors and Responses' (Hendriks M. & Büscher 2019).

it also creates openings, opportunities and capabilities for new urban constellations to unfold' (Büscher 2018: 4).

Drawing upon Kyed's concept of 'street authority', this article investigates the distinct style of politics and authority that is produced by civilian policing groups, such as the *anti-gang*, in their own right; 'a style of politics that intertwines with but also significantly differs from official competitive politics and state sovereignty' (Kyed 2018: 31). As Mbembe (2001: 76) notes on what he conceptualises as forms of privatisation of lawful violence: 'such phenomenon are not automatically indicators of chaos. It is important to see in them, also, struggles aimed at establishing new forms of legitimate domination and gradually restructuring formulas of authority built on other foundations'. This begs the following questions: what are these other foundations? How do organisations like the *anti-gang* seek to restructure formulas of authority? And what kind of political order do they envision?

To elaborate on these questions this article analyses how the *anti-gang* in Goma imagine their role as everyday policing actors themselves. How does the work of the imagination enable political action by which *anti-gangs* (seek to) impose themselves as street authorities? And how do *anti-gang* practices of everyday policing feed into and are shaped by political imaginations of order-making and authority?

Conceptually, this article draws from Rivke Jaffe's (2018) understanding of the 'political imagination'. Beyond emphasising that the imagination is political, her conceptualisation of political imagination refers 'to a particular realm of the imagination: to imaginings of political order, of how power works and how it should work' (Jaffe 2018: 1099). Political imaginations guide how we understand the workings of power, and legitimise or delegitimise how power, authority and resources are distributed. As Jaffe (2018: 100) notes: 'the political imagination is central in how we come to see ourselves in relation to others: with whom do we feel affinity or community, what forms of authority and hierarchy do we find acceptable?'

In the article, I identify four forms of political imagination that inspire the *anti-gang* in taking up their role as everyday policing actors: political imaginations around (i) the state, (ii) citizenship, (iii) the father, and (iv) martial arts and action movies.

The article makes two main arguments. First, political imaginations are not merely fantasies, but are harnessed by the *anti-gang* to do political work and impose themselves as street authorities. To be experienced as real, Meyer argues, 'imaginations need to materialise in the concrete lived environment and be felt in the bones' (2009b: 5). This is precisely the work of the imagination that the *anti-gang* are engaged in. By harnessing political imaginations around the state, the father, citizenship and the global imagery of martial arts and action movies, these imaginations 'touch ground and yield tangible forms and formations in social life' (Meyer 2009b: 3). In short, *anti-gang* practices are both informed by and give form to political imaginations of order-making and authority. As Jaffe (2018: 1101) emphasises: 'these relations are not

causal in any unidirectional sense, ... the imagination is not so much a concrete caus-
ative object or subject, but rather an ongoing process'.

Second, after situating the *anti-gang* as street authorities and the analyses of each
identified form of the political imagination, I conclude that the *anti-gang* do not pro-
pose a fundamentally new socio-political order. They seek to be included in it, escape
marginalisation and become politically significant by inscribing themselves into—and
thus reinforcing—dominant and powerful political imaginations of order-making.

Methodologically, the article draws upon 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork
on *gangs* and *anti-gangs* in Goma between 2015 and 2019. Moreover, it builds upon
visual materials I produced and gathered in the field. First, my research collaborators[5]
and I handed out cameras and smartphones to leaders from different *anti-gang* groups
in the city. We asked them to film and photograph everything they found meaningful
about their lifeworld, especially when we were not with them. These photos and film
fragments were regularly discussed during field visits. Second, in collaboration with
TD Jack Muhindo (a Congolese cineaste) we produced two action movies—of which
one (*Monstre's Prison Break*) will be discussed in this article.

A previous article elaborates on how I developed this filmmaking method, and its
epistemological principles (Hendriks M. 2019). In short, on their demand, we facili-
tated their making of their own movie about their lives as *gangs* and *anti-gangs*, re-en-
acting their roles and experiences as everyday policing actors. What makes these films
ethnographically exciting is that they are 'reflexive exercises' (Turner 1982) of *(anti-)
gangs* representing (and imagining) themselves and their lifeworld the way they see fit.
For the purpose of this article, the film *Monstre's Prison Break* serves as an analytical
tool to investigate how they imagine themselves as *gangs* and *anti-gangs* through mar-
tial arts and action movies.

The *anti-gang* as street authorities

Since the early 1990s, Congo's eastern provinces have been caught up in a deadly pro-
tracted armed conflict. Whilst the actual war-violence mainly takes place in eastern
Congo's rural hinterlands, levels of urban crime and violence have also increased dra-
matically in the past two decades. The ways in which urban violence and broader con-
flict dynamics are interlinked are a complex matter (see Verweijen 2019; Thill 2019;
Hendriks M. & Büscher 2019). For Goma, the provincial capital of North Kivu at
the Congo–Rwanda border, Karen Büscher (2011; 2016) demonstrates that, overall,
the city became a zone of refuge and relative safety at the heart of the conflict. It
became a humanitarian hub hosting the MONUSCO (until recently the largest UN

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[5] Christian Irenge, Rosette Watanga and TD Jack Muhindo.

peacekeeping mission in the world) and numerous national and international NGOs; opened up opportunities for business; and attracted large numbers of refugees and IDPs fleeing the violence in the neighbouring country of Rwanda during and after the 1994 genocide and eastern Congo's war-affected areas in the Kivus. The rapid and largely uncontrolled expansion and urbanisation that followed placed strain on urban social infrastructures, creating a context for urban violence and (in)security levels to increase (Büscher 2011; Büscher & Vlassenroot 2010).

Youths position themselves amongst the leading actors of both rural and urban crime and violence: fighting in the regular army or armed groups, roaming the streets as *maibobo* (street children) trying to get by, or being active in urban street gangs. In a wider context of social exclusion, economic decay and a general cultural experience of what Mbembe (2002) conceptualised as 'the state of war', violence in the Kivus became one of the few opportunities for many youths to escape social marginalisation. '[M]any youngsters are looking for a new identity and violence furnishes them alternative modes of identification and an opportunity to impose their own subjectivity' (Jourdan 2004: 157).

From their side, the *anti-gang* also partake in this youthful political economy of violence. In short, they are *sportifs* (martial arts practitioners) and *gangs*,[6] which transform themselves into *anti-gangs*, claiming to protect Goma's inhabitants against the everyday urban crime and violence of the *maibobo* and other *gangs*. They were founded at the Virunga market (Goma's principal market) in 2007 to stand guard at the market and protect market traders and their customers from theft and other harassments. With the support of Roger Rachidi Tumbula, Goma's mayor between 2008 and 2010, the *anti-gang* gradually expanded their activities throughout Goma's popular neighbourhoods (see Hendriks M. 2018). Since 2010, *anti-gang* operations have been constantly in flux. On my last field visit in March 2019, after a series of conflicts with certain high-ranked PNC[7] officers, the *anti-gang* member were forced to go into *camouflage*, as they say; meaning they could not operate in the open and performed their practices of policing and protection rackets in a more hidden fashion. For how long they will be forced into hiding is a question that remains open for now. It is clear, however, that since 2008, with up and downs, the *anti-gang* in certain popular neighbourhoods managed—to some extent—to take control of the streets.

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[6] Throughout the article the word *gang* is put in italics, referring to the emic understanding of how it is used in Goma. Rather than denoting a group of people involved in illicit behaviour, it refers to a person that has *gang* qualities; centred around toughness in both a negative and positive sense. *Gangs* are the marginalised but tough 'kids from the neighbourhood' who know how to make a living on the streets. Together with the *maibobo*, they are often blamed for much of the everyday urban crime happening in Goma (see also Hendriks M. 2018; 2019).

[7] *Police National de Congo* – The National Congolese Police.

The following observation illustrates how the *anti-gang* imposed themselves as authorities 'in their own right' (Kyed 2018):

> *Arriving with my research collaborator in the neighbourhood of Ndosho, we saw a crowd gathered in front of a shop not far from Station Simba. Five anti-gangs blocked the entrance with their arms crossed and nunchuks around their necks; protecting the shopkeeper from being arrested by two police officers for buying (fencing) a motorcycle engine stolen from a private security company. The anti-gang asked the police officers for the document that authorizes them to arrest the shopkeeper. 'They did not have it, so we refused' said one anti-gang. 'We protect the population. We cannot accept them to arrest this man without documents'. When the police officer in uniform tried to get to the shopkeeper, an anti-gang blocked his way. He took the machine gun of the police officer and threw it on the ground; provoking him by saying: 'take your weapon'. People around the shop applauded and laughed. Smelling danger, the police officer apologized and quickly reached for his gun. Some minutes later, the police officers walked away empty handed, to come back the day after with a convocation letter for the shopkeeper which they handed over to the anti-gang leader.[8]*

These and other observations show that the *anti-gang* should be understood as what Kyed has conceptualised as street authorities, referring to the 'pervasive yet ambiguous' style of authority civilian policing groups produce on the urban margins (Kyed 2018: 31). Characteristic of this style of authority is momentariness: 'the capacity to act swiftly without hesitation and without being bound-up to strict rules and codes of conduct' (Kyed 2018: 20). Whilst their ability to bring quick results in terms of policing and order-making makes them attractive for both people in the neighbourhood and official authorities for collaboration—to find stolen goods, beat up and deter *maibobo*, knock down protests and so on—at the same time it makes their authority morally ambiguous. Complaints are often made that the *anti-gang* are themselves involved in crime and collaborate with thieves and *maibobo*. Multiple residents referred to the *anti-gang* as '*maibobo* that have grown up',[9] or as one resident put it: 'a microbe that kills another microbe'.[10] Their ambiguous and momentary character, in turn, renders their authority rather unstable (Kyed 2015; 2018). Whilst the *anti-gang* can get things done, at the same time they are seen as a nuisance by both the state authorities and Goma's inhabitants. The above observation shows that whilst they are at times instrumentalised by state authorities, they are also (street) authorities in their own right. This article seeks to elaborate on Kyed's concept of 'street authority' by examining the imaginary foundations that underlie such authority.

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[8] Observation, Ndosho, Goma, 8 December 2015.

[9] Informal conversation with resident, Goma, 13 April 2016.

[10] Informal conversation with bus-driver, Goma, 12 November 2015.

Stateness and citizenship

The following video[11] (scan the QR code on the right) shows how an *anti-gang* group hands over apprehended thieves to the police. On the uniform of the *anti-gang* in the picture is written *sécurité civile, Maire de Goma* (civilian security, city hall of Goma), referring to both 'citizenness' and 'stateness' (Hansen & Stepputat 2001; Hoffmann *et al.* 2016). This section elaborates on this apparent paradox, dealing with how the *anti-gang*, to impose themselves as street authorities, simultaneously harnesses prevalent political imaginations around stateness and citizenship. In explaining what drives and motivates them in their mission, two *anti-gang* leaders responded:

> *The police, the military and the ANR [National Intelligence Agency] don't do a good job. They are not from here, so they do not know the environment. What is more, they collaborate with bandits. We on the other hand are Gomatraciens. We know everything and everyone here.[12]*
>
> *It is not the money. We do what we do in the framework of auto-prise en charge [fending for oneself]. We live here. We are watoto ya Goma [children of Goma]. Our family and friends live around this market. They are in insecurity! The police are not effective and are not from here.[13]*

These quotes show that in legitimising themselves, *anti-gang* members clearly differentiate themselves from the state police (PNC), military (FARDC[14]) and intelligence services (ANR[15]). As one *anti-gang* bluntly asserted: 'we are there because they fail'.[16] Hereby they tap into the general feeling of dissatisfaction amongst Goma's inhabitants with the state security services; blaming them for being ineffective in combatting—and even complicit in—urban crime.

Furthermore, the above citations exemplify how they deploy imaginations around citizenship. First, they stress that they are *Gomatraciens* or *watoto ya Goma* (children of Goma). They need to protect their home where their friends and family members live. By contrast, the PNC and FARDC are deployed according to a military logic, which means they frequently rotate to other parts of the country to not familiarise themselves too much with the people they are policing. As I explained elsewhere (Hendriks M. 2018), political imaginations around being *Gomatracien* can be seen as a cosmopolitan variant of autochthony or 'sons of the soil'. According to this logic, the original inhabitants 'are regarded as the rightful owners who can ultimately decide how their territory is governed, whereas members of other ethnic groups which "do

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[11] Video fragment filmed by *anti-gang* leader, Goma, 3 November 2015.

[12] Informal conversation with two *anti-gang* leaders, Goma, 27 October 2015.

[13] Informal conversation with two *anti-gang* leaders, Goma, 27 October 2015.

[14] *Forces Armées de la République Démocratique de Congo* – the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

[15] *Agence National de Renseignements* – National Intelligence Agency.

[16] Informal conversation with *anti-gang*, Goma, 13 June 2017.

not belong" to that area are given the status of settlers who have to accept the hegemony of the "sons of the soil"' (Harnischfeger 2010: 55). In the cosmopolitan urban environment of Goma, a variety of ethnic groups are present and many originate from elsewhere. As Büscher (2011: 171) notes for Goma, 'urban citizenship is more than a matter of "origins", it has also to do with a lived sense of belonging'. However, in a similar sense, people who grew up or lived in the city for a long enough time also identify with being its 'sons' or children (Hendriks M. 2018). Thus, an important difference with the more exclusionary logic of being 'sons of the soil' is that the cosmopolitan variant of 'being a *Gomatracien*' can be much more easily acquired.

Hence, by emphasising being *Gomatracien*, the *anti-gang* claim their 'right' to be involved in the governance of urban security. It shows how in legitimising themselves, the *anti-gang* both draw from and give shape to the notion of *Gomatracien* as a powerful urban political imagination of belonging. They feed into this political imagination in a *gang*-like fashion. Whilst they are *gangs* they are also 'children of Goma', and thus responsible for its protection. As *gangs*, they can use their inside knowledge about Goma's *gang* world to become responsible citizens or *Gomatraciens*.[17]

Second, they insist they take on their role as *anti-gang* in the framework of *auto-prise en charge* (taking care of oneself). In the economically declining Zaire of the 1980s, President Mobutu installed the notorious imagined *article 15* of the constitution, which states: *débrouillez-vous* (fend for yourselves). As Jourdan notes:

> *The 'article 15' can be considered as an implicit social pact between the state and its citizens since it allowed the former to retire from public life and from its functions, leaving to the latter the possibility to act unlawfully, in a context where the difference between legality and illegality had no more sense and everything was left to the capability of individuals to cut out a personal space of power within the society (Jourdan 2004: 170).*

Within this context citizens were also encouraged to 'fend for themselves' in terms of public service provision and take over services that were previously provided by the state, such as security provision. This 'fend for yourself attitude' is referred to as *l'auto-prise en charge de la population* (Carayannis *et al.* 2018: 23; Verweijen 2016; Thill & Cimanuka 2019). Although President Mobutu is dead, *l'auto-prise en charge* remains alive and kicking in Congo today as a political imagination through which people—including the *anti-gang*—partake in and legitimise political action in terms of 'public service provision', such as taking measures in protecting oneself from crime. The implicit social pact of *article 15* is also still frequently called upon to justify predatory behaviour and 'self-interested opportunism in all spheres of life' (Carayannis *et al.* 2018: 23; Jourdan 2004).

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[17] This 'becoming responsible citizens' is further elaborated upon in the following section.

Although the *anti-gang* clearly differentiate themselves from the state security services, by harnessing citizenship political imaginations around being *Gomatracien* and *auto-prise en charge*, at the same time, they are careful not to frame themselves as anti-state. They aim to be considered as an 'additional mode of policing' (Grätz 2010: 81). To avoid conflicts with the PNC—which do arise[18]—they are vigilant not to give the impression that they seek to compete or replace the PNC or take over its functions. As one *anti-gang* put it: 'we are the eyes of the police, not its competition'.[19]

> We are not against the government, we are against thieves. We are the people. We have our children, parents, sisters, everyone here. We complement the police. The police cannot be everywhere.[20]

In sum, the *anti-gangs* insist that they are different from the ineffective and corrupt state security services without portraying 'a revolutionary or anti-state message' (Gore & Pratten 2003: 232). At the same time, they seek to be inserted into state networks, to 'complement' and carry out jobs for them in return for patronage and protection (Hendriks M. 2018). The following video (scan the QR code on the left)—shot by an *anti-gang* leader[21]—illustrates this; it shows an operation carried out for the municipal authorities where the *anti-gang* evict a so-called pirate market,[22] accompanied by an ANR agent (an intelligence officer wearing civilian clothes). Dressed up in brown uniforms, they coerce people to '*tosha soko ku barabara*' (remove the market from the streets), hurling trade goods on the ground of those who do not respond quick enough. The video fragment and the fact that they seek to be inserted in state networks clearly shows that they do not operate in a security vacuum left by an 'absent or failed state'. On the contrary, *anti-gang* practices are articulated within wider struggles for authority within Goma's socio-political arena (Hendriks M. 2018). The above video fragment also demonstrates that, although they claim that they are not the state, they are engaged in 'state-like performances' (Kyed & Albrecht 2015; Kirsch & Grätz 2010b). During the operation where they evict the pirate market, they look, shout and act like the police and military. Hereby they enact what Hansen & Stepputat (2001) have conceptualised as 'languages of stateness'—enacting practices (of policing) and drawing from symbolic registers of authority associated with the state (Hoffmann *et al.* 2016). Making a similar observation on Mai-Mai (armed) groups in the Kivus, Hoffmann & Verweijen (2019: 16) assert:

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[18] See Hendriks M. (2018) for more detail.

[19] Informal conversation with Patient, 31 March 2016.

[20] Informal conversation with *anti-gang*, 21 January 2016.

[21] Video fragment of the eviction of a pirate market shot by an *anti-gang* leader, Goma, 1 November 2015.

[22] These are markets, often alongside the road, that do not have the official authorisation of the municipal authorities.

> *Despite widespread discontent with state authorities, languages of stateness remain firmly implanted in Congolese citizens' understandings of political order. Stateness evokes a particular discourse of power, which is associated with officiality, bureaucracy, sovereignty, bounded territory, the law, and what it means to be Congolese in terms of citizens' rights and obligations vis-à-vis the state and the nation.*

Clearly, *anti-gang* practices of policing are informed by this broadly shared understanding, or political imagination, of the state as an organising principle of society.[23] As described earlier for the citizen imaginations of *auto-prise en charge* and being *Gomatracien*, the *anti-gang* invoke the state imaginary to legitimise themselves as street authorities; to enable the political work of everyday policing. In turn, *anti-gang* practices also give shape to this state imaginary, which can hardly be called a figment of the mind. Through wearing state-like uniforms, operating in collaboration with state security agents (such as the ANR agent or PNC officers in the video fragments above), and acting police- and military-like, this dominant imaginary of the state 'touches ground' (Meyer 2009a: 3) and becomes very tangible in everyday urban life.

The point of interest here is not to determine whether civilian policing groups such as the *anti-gang* are 'state' or 'non-state', or to place a normative judgement on Congolese state agencies in Goma as 'failed' [compared to what?] or 'absent' [they are not]. By enacting and harnessing the state imaginary, civilian policing groups such as the *anti-gang* illustrate that the state–society boundary is porous and elusive (Kirsch & Grätz 2010b; Mitchell 1991). At the same time, it shows, as Mitchell asserts, that 'producing and maintaining the distinction between state and society is itself a mechanism that generates resources of power' (Mitchell 1991: 90).

In sum, *anti-gang* practices are informed by and give form to simultaneously political imaginations of stateness and citizenship. Although they claim to be its opposite, at the same time they subject themselves to the imaginary of the state as ruling over society. In this regard, as Lund (2006: 689) argues for what he conceptualises as 'twilight institutions', 'the idea [or imaginary] of the state is also effectively propelled by institutions which challenge the state but depend on the idea to do so'. In terms of state–society relations, the *anti-gang* do not imagine a fundamentally new political order. They feed into, rather than reinvent, dominant political imaginations around stateness and citizenship. However, in their claims to authority, the *anti-gang* do more than merely imagining themselves along the lines of stateness and citizenship. In the following sections I elaborate how their practices of everyday policing are also shaped by, and shape forms of, political imagination around the father and martial arts and action movies.

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[23] This is not particular to Congo, but is noted for a variety of cases worldwide (see for example Pratten & Sen 2007; Kirsch & Grätz 2010a; Feltran 2020).

The father

Another form of political imagination the *anti-gang* deploy in imposing themselves as street authorities relates to the figure of the father. In Schatberg's well known *Political Legitimacy in Middle Africa* (2001), he argues that 'political legitimacy in this corner of the globe rests on the tacit normative idea that government stands in the same relationship to its citizens that a father does to his children' (Schatzberg 2001: 1). For Congo, the most illustrative example is ex-president Mobutu, who liked to present himself as the father of the nation. According to this paternal logic, a *bon père de la famille* (a good father of the family) loves and nurtures his children, but on the flipside also disciplines and punishes them when behaving badly. Schatzberg notes that these paternal and familial metaphors did not restrict themelves to references to the president. '[T]here was also a replication of this imagery and metaphor at other levels throughout the state machinery and in other segments of society' (Schatzberg 2001: 2).

It is important to note that politics infused with the political imagination of the father—nurturing and disciplining its children—did not start with the long reign of Mobutu, nor can be put aside as a pre-colonial 'African' way of understanding politics. To a large extent, as de Sardan (2008) notes, it needs to be traced back to colonisation. Like elsewhere in Africa, the Belgian coloniser expressed their relationship with the 'natives' in 'stark terms of father and child' (Gondola 2016: 42); i.e. in need of being 'civilised', educated and punished when necessary.

In Goma's *gang* world, the political imagination of the father is embodied in the personage of the *maître* (master), a patron amongst *gangs*, who guides and takes care of (*encadre*) his *petits* (little ones, inferiors). It is a social status that is given to the fiercest, strongest and most streetwise amongst *gangs*. As further elaborated upon in the following section, high importance is given to mastering martial arts. Within the *anti-gang*, *maîtres* are often black belts in Shotokan or judo. Others are qualified boxers and weightlifters.[24] There are multiple *maîtres* in the *anti-gang* who are hierarchically structured. Overall, each neighbourhood group has one or two *maîtres* who often fill the position of *chef d'axe*[25] (group leader) and *chef de patrouille* (patrol leader).[26] As

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[24] Weightlifters were looked down upon by other *maîtres* in the martial arts who did not see weightlifting as a martial art.

[25] They use 'axe' to demarcate their territory of one *anti-gang* group.

[26] Furthermore, for most of my fieldwork—until he was set aside because of internal struggles over leadership—the different groups were overseen by the coordinator and founder of the *anti-gang*, *maître* Robin (this name is anonymised), the *maître* of all *anti-gangs*. After Maître Robin was set aside, multiple neighbourhoods had their own independent groups of *anti-gangs* who did not respond to one overall leader/coordinator.

Figure 1. Maître Robin and some of his *anti-gang* 'elements' (Hendriks T. 2016).

one *anti-gang* element put it, their *maître* is 'the spiritual father of both the *maibobo* and the *anti-gangs*'.[27]

At first sight, it seems paradoxical that a leader of those who claim to protect Goma's inhabitants against the crime and violence of *maibobo* also considers himself a father figure to the latter. However, on many occasions I observed how respectfully the *maibobo* treated *anti-gang maîtres* and how these *maîtres* at times sat down with them, sharing a plastic bag of *chief* (strong liquor) and cigarettes whilst chitchatting. An *anti-gang* maître explained this to me as follows, using paternal metaphors:

> They [the maibobo] are also children of Goma. Even in the bible, it is written that you can hit your child, to put him on the right path again. My relationship with the shege [Lingala for mai-bobo] is like one between father and child. It is not a question of being each other's enemies, it is a parental relationship [relation parentale]. I know all of them. We are all children of Goma [see the former section]. He who has strength corrects the other. In addition, we are supported by the state. So, we use the strength of the state and our physical force. It is not just about beating them. We do not want to kill them. It is about showing them the right path. The anti-gang are my children, but the bashege (Lingala for street children) are my children as well.[28]

So, through the lens of the imaginary of the father, the *anti-gang* is not so much about eradicating or doing away with the phenomenon of the *maibobo*. Rather, it is about 'transforming the *maibobo* into responsible citizens that do not cause trouble',[29] showing them the difference between good and bad. They punish them like a father

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[27] Informal conversation with *anti-gang*, Goma, 22 March 2016.

[28] Informal conversation with *anti-gang* leader, Goma, 5 November 2015.

[29] Informal conversation with *anti-gang* leader, Goma, 30 March 2016.

punishes a bad child, which is legitimised by the bible itself.[30] One way of showing these 'children' the right path is to recruit them. To be an *anti-gang*, after all, one must first be a *gang*. Many of the *gangs* recruited by the *anti-gang* have also been *maibobo*. By becoming an *anti-gang*, they can be recuperated and redeemed; work 'for the good of the population' (*pour le bien de la population*).

One afternoon on 11 December 2015, I witnessed a *maibobo* being recruited. An *anti-gang* called to say that they had caught a thief red-handed trying to steal phone credits. They [seven *anti-gangs*] were holding him at a football stadium in Goma. When I arrived, I noticed the thief was limping and could barely stand on his feet. Sitting on the tribunes of the stadium, with the thief in between us on the ground, we waited for their *maître* to arrive. When he did, the interrogation started. The apprehended thief begged for mercy and stressed that he was a *sportif* (martial arts practitioner) as well, that he had learned judo in Kinshasa. This made the *anti-gang* conclude that he was probably a *kuluna* member (youth gangs in Kinshasa that rob people with machetes), in other words a criminal. The thief now begged the *anti-gang maître* to recruit him, arguing he could be of use to them. The latter decided to verify whether he was a *sportif* or not and ordered *maître* Patient,[31] the *chef d'axe* of an *anti-gang* group in the neighbourhood of Katindo, a black belt in Shotokan, to fight him. Already beaten up, the thief was no match for Patient, who brutally floored him thrice. Nonetheless he did prove that he mastered some judoka techniques. This convinced the *anti-gang maître* to recruit him rather than handing him over to the police.[32] Later that day he told me: 'I recruited him because this is our mission; make the *maibobo* leave the streets to become responsible men'.[33]

> You see, all anti-gangs here are former gangs. But now they are encadrés [guided, supervised, taken care of]. Now they work for the good of the people, and they are stronger than the other gangs.[34]
>
> In the anti-gang we have formed them, washed their brains, showed them the difference between good and bad. Is this wrong?[35]

The *maître* is also a father figure to his *anti-gang* group to whom he refers as his 'disciples' in biblical terms. He shows them the way, protects them and 'opens their minds'[36] to how to make a living on the streets. He teaches low-ranked members how

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[30] As Schatzberg notes, the political imagination of the father is permeated by religious and spiritual metaphors (Schatzberg 2001: 51).

[31] Since he later died, shot by a police bullet, and had explicitly asked to use his real name, the name of *maître* Patient is not anonymised.

[32] Observation, Goma, 11 December 2015.

[33] Informal conversation with *anti-gang* coordinator, 11 December 2015.

[34] Informal conversation with *anti-gang* leader (Sarkozy), Goma, 8 December 2015.

[35] Informal conversation with *anti-gang* leader, Goma, 21 January 2016.

[36] Informal conversation with *gang* leader, Goma, 13 March 2017.

to do the job of an *anti-gang*: coaching them in the martial arts, showing them how, where and when to do 'collections' (levy 'taxes'); and how to deal with *maibobo* and thieves. Moreover, a good *maître* knows how to secure access to state patronage networks around the PNC, ANR and FARDC officials, and the municipal authorities. Similar to the argument of Hoffmann & Verweijen (2019) concerning Mai-Mai rebels in the Kivus, to operate effectively, *anti-gang* leaders in turn need 'fatherly' protection (patronage) from state officials (see also Hendriks M. 2018). In short, as Pype (2007) writes on similar groups of *sportifs* in Kinshasa, they are 'at once patron and client' (Pype 2007: 259). As is common to patron–client relationships, in return for their 'gift' of protection and guidance (*encadrement*) in how to be an *anti-gang*, *maîtres* demand loyalty and a lion's share of the group income.

When conflicts in the group arise, the *maître* is the one that mediates and places a final verdict, sometimes temporarily or indefinitely suspending or physically punishing *anti-gang* members for going too far (for example, in the case of theft). However, his role as conflict mediator goes beyond the work sphere of being an *anti-gang*. In November 2015 for example, the girlfriend of an *anti-gang* member in the neighbourhood of Ndosho came to see the *maître* of the group with a bruised eye. She accused her boyfriend of hitting her, and not making love to her anymore. The coordinator gathered a meeting and assembled all ten *anti-gang* members of Ndosho in a shop, where he patiently listened to both sides of the story. Afterwards, in front of everyone, he urged the *anti-gang* member in question to stop hitting his girlfriend. He told him that if he respected her and treats her right (also in the bedroom), she would return him the favour.[37]

In sum, the *maître* is a leader and father figure who provides guidance to the rest of the *anti-gang* group. Economically, by providing them with an income through the weekly 'collections' and other small jobs. Politically, by securing protection[38] and the patronage of officials and politicians. In terms of physical condition and fitness, by coaching them in the martial arts. And finally, morally, for example by intervening in family disputes and teaching them 'the difference between good and bad'.

To come back to Schatzberg's (2001) analyses, the above is a clear example of how the political imagination of the father, of government relating to citizens as a father to his children, is replicated throughout society. Just as the president is seen as the father of the nation, *anti-gang* leaders consider themselves as father figures to *maibobo*— who need to be educated, corrected and shown the right path—and to *anti-gangs*, of whom he takes care. In this way, the political imagination of the father informs how *anti-gangs* see themselves in (hierarchical) relation to each other, and the *maibobo* and thieves they have sworn to police. It gives shape to the *anti-gang's* social cause:

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[37] Observation, 20 November 2015, Ndosho.

[38] For example, by using their influence to keep them out of prison when in conflict with other authorities.

to transform the *maibobo* into responsible men, teaching them the difference between right and wrong. Moreover, it also shapes the role and responsibilities of patronage and 'care' of *anti-gang* leaders. By acting upon this political imagination and adapting it to their lifeworld, they contribute, in their way, to giving shape to this prevalent imaginary foundation of authority on which Congo's political order is built.

Martial arts and action movies

A fourth form of political imagination that inspires *anti-gang* politics of everyday policing is drawn from the popular imagery of martial arts and action movies. This is not specific to either *anti-gangs* or Goma or Congo. Fighters such as Bruce Lee, Jean-Claude Van Damme and Sylvester Stallone serve as role models for many young men across Africa and elsewhere (Richards 1996; Jourdan 2004; Bazenguissa-Ganga 1999; Hoffmann 2010; Joseph 1999; van Staden 2017; High 2010; Pype 2007).

The *anti-gang's* very foundation was inspired by martial arts- and action movies. In 2007, disturbed by the aggravated harassments of the Virunga market by *maibobo* (pickpocketing and extorting from traders and their customers), *Maître* Robin, a judo master and money exchanger at the market, told the president of the market committee: 'In the USA, there is a group of *anti-gang*, led by Jean-Claude Van Damme who fights gangsters, they are *sportifs*, we can do the same thing here'.[39] The latter agreed, and the *anti-gang*, coordinated by *Maître* Robin, came into being. This section elaborates on how the global imagery of martial arts and action movies serves as an 'imaginary space' (Pype 2007; Gondola 2016) that shapes and is also shaped by *anti-gang*—and *gang*—practices, giving form to hypermasculine imaginations around order-making in the process.

In *Tropical Cowboys*, Didier Gondola (2016) eloquently describes how in their quest for masculinity,[40] in Leopoldville[41] of the 1950s, youth gangs fashioned themselves through the imagery of the Western, which resulted in the so-called *Bill* movement, and later the *Yankees*. Across Africa, the Hollywood Western was one of the first popular film genres introduced to colonised audiences. This was no accident. In the colonial imaginary, the white hero gunslinger taming the 'Wild West' and its 'natives' bared resemblance and to some extent legitimated (in their eyes) the

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[39] Informal conversation with *Maître* John, Goma, 1 February 2016.

[40] An in-depth elaboration of the different discourses of (subaltern) masculinities in Congo is beyond the scope of this article. For a much more coherent overview of the contemporary debates on masculinities in Congo—next to the authors referred to in this article—the work of Thomas Hendriks (2016; 2019; 2021; forthcoming) and Jeroen Cuvelier (2014; 2017) is a must read.

[41] Leopoldville was the name for Kinshasa in the colonial period.

European's colonising work on the African frontier. Soon, however, anxieties arose on the part of the colonial administration about the bad influence of Westerns on youth, after the imagery of the Western started to shape youth and gang culture (van Staden 2017; Ambler 2001; Suriano 2008; Nixon 1994). On Leopoldville, Gondola states:

> *Young people, especially, parlayed their vision of the Far West from the screens into the street, creating in the process a unique hybrid blend that conflated the Hollywood version of the drifting cowboy with local elements of manhood and fashioned township gangs after frontier possess (Gondola 2016: 66).*

As Pype (2007: 264) asserts on Kinshasa: 'the consumption of Westerns in movie theatres ... propagated the cowboy as a new ideal of masculinity'. It provided youth with an 'imaginary space' to draw models, styles and behaviours from: models such as Buffalo Bill and Billy the Kid; styles of walking, talking and dress such as the cowboy hat and boots; and moral and behavioural codes, for example of when and how to engage in a fight (Gondola 2016; Pype 2007). They did not just mimic the Western imagery, but 'appropriated and reinterpreted film images in their own terms' (Ambler 2001: 87), performing 'their own tropical version of Hollywood's Far West' (Gondola 2016: 72).

Before reading any further, I suggest you scan the QR code on the left, or open the link in the footnote,[42] to take a look to a fiction film that TD Jack, a Goma-based cineaste, and I co-produced together with an *anti-gang* group in the neighbourhood of Ndosho. In this film, which came into being on their demand, they re-enacted their lifeworld and experiences as *gangs* and *anti-gangs* the way they saw fit.[43] In sum, they came up with the idea for the script, acted, and gave us feedback during the editing process. TD Jack and I aimed to facilitate as well as possible the making of *their* film (see Hendriks M. 2019). Better than I could ever write, the film shows how *gangs* and *anti-gangs* today—in similar fashion to the Bills through the Western genre in the 1950s—style their political subjectivity in relation to martial arts and action movies.

The film, based on true events, tells the story of *Monstre* ending up in and escaping from prison, using no more than grinded chilli peppers. Interestingly, the film starts and ends with re-enactments of scenes of the action movie *Expendables II*, starring an impressive cast of fighters with actors such as Sylvester Stallone, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Jet Li, Terry Crews, Chuck Norris, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis and Jason Statham. In this movie, the mercenary group the *Expendables* led by Ross (Sylvester Stallone) is engaged by a CIA agent (Bruce Willis) to retrieve a blueprint of a plutonium mine from a crashed plane wreck in Albania. After having retrieved the item, the *Expendables* are ambushed by the criminal mastermind Villain (Jean-Claude Van Damme) and his mercenary group the *Sangs*, who want the blueprint for

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[42] www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnuJQGa6bEI

[43] Similar to the principles behind the making of Jean Rouch's film *Moi, un Noir* (1958).

themselves in order to mine the plutonium and sell it to the highest bidder. They take the plutonium and kill Billy, the youngest of the *Expendables*. Ross swears revenge and at the end of the movie [spoiler alert] kills Villain in an epic hand-to-hand fight.

In short, the *anti-gang's* own action movie dramatises the true events of *Monstre* ending up in—and escaping from—prison through scenes of the *Expendables II*, modelling the *anti-gang* leader on the image of Sylvester Stallone. *Monstre's* version starts at the mine of Kalimbi, Nyabibwe[44]—around 120 kilometres south of Goma. This is where, before ending up with the *anti-gang* in Goma, *Monstre* led a group of *barasta* that 'provided security' on one of the hills in the mine. Instead of recovering an Albanian plutonium mine blueprint, he and his crew retrieve a diamond under a big rock. As in *Expendables II*, *Monstre's* group is being ambushed by the group of John Cena (the leader of the *anti-gang* group, imitating Jean-Claude Van Damme). After they kill one of *Monstre's* men in the same way as Billy in the *Expendables*, *Monstre* is taken to prison. Here, the re-enactment of *Monstre's* own story escaping from prison starts. The action movie illuminates what *gangs* and *anti-gangs* mean by expressing: 'my life is like a [action] movie', or 'I have lived a lot of movies'. Elaborating on the real conditions by which *Monstre* was sent to prison, he stated:

> They caught me at the lake. We already passed a lot of rivers, there were a lot of gunshots. I had to do a lot of jumps. It was like in a movie. ... I was in trouble at the lake, because I did not know how to swim. ... I hid myself in a hole under a tree at the river .... I had a shot wound in my hand, in between two fingers.[45]

During my fieldwork, *anti-gangs* often dramatised events—such as fights with other *gangs*, conflicts with the police and fellow gang members—through the scenes of martial arts and action movies. For example, one day an *anti-gang* leader told how he suspected one of the members of collaborating with thieves. To explain how he felt, he referred to a movie he saw on the Cold War, in which a commander of a group of American soldiers confronted a traitor and shot him. Disillusioned with the fact that he could not trust his own men, the *anti-gang* leader argued that he now found himself in a similar situation.[46]

Gangs and *anti-gangs* do not only imagine themselves living movies, but also appropriate, reinterpret and put into action terms, styles and behaviours from this movie imagery (see Pype 2007; Ambler 2001). Up until today—as one can see in *Monstre's* action film—*gangs* in Goma still refer to themselves as *cowboys* and *yankees*, a vocabulary clearly appropriated from the Western genre (Bazenguissa-Ganga 1999). Similar to the use of the word *gang*, the words *cowboy* and *yankee* denote toughness in both a positive and negative sense. Whilst used to refer to marginalised

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44 The entire film was shot in Goma.

45 Interview with *Monstre*, Goma, 2 July 2017.

46 Informal conversation with *anti-gang* leader, Goma, 21 February 2017.

Figure 2. Screenshots from the fiction film on *Monstre*'s prison break we made together with an *anti-gang* group.

youths and *voyous* (bandits) of the neighbourhood, it also designates 'anyone who does not fear risk' (Pype 2007: 265–6) and '*l'homme fort par excellence*' [the ultimate strong man] (Bazenguissa-Ganga 1999: 340). In the *anti-gang's* action movie, *Monstre* is harassed by his fellow inmates once he arrives in his prison cell (a common practice in Congolese prisons). To make them stop, he convinces his fellow prisoners—to whom he refers as his *petits* (little ones, inferiors)—that he is a real *yankee*, a *cowboy* and a maître (a patron amongst *gangs*) with the grade of general (another example of *gangs* and *anti-gangs* enacting languages of stateness) who is going to make them escape.

Through the imagery of martial arts and action movies, *gangs* and *anti-gangs* shape their identity as *sportifs*. Whilst not all *sportifs* in Goma are *gangs*, being a good *sportif* is highly valued in this *gang* world (Hendriks M. 2019). It is best to be trained in more than one discipline of the martial arts, in order to not get outwitted in a street fight when being confronted with *sportifs* trained in disciplines with which one is not acquainted. Through martial arts, so they argue, the *anti-gang* transform their bodies into a weapon.[47] It provides them with strength, muscled bodies and social status on the streets (Pype 2007). Fighting techniques and styles are often directly appropriated out of martial arts and action movies. For example, one *anti-gang* leader started to teach his pupils Thai boxing after he saw the movie *Ong Back: The Thai Warrior*

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[47] Informal conversation with *anti-gang* leader, Goma, 5 November 2015.

(2003), a style, he argued, that was yet unknown in Congo.[48] On the job, *anti-gangs* carry self-fabricated iron nunchuks, which, in addition to being a fierce weapon, are also a key symbol drawn from the imagery of martial arts movies, through which they underline and materialise their identity as *sportifs*;[49] the QR code on the right shows a *sportif* doing a nunchuk performance.

Similar to what Gondola (2016) argues concerning the Bills in the 1950s, *sportifs* in Goma also draw a moral and 'behavioural lexicon' from martial arts and action movies. As martial arts transform one's body into a weapon, one should be careful how and against whom to use it. Much like the frugal Bruce Lee who never provokes a fight and only takes on villains, the *anti-gang* assert that 'in front of people that do not do sports [martial arts] you need to be humble'.[50] 'Hitting *thieves* and *maibobo* is okay. You are in your right. But you can't use your nunchuk against everyone. It is a mordacious weapon.'[51] 'We do not want controversies. I know that I am stronger, but I do not smack everyone in the face. If I hit them with this arm [points to his right arm], blood will flow. If then I end up in prison, I need to start all over again [once released].'[52]

Moreover, much like their model fighters in martial arts and action movies, as one *gang* leader explained, 'a real maître is calm and has self-control, even when he is drunk .... A good *maître* has mastery over himself and knows how to master others. He will not fight with just anyone or be the first to hit someone'.[53] Also in the *anti-gang's* action movie *Monstre*, by presenting himself as a maître, the protagonist shows in his attitude that he masters himself—literally working on his body—and is firmly in control of his environment and the people in it. He takes the lead over other prisoners, calmly working out an escape strategy, whilst not being intimidated by the prosecutor in charge of his case nor the guards. In sum, although *gangs* in Goma and elsewhere in Congo (see Wilson 2012; Geenen 2009; Hendriks T. 2019; Hendriks M. *et al.* 2013; Hollington & Nassenstein 2017) still refer to themselves as *yankees* and *cowboys*, the imaginary space through which *gangs* fashion their subjectivity has made room for the imagery of martial arts and action movies.

Van Staden argues that the rise in popularity of Asian martial arts movies amongst African audiences since the 1970s, after the success of the Western genre, is attributed to its 'changed racial dynamics and explicit anti-colonial imagery' (van Staden 2017: 11). The 1970s represent a time where many African countries recently gained or were still struggling for independence. In Bruce Lee's international breakthrough *Enter the*

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[48] Informal conversation with *anti-gang leader*, Goma, 22 March 2017.

[49] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TEDwlgToiJY

[50] Informal conversation with *anti-gang* leader, Goma, 17 February 2017.

[51] Informal conversation with *anti-gang*, Goma, 15 May 2017.

[52] Informal conversation with *anti-gang* leader, Goma, 17 February 2017.

[53] Informal conversation with *gang* leader, Goma, 6 March 2017.

Dragon (1973) for example, white guys are beaten by Asian and even African American fighters, who explicitly brought in the theme and imagery of the black American struggle (ibid.).[54] According to May Joseph (1999), another appeal of Bruce Lee's movies to Tanzanian audiences is that his films are embedded in an 'aesthetics of frugality' which resonates with the frugality of everyday life for most young Tanzanians (Joseph 1999: 51–5). Lee mostly plays a very modest character—such as a factory worker, peasant or country bumpkin—for whom little is enough and self-discipline is everything. He does not walk around with guns and bombs. His only weapon—of frugality—is his body trained in the martial arts. Although the American martial arts genre is to a large extent an appropriation of its Asian counterpart, it is hard to defend the argument that its appeal to African audiences still lies in its anti-colonial imagery or aesthetics of frugality (see van Staden 2017: 14). American martial arts and action movies bring back in the trope of the good, brave, white American hero fighting evils such as communism, criminals and dictators, often by shooting and blowing up everything and everyone that stands in their way.

What binds Billy the Kid, Bruce Lee, Jean-Claude Van Damme, Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger together is that they are tough hypermasculine 'problem solvers' (Joseph 1999) in a world full of danger. They are all 'subject to grave injustices and are made to suffer immensely before they vanquish their enemies against all odds through the use of spectacular violence' (Hoffmann 2010: 354). Westerns and Asian and American martial arts movies have in common that they are celebrations of male bravado. As Pype (2007: 264) notes: 'These media products show virile men, who are self-confident, in control of everything, energetic and dynamic. They control their health and are able to confront any physical danger; in a word, they are invincible'. Similar to Hoffmann's (2010) argument concerning Mai-Mai rebels in South Kivu (DR Congo), *gangs* and *anti-gangs* in Goma identify with the ethos of these films since they see their condition as very familiar. *Kigang* life in the Kivus is full of danger, injustice and suffering. Fighters of the likes of Bruce Lee, Jean-Claude Van Damme and Sylvester Stallone serve as role models for how to deal with structural and everyday violence that surrounds them. Additionally, in the case of the *anti-gang*, they are models for how to restore order in a troubled city (see Joseph 1999: 57). Writing on Waorani men, an indigenous group in Ecuador of which previous generations were known as fierce hunters and warriors, High (2010: 762) asserts that 'images of Bruce Lee and Rambo appear to embody a fantasy of masculine power and generational continuity that young men idealize, even if they fail to demonstrate it in everyday life'. The action film on *Monstre*'s prison break however shows that global imagery of martial arts and action movies is more than a masculine fantasy. They *live* these movies.

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[54] The black struggle is embodied in the actor Jim Kelly, who fights racist policemen and trains his fellow African Americans in his own karate club decorated with black power symbols (van Staden 2017).

Similar to what Pype notes for *sportifs* in Kinshasa: 'They inhabit and act out the virility of the mass-mediated fictive figures. In this way, the masculinity of the young fighting Kinois is 'more real' than the images they imitate' (Pype 2007: 267).

To summarise, *anti-gang* practices and everyday politics are infused by the global imagery of Asian and American martial arts and action movies. Political imaginations related to these movies shape how social status is acquired on the streets, how *sportifs* and *gangs* style their identity, and set up moral and behavioural codes. Moreover, they provide marginalised urban youths with role models to look up to in order to fight back against injustice and the violence that surrounds them. At the same time, by living these movies, *anti-gang* members also give form to a 'tropical version' (Gondola 2016: 72) of the hypermasculine political imaginations present in this global movie imagery.

Conclusion

In this article, I examined the role of the imagination in how the *anti-gang* in Goma impose themselves as street authorities. I demonstrated that far from being figments of the mind, political imaginations around the state, citizenship, the father, and martial arts and action movies are harnessed by the *anti-gang* to do political work. They shape how *anti-gangs* legitimise themselves, see themselves in relation to the *maibobo* and state agents, acquire social status, style their political subjectivity, engage in political actions of order-making and policing (such as evicting pirate markets and catching thieves), understand the *anti-gang's* social cause (transforming the *maibobo* in responsible men), what they expect from their leaders and what it takes to be one. Furthermore, the work of the imagination is involved in how the *anti-gang* adhere to forms of political belonging, hierarchy, and moral and behavioural codes.

By enacting them through various performances—such as by wearing uniforms, waving their nunchuks, recruiting *maibobo*, and acting 'state-like'—*anti-gang* practices in turn materialise and give form to political imaginations of order-making and authority in the concrete socio-political policing environment and everyday urban life of Goma. In other words, by drawing from and conferring meaning to political imaginations around the state, citizenship, the father, and martial arts and action movies, the *anti-gang* contribute to making them matter and experienced as real.

The *anti-gang's* struggle to impose themselves as street authorities in Goma's popular neighbourhoods is indeed, to some extent, as Mbembe argues, aimed at 'establishing new forms of legitimate domination and gradually restructuring formulas of authority built on other foundations' (Mbembe 2001: 76). At the same time, through the analyses of the imaginary foundations that underlie the *anti-gang's* street authority, it is also clear that the *anti-gang* do not so much envision a new political order.

Instead, they seek to be included in it and become politically significant. As Helene Kyed argues on street authority, it 'does not fundamentally overturn prevailing relations of power and political systems .... However, it does provide an implicit political critique of the prevailing state of affairs ...' (Kyed 2018: 32).

The *anti-gang* impose themselves as street authorities, feeding into and informed by prevalent political imaginations of authority and order-making: the state as organising principle of society; *auto-prise en charge* and being *Gomatracien*; the father taking care of and disciplining his children; and hypermasculine political imaginations inspired by martial arts and action movies centred around the courageous action hero, mastering himself and others and bringing order to a treacherous world.

As Sneath *et al.* (2009) note on the literature on social imaginaries, there is often a tendency to romanticise the emancipatory and progressive potential of the imagination to ultimately lead to a better world. However, as Jaffe illustrates concerning the role of the political imagination in urban rule by criminal leaders (so-called 'dons') in Kingston, we should also be prepared to meet 'the more dystopian potentials of imaginative engagement' which relate to violent political practices (Sneath *et al.* 2009, cited in Jaffe 2018: 1100). The way in which the *anti-gang* imagine themselves as street authorities is also in many ways a violent enterprise. It does certainly not envision a fundamentally brighter or better future. At the same time, however, their imaginative and 'real' endeavours of imposing themselves as street authorities should be read first and foremost as an attempt by marginalised youths to escape their exclusion from social, political and economic life, and to make themselves matter.

Acknowledgements

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Precarious technoscapes: forced mobility and mobile connections at the urban margins

Peter Chonka and Jutta Bakonyi

Abstract: Displaced people settling at the margins of Somali cities live in conditions of extreme precarity. They are also active users of information and communications technology (ICTs), employing mobile phones to maintain social networks, obtain information, navigate urban space and labour markets, transfer and store money, and receive aid. This article explores mobile connectivity from the perspective of displaced people, analysing how they experience mobile phones, and the connections they enable in the context of conflict and urban reconstruction in Somalia. The findings caution against techno-optimist developmental discourses, and provide a nuanced picture of the benefits, constraints, challenges and risks entailed in the engagement of marginalised urban populations with ICTs. Although providing various beneficial affordances, increased mobile connectivity does not by itself diminish inequalities. ICTs can reinforce power differentials between urban labourers and employers, become instruments of exploitation, and increase the distance between receivers of aid and the transnational regimes that govern precarity in Somali cities.

Keywords: Mobile phones, mobile money, ICT4D, precarity, displacement, migration, urbanisation, Somalia, Africa.

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Introduction

Urbanisation in Somalia is closely related to displacement and migration.[1] Violent conflicts and periodic ecological shocks displace people who often move to cities. There they either settle in makeshift dwellings in ruined buildings, build shacks on unused inner-city spaces or set up tents in sprawling camps that ring the outskirts of urban centres. While moving and settling, displaced people learn to navigate the uncertainties and insecurities of unfamiliar urban environments, mobilise new and existing social relations, engage with humanitarian organisations, and look for means to survive within urban labour markets. Their acute precarity is reflected and compounded in their meagre possessions and basic shelter: corrugated steel huts, or tents constructed from sticks, tarpaulin, discarded cloth or tin cans. In the new urban settlements, people often go without adequate food and lack sufficient access to healthcare or education. Basic mobile phones, however, are widely used by people in precarious settlements—in Somalia and across the wider continent—and constitute an increasingly ubiquitous information and communications technology (ICT) integral to their sense-making, security and survival.

Mobile connectivity has become a prominent feature of social and economic life in Somali cities. The Somali telecommunications sector has been one of the most expansive industries post-1991, a period characterised by state collapse, conflict, foreign military intervention, and externally backed counterinsurgency and state-building efforts. In this article, we ask how displaced people use mobile phones and how engagement with ICT infrastructure shapes their everyday life in the urban environment. Improving ICT access for marginalised mobile populations is an often-stated goal of international development actors, and is frequently associated with narratives of 'empowerment' (Hatayama 2018; World Bank 2016). In the wake of the so-called 'European Refugee Crisis' of 2015–2016, the figure of the 'connected migrant' (Diminescu 2008) has risen in prominence. Accounts of digitally mediated mobility have highlighted the practical value of ICTs as they expand networking abilities of mobile populations, increasing access to information and other resources that facilitate movement (UNHCR 2016). Increasingly, however, critical interventions are challenging this tech-optimism, highlighting individualised harms and burdens of connectivity (Awad & Tossell 2019), the techno-colonial power inequalities built into

'digital innovation for development' discourse and practice (Madianou 2019), and the implication of ICTs in 'post-humanitarian' strategies for reproducing and governing an expanding global precariat (Duffield 2018).

Academic literature on migrants' use of ICTs tends to focus on refugees *en route* to the Global North. Although studies of the impacts of ICTs for marginal populations in the Global South are increasing, research on the use of phones by forced migrants on the African continent is limited. This article's empirical material was generated in a research project that explored links between urbanisation and displacement[2] from the perspectives of displaced people in three cities in Somalia: Baidoa, Bosaaso and Mogadishu.[3] It draws from 79 narrative interviews—conducted by researchers from Somalia and the authors between 2017 and 2018—with residents of multiple urban settlements in which predominantly displaced people reside. Thirteen semi-structured interviews were also held in those cities with so-called 'gatekeepers', host communities, humanitarian workers and local government officials. Additionally, the researchers used 'photovoice', equipping 30 people, ten in each city, with camera-phones to document their everyday lives.[4] Photos used in this article were taken by these research participants. Drawing on research findings on migration to Europe, the interviews included questions on access to mobile phones and ICT infrastructure during displacement and resettlement. The interviewees confirmed widespread use and highlighted the everyday

Figure 1. A female resident of a displaced people's camp in Mogadishu holds her baby and phone. Photo by Mano (July 2018).

[2] https://securityonthemove.co.uk/

[3] Displaced people make up a significant proportion of the populations of these cities. The project also conducted research in Hargeisa, capital of the *de facto* independent but internationally unrecognised Republic of Somaliland (Stuvøy *et al.* 2021).

[4] The photographic materials and testimonies were used in exhibitions aimed at stimulating dialogue between local policymakers and people living at the urban margins. An online version of the exhibition is available at: https://securityonthemove.co.uk/photo-exhibition/. Pseudonyms are used for interviewees; photographers are mentioned by their first name.

affordances of mobile phones for maintaining social networks within cities, and with rural places of origin. Mobile phones also enabled payments for work and facilitated engagement with humanitarian actors using mobile money systems for cash aid.

Drawing from Appadurai, we use the concept of 'technoscapes' to emphasise the 'global configuration ... of technology' that 'moves at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries' (1990: 34). Appadurai's emphasis on mobility, flows and 'scapes' aims at overcoming the often static and spatially bounded conceptualisation of the social. Instead, he highlights how multiple, multidirectional and chaotic flows crisscross the globe, creating overlaps and intersections that shape contemporary global culture. To underscore his argument, Appadurai tends to contrast flows with (spatial) fixities and implicitly dissolves the dialectic tension between mobility and geographic spatiality that other researchers have identified as constitutive of socio-spatial formations (Thrift 2006). His emphasis on flows, therefore, runs the risk of overlooking how multiple mobilities are embedded in—and simultaneously shape—a variety of locally specific social relations and materialise unequally in socio-spatial formations and landscapes across the globe (Heyman & Campbell 2009). We build on Appadurai's notion of technoscapes, emphasising the planetary expansion of digital technologies. However, beyond the notion of unfettered movement, our focus on the everyday lives of people at urban margins shows how flows are staggered and interrupted as they are embedded in improvised and cobbled-together materials that constitute the precarious fringes of global technoscapes. Precarity here identifies politically-induced conditions of existential and normalised uncertainty and insecurity for certain populations (Butler 2009: ii). People undertake continuous improvisation, making their living through assembling left-over materials and social fragments, and mitigating infrastructural gaps and technological deficiencies with their bodies and labour (Simone 2018; McFarlane 2018). Our articulation of precarious technoscapes enables us to identify how marginalised urban populations engage with and understand ICTs, without detaching these local, specific uses of technology—and the particular socio-spatial relations in which they take place—from the wider flows that enable and shape them. It is through this everyday lens that transnational flows and the multi-scalar entanglement of people living at the margins of Somali cities become visible.

Elsewhere, we have identified entanglements of locally distinctive and globally travelling practices governing displaced populations and have discussed people's agency to comply with or resist these modalities of government. The role of international humanitarian regimes and (diasporic) capital investment makes the reconstruction of (post) conflict Somali cities and the commodification and regulation of property relations inherently transnational (Bakonyi *et al.* 2019; Bakonyi 2021). In this article, we use the example of mobile phones, as individual devices and related infrastructure, as a further example of (global) interconnectedness. Urban ICTs play a distinctive role in forging multiple connections: between displaced people, the Somali diaspora, urban investors

and employers, international telecommunications companies, humanitarian agencies, and national and international policymakers. We examine how people who live in acute precarity make use of mobile phones and engage with these networks. Exploring multiple and diverse encounters through the lens of ICT infrastructure and its usage demonstrates how these particulars are embedded in wider networks and flows. This is more illuminating of conditions and practices of urban precarity than focusing simply on the 'effects' of technologies *on* particular groups (Brinkman *et al.* 2017).

The article proceeds with a review of literature on the relations between connectivity and (forced) mobility. We point to the paucity of empirical engagement on these questions *within* cities in the Global South and discuss growing scepticism about the 'empowering' potential of connectivity. This is followed by an introduction of the dynamics of displacement and (post)conflict urbanisation in Somalia. Here we also discuss the emergence of telecommunication companies as powerful actors within the conditions of a (formally) unregulated economy. We then discuss how connectivity is experienced by people with limited literacy, but who are compelled to engage with mobile systems. We examine how people imagined the affordances of technology (Nagy & Neff 2015), the things they felt that they could do with mobiles to address their conditions of insecurity caused by displacement. However, their accounts also brought to light various risks or insecurities associated with the social and economic relations mediated through mobile connections. We focus on relations between employers and a displaced workforce, and how mobile phone/money use reflects and reinforces spatial urban divides, power imbalances, and differing levels of digital capability. We also highlight risks associated with digital humanitarian engagement, data collection and connectivity into extortive global migration networks. Mobile infrastructure is embedded in the social fabric of urban life and implicated in the political economies of displacement, aid and labour that underpin the (post)conflict reconstruction of Somali cities. A comprehensive account of these interconnections is required for any assessment of the extent to which the lives of people at the margins are improved by ICT access.

Mobile phones and mobile people: displacement, empowerment and precarity

The acceleration of migration flows through Mediterranean routes around 2015 prompted significant research interest in the role of phones and mobile internet access for people making perilous journeys into 'fortress Europe'. A burgeoning literature explores how mobile connectivity helps migrants access practical journey-relevant information, navigate border regimes, access or avoid human trafficking/smuggling networks, connect with humanitarian actors, and obtain digital resources on arrival

that may foster social integration (Borkert *et al.* 2018; Dekker & Engbersen 2014; Frouws *et al.* 2016; Gillespie *et al.* 2018). This builds on earlier research on phones as the 'social glue' of migrant transnationalism (Vertovec 2004) and the emergence of 'digital diasporas' in the internet age (Brinkerhoff 2009). ICTs have long contributed to the deepening and broadening of transnational social networks and influenced further migration (Charmarkeh 2013; Diminescu 2008; Horst, C. 2006; Hiller & Franz 2004; Komito 2011; Lindley 2009b; Madianou 2016; Oiarzabal & Reips 2012; Schaub 2012). Studies in these fields have focused mainly on international migration and journeys to Europe, while migration within the Global South has gained less attention. Research on displaced peoples' ICT use in African contexts is limited, although recent studies on camps in Kenya and Uganda have shown significant smartphone use and a higher than the national average smartphone ownership (Hounsell & Owuor 2018).

Recent studies have critiqued utilitarian interpretations that emphasise the transformative or empowering aspects of ICT access. Awad & Tossell (2019) detail the emotional strain that post-arrival migrants face in their use of social media to maintain connections with a conflict-affected homeland. Connectivity builds expectations among family members that arrivals in Europe will always be 'on-call' to fulfil long-distance obligations. Digital connections can also enable mobility-linked extortion and studies have highlighted how phones, digital images and videos are used by groups who detain and torture migrants in transit countries for ransom payments from distant family members (Van Esseveld 2019; MacGregor 2019). This is a phenomenon we discuss below.

Studies of phone use by people moving within countries of the Global South have asked whether increased connectivity accelerates rural-to-urban migration (Muto 2012; Onitsuka & Hidayat 2019). Given the multiplicity of factors that drive migration to cities, differentiation of causes and effects of urban in-migration is difficult. Migration may be driven by economic growth and employment 'pull' factors, which can themselves contribute to greater ICT diffusion and expand markets for migrant connectivity (Cartier *et al.* 2005; Hübler 2016). Ethnographic research on mobile phone use and mobility within the Global South has emphasised the impacts of ICTs on social networks and their contribution to the continued entanglement of rural and urban economies and livelihood-related movements. Steel *et al.* (2017: 148) describe how ICT use in Cameroon, Rwanda and Sudan 'facilitated new connections and decreased the physical and psychological distance between the city and the countryside'. They situate this within historical continuities of mobility, identified as a crucial element of the livelihoods across multiple African contexts (Steel *et al.* 2017: 153; De Bruijn *et al.* 2010).

Nonetheless, communication practices of migrants moving to and within cities have received little attention. Very few studies engage with the use of ICTs by internally displaced populations and those living in conditions of acute ecological,

economic or social precarity. Boas (2020) looks at the online social networking of people displaced by climate change-related environmental shocks in Bangladesh, and emphasises the complexity and multi-directionality of movement. Here, mobile phones enable migrants to maintain extended and dispersed social ties, which can be leveraged when necessary. Boas (2020: 1330) argues that phones allowed for the coordinated utilisation of geographically expanded networks, improved mobility decision making and reduced risks. Phone/online access allows micro-coordination of movements during emergencies, makes information available and thus supports displaced people's decision making.

Considering mobilities related to everyday livelihoods, research in the 'ICT for development' (ICT4D) field has explored gender dynamics and potentials for women's empowerment through improved access to mobile communications. Studies highlight how devices ease access to market-relevant information or increase entrepreneurial capacity (Komunte 2015; Kusimba *et al.* 2015; Suri & Jack 2016). However, scepticism about the liberating promises of technology grows. Research has shown, for example, how cultural and economic factors can reinforce patriarchal power in the ways phones are accessed and used (Wallis 2011). ICTs may facilitate long-distance links vital for accessing opportunities, such as those described in Dahya & Dryden-Peterson's (2017) study of Somali refugees' use of virtual support networks to (potentially) access higher education. However, as they and others note, mobile connectivity does not automatically transform or transcend social structures, and ICTs are more often used in ways that support existing structural and agentic constraints on gender equality, reinforce existing social power dynamics and strengthen patriarchal familial bonds (Hahn & Kibora 2008; Horst, H.A. 2006). Porter *et al.* (2020) provide a comparative account of relationships between young women's phone ownership and usage, their relative empowerment, and chronic poverty in Ghana, Malawi and South Africa. Women's use of phones is often embedded in new forms of surveillance and control by male family members and partners. Phones can increase the threat of sexual harassment by powerful others, which can negatively impact educational and entrepreneurial strategies. While the authors acknowledge that 'many women now perceive the phone as an essential tool for promoting work opportunities', they also emphasise the lack of evidence that phone use has had a positive impact or removed restrictions in contexts of 'intense competition for jobs and business opportunities among women with few skills and little capital' (Porter *et al.* 2020: 188).

Recognition of patriarchal and economic constraints to technologically mediated empowerment has not dampened international humanitarian and development organisations' enthusiasm for ICT-orientated interventions, and programming often engages narratives around the entrepreneurial capacity of impoverished populations. Projects frequently attempt to leverage potential benefits to livelihoods and education opportunities that ICTs can provide (Hatayama, 2018) and feed into currently

dominant 'resilience' discourses (Chandler 2014). The neoliberal underpinnings of such programming have been widely critiqued, partly because the promotion of self-reliance and self-care shifts welfare responsibilities onto refugees themselves (Skran & Easton-Calabria 2020). For Duffield (2018: 142), the emphasis on innovative and design-based responses to poverty forms part of a global 'post-humanitarian' shift away from structural social transformations to the acceptance of an inequitable global *status quo*. This acceptance is enacted through 'disaggregated biopolitical technologies', including the use of mobile telephony, a platformised 'gig economy', and the digital facilitation of humanitarian management from a distance.

These research contexts and questions are relevant to our discussion of mobile phone use, displacement and urbanisation in Somalia, a country historically characterised by high levels of mobility and extensive, often securitised (and militarised) humanitarian engagement. A large part of the Somali population is directly or indirectly dependent on nomadic pastoralism or agro-pastoralism, and climate-induced migration increasingly intersects with waves of mass displacement that accompany recurrent conflict. Mobility is multidirectional. People on the move build on wide social networks and mobilise complex social relations that stretch across kin groups and urban and rural locations. Acknowledgement of the multi-directionality, multiplicity and complexity of migration is a starting point for analysis of precarious technoscapes. We focus here on the role of ICTs in establishing, maintaining or changing these networks, and how they are activated and used when needed. Studies on mobile phone connectivity within dynamics of displacement, (re-)settlement and urbanisation in Somalia or the wider Horn of Africa are lacking, and we know little about the way ICTs affect living conditions in sprawling camp-like settlements that exist within and around many cities. How do displaced people use mobile phones? Do phones shape how they navigate the new urban environment, establish settlements or look for new livelihoods? How are survival strategies involving mobile phones gendered? Before turning to accounts from displaced people that begin to answer these questions, we provide in the next section a brief background to the recurrent conflict and ongoing urban reconstruction in Somalia, and outline the rise and role of the modern telecommunications sector.

Displacement, urban (re)construction and connectivity in Somalia

The cities of Mogadishu, Baidoa and Bosaaso have each been affected in different ways by violent conflicts and corresponding phases of destruction, displacement, resettlement and (re)construction. Somalia's central government collapsed in 1991. The clan-based factions that ousted the longstanding military regime failed to form a new government, fragmenting in subsequent phases of violence that increasingly

came to be organised along clan lines (Kapteijns 2012). Consequently, many people migrated from previously more diverse cities to territories dominated by their clan (Hoehne 2016). Physical institutions and symbols of the state were destroyed in Mogadishu, along with much of the city's wider infrastructure. Militias fought over southern regions, grabbing valuable agricultural land and humanitarian supplies flowing into the country. The violence accelerated the effects of drought and initiated a famine, within which the agriculturally productive Bay region and its main city Baidoa became an epicentre (de Waal 1997: 164–8). Bosaaso, a port city on the north-eastern Somali coast, was largely spared from violence and became an attractive destination for people violently displaced from elsewhere, including officials and businesspeople linked with the former regime, as well as southern 'minority' clan/ ethnic groups (Marchal 2010).

By the mid-1990s, and following the withdrawal of the failed UN humanitarian intervention (1992–95), mass violence subsided. Unable to re-establish a central government, clan-based militias divided Somalia into a patchwork of fiefdoms (Bakonyi 2013). Some governance experiments became lasting political projects—such as the north-eastern autonomous Puntland State, with Bosaaso as its commercial centre. In the early 2000s, a Union of Islamic Courts formed in the southern regions as a relatively broad-based and popularly-supported authority (Ahmad 2015; Barnes & Hassan 2007). Neighbouring Ethiopia (backed by the US) understood the Courts as a security threat and invaded the country in 2006. The Courts were overthrown, but Al Shabaab emerged from their ruins. The group consolidated its power across the southern regions, including Mogadishu and Baidoa, until the African Union Mission for Somalia (AMISOM) helped the Transitional Federal Government oust it from the capital in 2011. This fighting caused mass displacement out of Mogadishu. However, Al Shabaab's withdrawal from the capital coincided with a severe famine which, during 2011, precipitated a new influx of people into Mogadishu and Baidoa. These cities promised access to humanitarian aid with the presence of AMISOM and other international actors. Despite losing direct control of most of its former urban strongholds since 2011, Al Shabaab maintains its insurgency in rural areas and regularly launches attacks in the Somali capital. Nonetheless, the absence of large-scale urban violence has initiated investments in business and real estate, often driven by the diaspora. Displaced people play a role in urban reconstruction as they provide a large pool of cheap labour. They often clear and prepare land for settlements, which can increase its value. Owners may then return and evict displaced people to sell or commercially develop these plots (Bakonyi *et al.* 2019: 88).

In the context of statelessness, and despite recurrent phases of violence, a vibrant and expanding telecommunications market has evolved in Somalia. Throughout the 1990s, multiple mobile phone and internet providers imported telecommunication infrastructures and established their services across the fragmented political space

(Collins 2009; Feldman 2007; Nurhussein 2008). High competition drove down airtime costs while coping with a largely unregulated and (concerning business transactions and property rights) formally unprotected environment,[5] required innovation from providers.

This could be seen, for instance, in the development of SMS-based mobile money systems that are now prevalent across the Somali territories. Telesom, the leading mobile provider in Somaliland, launched its Zaad mobile money service in 2009 (Iazzolino 2015). This was emulated by telecommunication companies in southern Somalia and Puntland. Cash can be deposited into users' mobile accounts and the input of SMS-based codes on even basic phones—indicating the desired function, amount, the phone number of recipient and a security PIN—enables the transfer of balances. SMS notifications inform users that money has been sent or received, and provide account balances. The systems effectively operate as saving accounts and are used to send and receive money. Like Safaricom's renowned MPesa system in Kenya, Somali SMS mobile money systems do not require mobile internet, but unlike MPesa, they have hitherto not charged transfer fees. In Somalia, mobile money is calculated in US Dollars, as the devalued local currency is not easily transportable across the fragmented territories and printed banknotes have diminished (Figure 2).[6] These factors, alongside the proliferation of cheap mobile handsets, have led to the widespread uptake of mobile money. As the accounts below demonstrate, people use mobile money services for their everyday shopping, receipt of wages and humanitarian support, and money transfers within social networks. Even beggars often hold signs with their mobile numbers as passers-by aren't likely to have small (physical) cash.

Telecommunications companies play a central economic role throughout Somalia and have emerged as powerful business actors. These companies overlap with the foreign remittance industry and nascent formal banking sector, and hold investment portfolios in agricultural land, food production and trade. Emblematic of their status in narratives of economic growth, their physical corporate headquarters are rising in size and visibility on the skyline of cities such as Mogadishu. Hormuud is the dominant telecom provider in southern Somalia—with Golis and Telesom leading in the Puntland and Somaliland markets, respectively. These companies emerged

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[5] Properties are not entirely unprotected in Somalia. Multiple property and user rights are embedded in informal regulations and customary laws that are, however, constantly negotiated and often also violently contested. They are also not uniformly applied and change in accordance with the groups able to exert dominance.

[6] In spite of the collapse of the state, and with it the national bank, the Somali Shilling (SoSh) continued to be used, alongside US Dollars for larger transactions. Over the years, several politico-military leaders printed new banknotes, initiating severe inflation of the SoSh (Luther 2012). In recent years, the printing of 'forged' banknotes has ceased and the availability of SoSh has significantly reduced.

Figure 2. Children in a resettlement area for displaced people in Bosaaso play with 'worthless' paper currency printed by a previous administration. Photo by Nuurow (July 2018).

around 2002 and grew out of earlier infrastructure developed by the Al Barakaat remittance company (Hagmann & Stepputat 2016: 10; Lochery 2015; Marchal 2002). Al Barakaat operated until 2001 when its funds were frozen by the US following accusations of links to terrorist financing (Lindley 2009a: 529). Today, Hormuud offers a wide range of services and is a provider of some of the lowest-cost mobile internet data in the world. In this context, mobile telephony provides a nearly ideal-typical example of the global flows that Appadurai's concept of technoscapes emphasises. Although internet access via smartphones is beyond the reach of the majority of people living at the margins of cities, basic mobile phones and mobile money were used by all interviewees. Only four interviewees, all of them elderly, did not possess a phone. However, they still used the devices of relatives or neighbours to communicate or receive money. Some interviewees reported that they had not had a phone for some time because it was broken, had been stolen or they had to sell it. They usually tried to replace it as soon as possible.

Hormuud has become a leading actor in the political economy of Somalia. The expansion of mobile telephony has precipitated a shift by humanitarian actors towards mobile money cash assistance, further expanding mobile phone use by displaced people. Jaspars *et al.* (2019) outline the wide-ranging impacts of this development, not only at the micro level of vulnerable populations' access to aid but also concerning the broader entanglements of humanitarian assistance, business and conflict. Major international aid organisations give out SIM cards or phones to displaced people and these are used at registered retailers to buy essential items, often alongside biometric ID and e-voucher systems. This requires large-scale close cooperation between humanitarian actors and telecom companies. Around 90 per cent of cash aid transfers in Somalia flow through Hormuud, which takes fees from humanitarian mobile transfers and supplies equipment for aid organisations (Jaspars *et al.* 2019: 18). The company arguably wields more power than the Somali Federal Government. It invests heavily in food imports and rural land for export-orientated agriculture, contributing to a decline in local food production, rising rural land prices and subsequent displacements of farming populations, particularly from weaker or so-called minority clans (Jaspars *et al.* 2019: 25, 44). This occurs in rural hinterlands still affected by Al Shabaab's influence and militancy, itself playing a role in driving forced displacement. Jaspars *et al.* (2019: 34) point out corruption in the cash aid system and the lack of attention paid by humanitarian actors to the wider political economy of assistance. At the micro level, displaced people often make payments to gatekeepers involved in the creation and management of their settlements. While gatekeepers provide support to new arrivals, they also extract a share of aid when camps become big enough to attract the attention of humanitarian organisations (Bakonyi 2021). We return to these practices below.

The fact that telecommunications companies have become key players in the complex political economy of humanitarianism illustrates how the impact of ICT diffusion cannot be conceptualised solely through a micro-level focus on individual device use. Similarly, Brinkman *et al.* (2017) analyse South Sudan's mobile phone industry and infrastructure, emphasising the embeddedness of the sector in the political economy of mobility, displacement and speculation around emerging ICT markets. Nonetheless, micro-level data on the ICT use of the urban poor is lacking. Addressing this, the following section shows how mobile phone-use conditions urban mobilities and precarious livelihoods at the margins of rapidly growing Somali cities. It also connects people—in ambiguous ways—to the transnational humanitarian and commercial networks that underpin their contemporary reconstruction. Here, mobile telephony, in spite of its ability to collapse spatial and temporal distances, contributes to the establishment of socio-spatial and infrastructural formations located at the precarious edges of both growing cities and global technoscapes.

Navigating precarity in Somali cities: mobile affordances

Most of the people interviewed during the research had been displaced from rural areas. Some had moved only a few months prior to interview; others had been displaced in earlier periods of violence and had lived in the cities for nearly two decades. All lived in settlements that were, in popular parlance, referred to as camps or neighbourhoods of 'the displaced' (*barakacayaasha*).[7] People frequently described a combination of different factors causing their displacement, including armed conflict, ecological shocks such as droughts or floods, or high levels of taxation by Al Shabaab. Many referred to the loss of their livelihoods and poor economic prospects in rural areas. Distinctions between 'forced' internal displacement and 'economic' rural–urban migration, or between people who cross state borders (refugees, returnees) and those who move within the same country, can obscure the social complexity of displacement and urbanisation in a region where state boundaries are regularly crossed by nomadic pastoralists, traders and displaced people. People categorised as refugees, returnees or internally displaced people by international organisations often lived side-by-side with other poor urban dwellers, who could not afford rising rent prices in the rapidly growing cities. This section analyses how interviewees who were residing in settlements associated with displacement (camps) used mobile phones in the course their displacement, and perceived and experienced mobile connectivity in the context of precarity. Despite living in conditions of acute poverty, a large majority of interviewees reported owning a basic mobile phone, often a Techno or Nokia model, and had experience using mobile money. Many people had not purchased their phone but received the device from a family member, a humanitarian organisation or an employer. As in other African contexts, mobile sharing is common in families and among neighbours, so even when ownership is lacking this does not necessarily mean absence of use (Hahn & Kibora 2008).

The importance of mobile telephony is reflected in the morphology of urban camps. Signboards with mobile telephone numbers are spread throughout clusters of camps at the cities' outskirts, as well as in camps located in the inner city. The signboards (Figure 3) display the telephone numbers of camp leaders (so-called gatekeepers) who organise and manage these settlements. Gatekeepers in Mogadishu often hailed from clan families of people who own the land on which displaced people settle. A large proportion of displaced people come from either Rahanweyn (Digil & Mirifle) clans or belong to other, often racialised, minority groups such as the so called 'Jareer'/'Somali Bantu' (Kusow & Eno 2015). They therefore need a broker to negotiate settlement with landowners and ensure the protection of the camp through that clan.

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[7] Status designations are often territorialised (Wacquant *et al.* 2014). The status of displaced people in cities in Somalia is linked with both the place of settlement and the clan affiliation of the settler (Bakonyi & Chonka *forthcoming*).
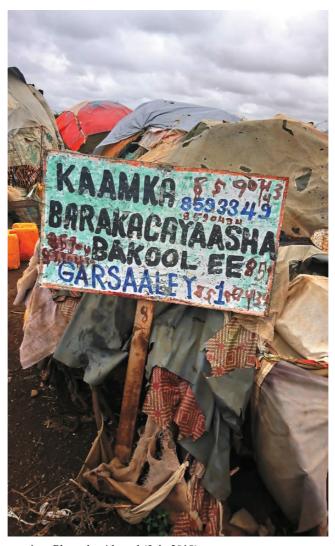
Figure 3. Baidoa camp sign. Photo by Ahmed (July 2018).

Interviewees also explained how they use the phone to inform incoming relatives and friends about places to settle. People who had decided to move to the urban camps had often communicated before with relatives and neighbours who had already made the journey. These contacts helped them find a place where they could obtain the necessary support until they learned how to navigate the city. Most displaced people try to find camps where aid is available or expected. Many interviewees out-lined how mobile phones enabled them to stay in contact with family members who remained in rural areas. People spoke frequently with their relatives to receive updates on their wellbeing and 'the family situation' (Gedi, Baidoa, 3 January 2018). They received political and security updates, or 'whether they received rain or not' (Olad, Baidoa, 3 January 2018). Several interviewees appreciated how the phone removed the

need for them to travel back to the rural areas for information. Ikran compared a lack of access to a phone to being 'like a deaf person' (Bosasso, 23 December 2017). Aliya, a 30-year-old woman who had lived in Mogadishu for 7 years after leaving the south-western Bakool region, explained the difference between the present and displacement in an earlier period when fewer people had mobile phones. In an earlier experience of displacement, she lost contact with the aunt who had raised her and could only obtain second-hand information about her wellbeing:

> *There were no mobile phones at that time. So she [aunt] did not know whether I was alive then. I met her a few years back when I had already become a [older] woman. [In the meantime] I have been working for families for free, in return for living with them. [At that time] I met with people who fled from that place and they told me about my aunt. (9 January 2018)*

Shamsa, who fled to Mogadishu in 2014—after a drought hit her region and Al Shabaab blocked humanitarian aid—explained the challenges of being unable to communicate with loved ones:

> *[When I fled] I couldn't communicate with anyone because I did not have a mobile phone with me, you understand? And I did not have their contacts with me. So, I didn't know their situation ... I can't even speak with my siblings ... I am worried. (9 January 2018)*

Displaced people in Baidoa emphasised difficulties in getting in contact with family members as Al Shabaab disrupts communication networks. According to a camp resident in Baidoa, the Islamist militia suspects that people 'are communicating with their enemies' and providing them with information on the areas they control and therefore 'end up destroying the antennae [telephone masts]'. When they can make calls, their family members 'talk in fear' of repercussions by Al Shabaab and the conditions of insecurity they endure (Robla, Baidoa, 3 January 2018). Al Shabaab has also enforced bans on the use of mobile internet on smartphones in areas which it controls (RSF/ Reporters Without Borders 2014).

Many displaced people rely on financial and other assistance from neighbours, relatives and friends, and phones facilitate searching for and requesting support. As Eney explained:

> *I benefit [from the phone], for example, when I wanted something from someone, I used to go to him or her. But now, I just call them while I am at home. If I don't have something for my family to eat, [you call and say] 'if you have worked today and you made some money, please bring me something ...' Yeah, he will send me 5 dollars or 2 dollars. So, I benefit from not having to walk in the sun. (Baidoa, 2 January 2018)*

Eney confirms how mobile telephony transforms experiences of space and time. It allows people to communicate and to mobilise support without the need to move physically and contributes to dissolving oppositions of nearness and remoteness, mobility and fixity, presence and absence (Urry 2007: 180–1). Interviewees particularly appreciated the use of the phone for sending and receiving money: 'I really thank

God for providing us such kind of services' (Gedi, Baidoa, 3 January 2018). As Gedi puts it, the phone replaced the wallet, and interviewees described how they pay for their shopping in town or receive money for services provided to others. Underscoring the hand-to-mouth nature of their economic precarity, Shoobta noted that if her husband was late from work, he would still be able to send money to the family so that the children would not have to go to bed hungry (Mogadishu, 9 January 2018).

Others outlined how mobile money facilitated their settlement in urban camps, as they could instruct relatives to sell the few belongings they had left back home. Megaag, for example, still had livestock and requested his brothers to sell his animals and send the money to pay for his settlement in an urban camp (Baidoa, 4 January 2018). Idow in Baidoa emphasised a similar affordance, but referred to security on the move:

> *It helped me a lot. You know, when you are a traveller and you look after animals you just deposit money into the EVC service because you might encounter thieves on the way. Carrying cash is riskier ... So, when your money is in the EVC service, no one can take it from you. Maybe someone can take your life, but can you take [money from] a sim card? No one can. (1 January 2018)*

However, phones are a common target of armed robbers, and many participants noted fears and experiences of violent crime. Deynabo, a woman in Mogadishu, described how she had been robbed:

> *There are some thieves around some of the places where I work. One day, as I was walking from work, they attacked me with a knife. They robbed me of my cell phone, and my money was within the phone. They also took a plastic bag of food from me. Immediately, I went to the [telephone] company and informed them that my mobile phone was stolen by thieves. And the money was returned. I was coming from work, it was late afternoon around 4pm. I was then without a phone for some months, but I later got another one. (8 January 2018)*

Although other interviewees spoke about robbers' use of violence to get hold of a victim's PIN to access accounts, in most cases, people perceived mobile money to be more secure than carrying cash. In Deynabo's case, her savings were available as soon as the phone company provided a new SIM and restored access to her account.

Without access to formal banking, interviewees outlined how mobile money (Sahal) functions like a savings account. Yasmin in Bosaaso explained that

> *if my husband brings 10 Dollars a day, we use 5 Dollars for things like rent and keep the other 5 in Sahal .... The phone helps us to save the little money we get. (23 December 2017)*

Mobile money accounts are often used in rotating group saving schemes, known as *Ayuuto/Hagbad*. Groups pool contributions from members, who take it in turn to receive the accumulated pot. This allows for the payment of debt or larger purchases.

Mobile phones have also become central to the ways in which displaced people navigate the urban environment in search of work. Women often provide laundry or cleaning services to wealthier households, while men characteristically look for

opportunities on construction sites. Although women continue to go door-to-door to offer domestic labour, they also leave their mobile numbers. This allows clients to call them when work is available, and the worker to call to inquire about work. Aasia in Mogadishu outlined that she only bought a phone to enable her client to call if work was available. She also emphasised that a phone was needed to receive her payment as there is generally 'not much [paper] cash circulating' (8 January 2018). Dhahiro additionally explained how the phone facilitated work and ad hoc assistance from clients:

> *When there is work, [customers] check on me when they don't see me around. They ask if I am sick, and they sometimes send me a dollar so that I can buy food for my kids. … I might say that my daughter is hungry. They would say, I will send a dollar to this poor person or two dollars so I can buy milk for my children. Thank God. (Mogadishu, 7 January 2018)*

The prevalence of mobile money enables humanitarian organisations to increasingly rely on these systems for cash aid. Some interviewees noted how displaced people had been biometrically registered and given SIM cards; some even received phones, through which they had received some support.

Precarious technoscapes: limits and risks of connectivity

The previous section indicates the extent to which mobile phones are embedded in the daily experiences, mobilities and livelihoods of some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in Somali cities. So far, the affordances of mobile phones have been described in terms of their perceived value and in ways which correspond with dominant humanitarian narratives about the empowering utility of ICTs. In this section, however, we illustrate how social inequalities are reflected in displaced people's ICT use, and the extent to which necessities to engage with mobile communications reinforce their positions of precarity and marginality.

Urban displaced populations constitute a large pool of cheap and exploitable labour. As people in the camps usually do not hail from dominant clan groups in the cities, social and labour relations are stratified and unequal. In such contexts, technologies such as mobile money can be used in ways which disadvantage workers and reinforce spatial divides between the camps and city neighbourhoods where workers and employers reside. Aasia, for example, reported three instances where people who employed her for domestic labour in Mogadishu promised to send payment by phone but then failed to do so (8 January 2018). Other women had similar experiences and were either paid less than the agreed amount or received nothing at all. Aalima explained how she had little chance of recovering the payment:

> *Sometimes they [the employers] say to us 'give your number and we will send the money to you.' Then, after a while, they send you less money than what you have worked for. This happened to me one day. I went shopping and when I reached the market, I collected what I needed and then*

> *told the seller to withdraw his money from my phone. When he tried it, there was no money in my phone. Then I ran back to where I had worked. I told the sister [of my employer] 'you sent me only a message – so give the money to me in cash.' She said, 'I already sent you the money. So if I have not sent you the money, why did you leave here?' As we were quarrelling, some of the neighbours came and tried to calm the lady. But she insisted and forced me out of her house. One of the ladies assisted me with one thousand shillings [approx. 0.04 USD] and advised me to leave. I left and went to the Telecom company. But they told me there was no money that was sent to the phone. Then I kept quiet and left. (8 January 2018).*

With greater circulation of hard currency, it would be less likely that the women would leave their place of casual employment without receiving payment. The ability for employers to defer payment relies on the prevalence of mobile money for remote transfers. Other important factors are the employer's physical detachment in a gated compound in a city neighbourhood; the employee's subordinate position; displaced people's related inability to leverage influential social networks in the city; and a lack of enforced labour laws.

Aalima's description of her interaction with the shopkeeper—from whom she attempts to buy goods and thus discovers that she has not been paid—highlights another problem which compounds her disadvantaged position. She tells the vendor to withdraw the money from her phone for her, indicating that she is not comfortable or fully able to use the phone interface to send the money herself. Although the majority of interviewees spoke about familiarity with mobile money systems, many also noted that they required assistance to use the technology. This was particularly true for older people and especially women, and was often related to weak literacy skills, hindering navigation of the text-based inputs and notifications (Wasuge 2019). In Aalima's case, this reduced her ability to confirm whether the payment was received.

In other contexts, studies have reported difficulties with text-based phone interfaces as a factor hindering people's use of digital financial tools and services (Wyche & Steinfield 2016). Differing levels of (digital) literacy are important here, as we heard about the widespread usage of services, albeit with simultaneous reliance on other people to assist with some functions. Nagan, a 30-year-old laundrywoman, explained that she is usually paid through the mobile. However, she also noted that she does not know how to fully operate the services:

> *I do not know how to use it. I go to [shops] and tell them to get the money out for me. … I can tell how much I have left in my account. However, I do not know how to send money to others. I was taught how to check my account, but I could not understand how to send money well. (7 January 2018)*

Shamsa explained her device use in a similar way: 'I ask the people I trust to help me to send money to the people I owe money' (Mogadishu, 9 January 2018). While mutual help is common in the settlements of displaced people, the inability to operate the transfer and banking services or even to check the amount of money received,

paid or left in the account diminishes people's capacity to act independently and opens opportunities for control and abuse. Although none of the interviewees explicitly highlighted this risk, the accounts of exploitative labour relations discussed above are compounded by such digital inequalities.

Many interviewees treated mobile phones as part of their essential living expenses. Others, however, simply couldn't afford to spend money on communication and only irregularly topped up their phones. As Dahabo explained:

> *I call my clients and ask if they have a job to be done. ... I spend a lot of money. The rate of calling is too high. When you call the families and the clients asking if you can come for them, you must top-up each time. ... The amount I use [for topping-up] it is very high. Sometimes I miss a job and [I have to] take debt from neighbours. Or we sleep hungry for some nights. But if I get a job, that night my children will have a good night.* (Mogadishu, 9 January 2018)

Many reported that they would put on the minimum required 10 cents of airtime, which would enable them to 'flash' people with a missed call, signalling a request for a call back. As most displaced people were not connected to electricity, they also pay to charge phones, even if this service costs only a few Somali Shillings from kiosks in/near camps.

Across Somalia, mobile phones play a role in the remittance sector, which facilitates huge inward financial flows from the global diaspora. Although remittances are vital for the wider Somali economy and household finances, displaced people from marginalised social groups are generally less likely to have these diasporic connections and regular access to financial remittances (Majid *et al.* 2018). Conversely, some interviewees' accounts of international and migration-linked networks highlighted dangers of transnational connectivity. For Murayo in Bosaaso, discussion of her children's use of messaging platforms (such as WhatsApp) prompted her to recount her daughter's experience of undocumented migration (*tahriib*) to Europe. The young woman was detained in Libya by human traffickers who contacted her mother (Murayo) in Bosaaso by phone. Her daughter described the violent abuse she was suffering and the traffickers' demand for thousands of dollars to secure her release and onward travel to Europe. Murayo pleaded her poverty and was able to negotiate the sum down to $2600, which she then raised through family and social networks in Bosaaso. The money was sent to an intermediary in Mogadishu and then a smuggler in Sudan. These contacts were afforded by international mobile phone connections, and this may also include the transmission of images or video. In this case, Murayo reported that her daughter had reached Europe, first Italy and later Holland, but that she had struggled to find work and did not regularly remit money. Therefore, Murayo had not been able to pay back most of the debt she owed.

Other international links and resources manifest in displaced people's digitally mediated engagements with humanitarian organisations. Although some interviewees had received SIM cards or phones from humanitarian organisations on which to receive mobile-cash support, they did not speak in detail about their experiences of using these

systems. Instead, they often complained that transfers occurred only once or were irregular. Digital cash transfers are often seen as being more discrete for recipients, giving greater potential control over spending (Sossouvi 2013). As noted above, the management of urban camps for displaced people is undertaken by gatekeepers who are often affiliated with owners of the camp land. Some interviewed gatekeepers were quite candid about the share of aid they received from camp residents following distributions. We discuss elsewhere ambivalence towards gatekeeping practices and the patron–client relations in which they are embedded. Displaced people often weigh up the tangible support they received from gatekeepers against their obligations to pay a share of any external assistance received (Bakonyi *et al.* 2019; Bakonyi 2021). Mobile money doesn't protect recipients from these obligations as gatekeepers are aware of the timing and scope of distributions and those registered (fieldnotes, Mogadishu, July 2018).

The relationships between camp leaders, humanitarian organisations and telecommunications companies also raise questions about the data being generated and stored through beneficiary registrations. Somalia currently lacks any data protection laws (Haji 2019) and data is collected by both humanitarian organisations and telecommunication companies without oversight. The collection and utilisation of humanitarian (meta) data and the risks this involves has only been recently discussed by humanitarian actors (Privacy International/ICRC 2018). In Somalia—a country lacking regulatory oversight and characterised by violent conflict and international military and civil engagement—the risks of data misuse are particularly acute. Some of these dangers relate to surveillance, either from foreign or national intelligence agencies or from Al Shabaab. The latter maintains its military campaign against governmental institutions/representatives and their international backers. Al Shabaab operates parallel governance institutions and uses mobile telephony to request and collect parallel tax from businesspeople in cities, using it to threaten its opponents. Its occasional closure of mobile internet and its suspicion towards the use of smartphones is partly rooted in the awareness of the risks of data surveillance and the use of phones by spies to direct drone attacks against its members.

Conclusion

Mobile telephony has been adopted at rapid speed in Somalia and has inserted itself into and transformed everyday lives. Building on Appadurai, we conceptualise 'precarious technoscapes' to emphasise how the mobile connections of displaced people who settle at the precarious urban fringes remain part of quickly evolving global technological assemblages, but also highlight the unequal distribution and locally specific realisations of these global transnational flows. The speedy adoption of mobile telephony among some of the world's poorest people has been accompanied by assumptions about ICTs' equalising and empowering effects. Our analysis contributes to a tempering of techno-optimist

discourses that, despite growing critique, continue to characterise humanitarian imaginaries. We have explored how displaced people settling at urban margins understand and experience the mobile boom, and how everyday movements, communications, transactions and social relations are mediated through and shaped by ICTs.

Interviewees emphasised various benefits mobiles brought to their lives, focusing on social networks and financial transfers. The phone facilitated mobility, and enabled access to information on available settlements and material aid. It allowed displaced people to stay in contact with relatives in Somalia and abroad, eased the search for jobs and facilitated the mobilisation of support. Above all, the telephone has developed into a 'global banking tool' (Easterling 2014: 121) and a partial alternative to formal banking and traditional forms of payment. The mobile phone became an important technology for network capital, the social relations that enable mobility and circulation (Urry 2007: 194–203).

The use of mobile phones and mobile money also brings risks for displaced people. Beyond the dangers of robbery, people with lower levels of literacy were often unable to fully operate phones and had to rely on neighbours, family members or shop owners to access their accounts. They were often unable to ensure that employers had transferred payments and were vulnerable to deception. The possession of a mobile phone does not, in and of itself, empower people and neither does it automatically minimise social exclusion. Instead, the use of the phone remains embedded in social relations and is shaped by power differentials, notably concerning economic constraints (which phone to buy, and how often to use it), differing levels of literacy, and social networks that can be mobilised for support. Although the mobile phone can be used to make and maintain these social connections, it does not by itself generate access to relevant networks and does not ameliorate the power differentials that structure these networks. Engagement with the micro-sociology of ICT use can help to shed light on wider inequalities, in this case, the relation between marginalised urban populations and the commercial and humanitarian actors engaged in the reconstruction of Somali cities. Beyond the imaginary of frictionless flows and connectivity, people at precarious fringes of technoscapes continue to improvise and cobble together social relations and materials in their daily attempts to ensure their survival, while adapting to the new circulatory regimes and modalities of mobility that Appadurai (1996) has emphasised. Of emerging concern here is the rapid 'datafication' of humanitarianism and the unregulated generation and storage of data on vulnerable populations. Extreme power imbalances exist between recipients of humanitarian aid on the one hand, and humanitarian agencies and communications companies on the other. Further investigation is required on the implications of these digitally mediated entanglements. This requires a move beyond teleological assumptions of technology-facilitated development and a critical reflection on the risks that new forms of data generation entail concerning the protection of privacy, surveillance, commercialisation and the governance of precarious populations.

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Shaping a township: self-connecting as 'counter conduct' in Umlazi, Durban

Shauna Mottiar

Abstract: South Africa has high levels of protest. Protest actions are frequently linked to demands for 'service delivery', specifically the lack of access to housing, water and electricity in poor neighbourhoods. As a result, residents in these areas have resorted to informal, self-service provision in the form of illegal water and electricity connections. These self-services have assumed two narratives: the first, in official circles, as criminalised activities; and the second, by protestors and social movements, as gaining basic social rights. This article examines the various methods of 'illegal' water and electricity connections in the township of Umlazi, situated in Durban, South Africa. It draws on 'counter conduct' to understand illegal connections as 'diffuse and subdued forms of resistance'. Techniques of counter conduct by Umlazi residents resist both *forms* and *quantities* of service provision through the act of self-connecting. Self-connections use the government's own techniques against it while adopting its own governmentality. The article is based on a qualitative study comprising interviews with householders of Emhlabeni, Umlazi Section D.

Keywords: Protest, counter conduct, governmentality, resistance, service delivery, self-connections, illegal connections.

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Introduction

South Africa has high levels of protest. It is estimated that between 2014 and 2017 there were 1,500 community protests per year, or an average of four community protests a day (Runciman *et al.* 2019: 392). Protest actions are frequently linked to demands for 'service delivery', specifically the lack of access to housing, water and electricity in poor neighbourhoods, including informal settlements and townships. Consequently, residents in these areas have resorted to informal, self-service provision in the form of illegal water and electricity connections. These self-services have assumed two distinct narratives: the first, in official circles, as criminalised activities; and the second, by residents, protestors and social movements, as gaining basic social rights. This article examines the various methods of 'illegal' water and electricity connections and the narratives around them in the township of Umlazi, situated in Durban, South Africa. It considers self-service provision, drawing from Michel Foucault's ideas of 'counter conduct'. Counter conduct goes beyond protest or direct confrontation (Rosol 2014: 2) and does not necessarily pose a hegemonic challenge to the state but is rather a form of resistance to processes employed in 'conducting others' (Foucault 2007). It can both resist and fortify systems of power (Death 2016).

Conduct and counter conduct

Carl Death (2016) argues that examinations of protest, dissent and resistance should be expanded in the sense that they cannot be reduced to framings of movements opposing hegemonic structures, or movements offering coherent and progressive counter-hegemonic challenges. In this sense, individual, unorganised and non-strategic forms of resistance such as daily self-connections make up the 'micro politics' of urban struggle that do not fall into the ambit of social movement theory (Mayer & Boudreau 2012). Death (2016: 202) argues that resistance 'can draw attention to modes of protest which form in parallel to techniques of governmentality; are deeply inter penetrated with the power relations they oppose; and which facilitate or enable the production and performance of alternative subjectivities through processes of ethical self-reflection: "ways of not being like that"'. Governmentality, or 'the way in which one conducts the conduct of men' (Foucault 2008: 186), refers to the 'mentalities or rationalities' of government (Death 2010: 236). It is understood as the practices and techniques through which people are governed (Mayhew 2004). Governmentality is a consideration of the 'aims and aspirations, the mentalities and rationalities' undertaken to steer 'conduct' (Massey 2013: 606). It is opposed by 'counter conduct' or 'wanting to be conducted differently ... through other procedures and methods' (Foucault 2007: 194). Counter conduct reflects 'resistance to

processes of governmentality as distinct from political revolts against sovereignty or material revolts against economic exploitation' (Death 2016: 209). Counter conduct therefore attempts to understand 'much more diffuse and subdued forms of resistance' (Foucault 2007: 200). It is 'the struggle against the processes implemented for conducting others' (Foucault 2007: 201). Further, in as much as it is does not employ direct confrontation or open protest, 'it is highly important for changing and shaping urban politics' (Rosol 2014: 72). Counter conduct emerges in relation to existing governmental rationalities and does not advocate radically different approaches (Gribat 2010). It is, often, an effort to manage a particular problem (Massey 2014: 291). It can also produce new norms that introduce new ways of being (Gribat 2010). Resistance in the form of self-service provision further intersects with constructs of entitlements and obligations of citizenship. In this sense, access to these services is 'bound up with questions of belonging and citizenship', which were central to the South African liberation struggle (Von Schnitzler 2013: 675).

Umlazi township

eThekwini Municipality in Durban, South Africa has a population of approximately 3.7 million people and over 700,000 people live below the food poverty line (eThekwini 2017/2018). Its challenge is facilitating pro-poor interventions in the context of the dominant neoliberal pro-growth agenda. Inequality in housing in Durban has a spatial dimension with most sub-standard housing located on the city periphery or on marginalised sites occupied by informal dwellers (Georgiadou & Loggia 2016). The eThekwini Housing Unit promotes the upgrading of informal settlements through its Informal Settlement Programme, where it is advocated that informal settlements be integrated into the urban fabric to overcome spatial, social and economic exclusion (eThekwini 2015).

Umlazi township is located south of Durban with a population estimated at half a million people, making it the country's second largest township after Soweto. In the 1950s and 1960s, it housed Africans, Indians and Coloureds violently relocated from central Durban (Hunter 2015). The state stopped building township houses in the 1970s and 1980s, which saw a surge of extended rooms and backyard structures. By the 1980s, shacks occupied most of the vacant land (Hunter 2015). The research for this paper was conducted in Emhlabeni Ward 86, Section D of Umlazi. Ward 86 comprises formal housing provided by the state, such as the post-apartheid RDP[1] housing, as well as informal homes or shacks self-built with various materials. Residents access

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[1] RDP housing is government subsidy housing originally set out under the post-apartheid Reconstruction and Development Programme.

water through communal ablution blocks provided by the municipality as well as yard taps. Some residents in formal houses have in-house plumbing but their water has been cut off for non-payment of water bills. Some of these formal houses however do not have proper in-house plumbing. Residents in formal dwellings have therefore self-plumbed—erecting pipes that connect them to the main water supply which run in front of their homes. These pipes also serve many of the informal dwellings. Some residents in the formal houses have electricity connections and receive bills for their energy usage or have prepaid metres. These bills are high, however, and defaulting on payment has led to their being cut off. Likewise, the prepaid system provides expensive and limited access to electricity. In these cases, residents use the existing infrastructure to re-connect to the electricity supply. Residents in informal structures connect to electricity using their own cables.

The research methodology

Emhlabeni Ward 86 was selected as a case study for this research as it is habitually targeted by eThekwini municipal officials due to the high occurrence of 'illegal connections' with respect to water and electricity. Ward 86 is 4.5 square kilometres and has a population of 31,745 people; 12.4 per cent of households are informal (South Africa Census 2011). Twenty-four households were purposively sampled to include both formal and informal dwellings and for the most part one resident per household was interviewed. Interviews were carried out with the help of a local guide familiar with the Emhlabeni community. Only householders who were willing to participate were interviewed. All participants were anonymised and the majority of them were comfortable about speaking openly regarding self-connections. Those who were less comfortable were given the opportunity to refrain but none of them used this option, seemingly satisfied that they did not have to divulge details such as names, contact numbers or identification references. Interviews were carried out using semi-structured questions and for the most part took place in English but in some instances probing took place in isiZulu to elicit a clearer response; this also put some of the participants at ease. Of the sample, 10 participants were male and 14 were female. Twenty-one participants were unemployed and the three that were employed were self-employed. This self-employment took the form of informal trading and householders stated that this income was precarious. Seventeen of the participants were social grant recipients, citing access to the Child Support Grant and the Pension Grant, which served as their main/only source of income. The majority of households comprised two to four inhabitants but households comprising as many as eight inhabitants were also interviewed. In these cases, it was noted that the household water and electricity consumption would be higher than an average household, impacting the cost factor. Although

this study is based on a relatively small sample, the data collected is indicative of self-connecting practices in Emhlabeni.

Conducting Umlazi

The rationality of the state with respect to citizen access to services was reflected as early as 1995, a year after the transition to democracy, when the African National Congress (ANC)-led government adopted the 'Masakhane Campaign' to 'promote civic responsibility' in terms of encouraging South African citizens to pay rates and taxes. This followed a history of apartheid resistance where service payments were boycotted and expectations were that the new democratic state would provide equal and free services. This campaign attempted to deal with the 'culture of non-payment' for services which impact on municipal income. eThekwini Municipality, for example, reported that water leaks and illegal water connections cost in the region of R100 million a year (de Bruyn 2012). The national electricity provider Eskom reported that over the past three years, theft and vandalism of the electricity network cost as much as R188 million, excluding the loss of revenue (Naidoo 2020). The state has therefore attempted to 'regulate, manage and re-educate the poor into a "payment culture"' (Ruiters 2007: 487). These attempts have included various techniques, such as service cut-offs, aggressive cost recovery measures and prepaid meters. Such techniques have eroded citizens' constitutional rights (Dugard 2008) and forced the poorest to accept sub-standard levels of service (Ruiters 2007). This has continued despite the advent of free basic water and electricity policies, which guarantee qualifying households a basic minimum of water (6 kilolitres/month) and electricity (50 kilowatts/month) following a local government election campaign in 2000 where President Thabo Mbeki promised free amounts of water and electricity to alleviate poverty under the ANC banner 'A Better Life for All' (Joseph 2002). Attempts to 're-educate' the poor towards a 'payment culture' has resulted in popular resistance through community protest and social movements. This includes campaigns such as Operation Khanyisa, launched in 2001, where the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee illegally connected some 3,000 Soweto households to electricity. Likewise, in Operation Vulamanzi, implemented in 2003 and supported by the Anti Privatisation Campaign and the Coalition Against Water Privatisation, township residents bypassed water control measures such as prepaid meters and ticklers, re-routing pipes to access unlimited water for free.

This spirit of resistance is evident in Umlazi, where rationalities are centred on access to water and electricity as a means of survival and also as part of the promise of genuine citizenship following the transition to democracy. In areas like Emhlabeni the municipality has provided ablution facilities in modified containers comprising toilets, urinals, showers and basins 'to service approximately 50–75 households'

(Department of Economic Development Tourism and Environmental Affairs 2013). Households who are able to self-plumb, however, utilise these facilities to connect to the water mains, providing themselves with proximal connections. These acts of 'vandalism' have been described by municipal authorities as occurring 'on an industrial scale' (Etheridge 2019). eThekwini Municipality cites one of its main challenges to water provision in townships such as Umlazi as being 'poor social behaviour' leading to 'massive amounts of illegal connections, tampering, vandalism and theft' (Govender 2016: 25).

Residents have also been encouraged to utilise prepaid meters to access electricity. Those who have prepaid meters, however, complain about high electricity bills (having to buy more vouchers) and cut-offs, which officials blame on residents who 'overload the system' by connecting illegally. It seems that people with prepaid meters have also started self connecting 'so the electricity balance decreases slowly in the meter' (DUT 2020). In 2012, the Electricity Unit, Metro Police and a private security company stripped all the illegal electricity connections in Emhlabeni, resulting in the removal of 868 kilograms of cable from 350 homes. The manager of the municipal revenue protection division reiterated that 'electricity theft is a crime' (Mdlalose 2012).

Counter conduct in Emhlabeni

The provision of services in Emhlabeni seeks firstly to limit the *form* of the service to poor people. In the case of water, ablution blocks and yard taps have been provided as the only way to access water for residents who have been cut off for non-payment or residents who live in informal dwellings. In the case of electricity, formal dwellings have been provided with connections to the main grid supply, while informal dwellings have no official access to electricity. The reasoning seems to be that electricity is a service that goes hand in hand with formal housing and will not be provided to shacks. Secondly, the *quantity* of services available is controlled in that water access will remain minimal, covering the basic constitutional right to water, if only accessible by a yard tap. Likewise, electricity usage will be cut off in the case of non-payment or controlled via the prepaid meter mechanism, preserving it as a revenue-generating service.

Techniques of counter conduct by Emhlabeni residents resist both *forms* and *quantities* of service provision by self-connecting to water and electricity. In this sense, self-connections act in relation to existing governmental rationalities as they do not advocate radically different approaches to service delivery (Gribat 2010). So self-connections use 'the government's own techniques against it while adopting their own governmentality' (Massey 2014: 291).

> *Since arriving here, we built our shacks and waited for the local municipality to build and distribute the RDP houses promised to us. While waiting we applied for water and electricity metres but were not served, as we are still living in a shack and a metre cannot be installed. (Participant 22)*
>
> *In the beginning when we were promised RDPs, and the municipality found us there with our shacks, they built outside toilets first to mark the plot where the house will be, since then a small number of RDPs were distributed so now, we have outside toilets with house/plots numbers no houses to go with them. The toilets are made of concrete but don't have running water. (Participant 23)*

The two quotes above reflect frustrations incurred by shack dwellers promised formal services which have not been forthcoming. Consequently, this has led to the emergence of a new rationality by residents, which has 'changed and shaped' (Rosol 2014: 72) the Emhlabeni landscape. This landscape includes illicit water pipes connected to the municipal supply that run over-ground along the front doors of dwellings and a mass of unauthorised overhead electricity cables from which power is drawn. This infrastructure provides residents with access to unlimited water at the point of their homes and free broad electricity supply able to power cable (DSTV) television access in shacks.

Water self-connections resist forms and limited quantities of service delivery by expanding the ways residents can access water in that they can now draw unlimited water on their dwelling site, as opposed to having to collect limited supplies of water in buckets from the designated yard tap:

> *There is a concrete standpipe where we draw water from and connect it with water pipes underground and draw water from there. We also have other sources of water e.g. the communal ablution blocks and community tap. (Participant 22)*

Likewise, electricity self-connections provide access to a full service rather than a restricted amount of electricity as per what may be available on the prepaid meter. In this way, shack living does not mean restrictions on electrical appliances or television/satellite connections:

> *With our living situation we have had people in the area who are skilled in such things, there is a guy who is called a tuber who can work with cable and run it in the house, we have to buy the cables and extension cords and tubes for him to connect and run. He can also do the plug points in the different rooms in shacks and some RDP houses that were not finished and fully done by municipality. (Participant 21)*

Water self-connections in Emhlabeni involve community plumbing techniques, which have been cast as 'cunning water theft' and 'economic sabotage' by authorities (Von Schnitzler 2013: 684). What they also reflect are normalised practices that are intertwined with the 'power relations they oppose' (Death 2016: 202). Residents spoke of engaging the services of a municipal worker to self-connect. This person holds

plumbing expertise but is also familiar with the municipal water system, which enables him to best make re-connections. It was also noted that he works 'alone', ensuring discretion. Also, this work is 'private' and so removed from his obligations as a municipal agent—in this sense, municipal 'responsibility' blurs with ideas of community access:

> *In cases like those we get the help of a known municipal worker who would know which fittings and pipes would work and be needed to run the distance and connect properly. He usually works alone and in private outside of his usual working hours. (Participant 22)*

Electricity self-connections in Emhlabeni draw on community networks of 'electricity poachers', 'tamperers' (Von Schnitzler, 2013: 684) or *iziNyokanyoka*. Translated from isiZulu as 'snakes' in the pejorative, *iziNyokanyoka* in fact reflect embedded community networks of trust. This is suggested in relationships among the connecters and the community served—'knowing each other' resulting in a small fee for labour rather than an exorbitant one. Further to this, safety issues that centre on electricity cabling, especially informal cabling, are taken into consideration, suggesting a level of care:

> *He is a known skilled electrician, a guy who lives off doing such piece jobs in the area and other parts of Umlazi. We have grown to trust him since we know he can do a good job where the connection is relatively safe and looks legit. Since he knows us, we don't have to pay him a big amount, but we do pay him for his work. (Participant 21)*

Access to more complete services through self-connections are threatened by municipal interventions. Part of the process is re-connecting once again, as explained by a resident: 'usually the place will be full of police and municipal members coming to cut off but we wait for them to leave and we connect again' (Participant 11). Counter conduct in Emhlabeni is embedded in community solidarity. This form of solidarity is a key feature of Durban township life reflected in the Durban Kennedy Road settlement, for example, where householders erect 'illegal' dwellings without fear that they will be destroyed by authorities on the basis of the sheer number of shacks (Mottiar 2019). There is a strong social fabric of neighbours who stand together in their experience of a common struggle and who understand there is power in numbers:

> *For me as a single woman parent, I am sometimes scared of the illegal connection and fear that one day we'll get caught and put away, then on the other hand I am reassured by the number of people doing the same thing and the neighbours assured we will stick together should things get severe and rough. (Participant 21)*
>
> *Being in this area we are comfortable with the setup because as a community we know each other and know how we all struggle for services, so we are not scared of the municipality should they come and cut our connection, we trust that the authorities cannot arrest all of us. (Participant 22)*

'Not being like that'

eThekwini's governmentality is underpinned by a neoliberal, market-driven approach, where citizens are entitled to their constitutional rights to water and electricity but are also 'consumers' from whom revenue can be extracted. This is evident in the nature of service provision in Emhlabeni and in official remarks that cast self-connections as 'vandalism' and 'crime'. There is also the sentiment that 'residents must be patient' (Madlalose 2012). Residents of Emhlabeni resist this, taking the view that self-connections are necessary: 'people are desperate for things and need to get them to survive' (Participant 3); 'they [self-connections] are all we can do to stay with lights on in our homes' (Participant 8). Formal services further present financial challenges, residents argued, 'we can't all afford to pay for lights and water' (Participant 6). Counter conduct is thus framed as community agency—participants noted, 'when we need things to be done, people can do what they need to do' (Participant 1). This agency also includes the power to hold authorities to account; according to residents, 'they [self-connections] also need to happen so that government will know they need to do work' (Participant 7). In this sense, residents who self-connect understand their conduct as appropriate action, acknowledging only technical drawbacks as problematic; for example, 'no, they [self-connections] are not wrong but they are dangerous and cause more problems in the power grid' (Participant 2).

Resisting payment for services is implicit in self-connections. Most residents argued that services should be provided for free. In some cases this argument was tempered with suggestions that 'some' services be free or that fees should be negotiated: 'they should be free for people who can't afford them – we know it is expensive to make electricity' (Participant 2); or 'taxes can be used to pay for water and electricity' (Participant 3); and 'maybe we should talk about how much we pay for each of these services' (Participant 4).

Resisting payment in Emhlabeni reflects 'ways of not being like that'. Even residents with service connections (i.e. those who have secured a degree of formality of living) have bypassed their prepaid meters to access water and electricity for free. Reasons for this are centred on the expense factor in that their water bills had been too high and they were cut off for non-payment and prepaid electricity was too costly. The fact that self-connecting options are accessible and normalised makes them a default option. Tracing the micro politics involving township residents, municipal officials and engineers, Antina Von Schnitzler (2013: 673) has argued that 'technologies and infrastructures are not merely symbols or tools for political expression but rather [they become] the political terrain for the negotiation of moral-political questions'. These questions were critical to the liberation struggle in South Africa relating to 'the limits, entitlements and obligations of citizenship'. Across South African townships, Soweto being a notable example, infrastructure is not 'a neutral conduit for the

provision of services' but rather integral to 'questions of belonging and citizenship' (Von Schnitzler 2013: 675). Infrastructure is a way in which the violence of apartheid would be reversed by ensuring access for the previously denied. Indeed, during the apartheid struggle, township residents withholding payment for rents and services formed part of the campaign to make cities 'ungovernable', transforming disconnections into sites for political struggle (Von Schnitzler 2013: 684). Township residents in South Africa, and this is reflected in Emhlabeni rationalities, continue to approach the 'service delivery' terrain as one in which their struggle for access is being played out through a low-intensity conflict with municipal officials and city engineers; centred on ideas of post-apartheid citizenship, they are 'residents with political problems' (Von Schnitzler 2013: 684).

The struggle 'against the processes implemented for conducting others' (Foucault 2007: 201) is reflected in attitudes towards self-connection infrastructure. In evading detection, Emhlabeni residents are careful that self-connected electricity cables 'look legit'. This is a reference to ensuring that cables are run neatly from the roof and along the wall inside the dwelling—and so are, to an extent, hidden and removed from the mass of overhead cables which characterises South African townships. Wiring which runs along the ground and connections made up of different sizes and colours of cables are a give-away that the connection is illegal. Likewise, piping used to re-connect to the main water supply is laid over-ground in horizontal lines in front of dwellings. This way it cannot be detected unless it is felt underfoot and as a resident claimed, '[because] the municipality is disconnected from the community – they would hardly walk around here' (Participant 2). Self-connected water pipes are 'bent to look like a tap'—the pipe is bent to restrict water but straightened to allow the flow of water when in use. In this sense, counter conduct applies a different governmentality to infrastructure—'playing the same game differently' (Massey 2014: 295). So counter conduct is adopted to 'manipulate and benefit from what is available' (Massey 2014: 295).

In terms of quality of self-delivered services, residents highlighted the dangers of self-connections, citing potential electrocutions: 'cables run across the open space where children play' (Participant 3). Furthermore, there is a high element of unreliability in self-connecting where the service may fail or the municipality may come in to disconnect, and so residents said: 'we have to go back to the bucket system or be in the dark while trying to buy new cables' (Participant 3). Opinions as to how services should best be delivered are instructive of Emhlabeni residents' frustrations accessing basic services over the years. They argued that service delivery processes required a participatory approach, 'with full community consent and participation' (Participant 16). In this sense, counter conduct reflects township residents accessing services on their own terms and in ways that suit their needs, as opposed to accepting an already decided package of services from the municipality according to the municipality's

timelines—'ways of not being like that'. There was also a sense among residents that service delivery should work as a mechanism for empowerment and that the process could reflect community ownership and pride: 'I think services should be delivered by local people who know and understand the community' (Participant 12). Following long experience with the quality and unreliability of self-connections, it was not surprising that Emhlabeni residents stressed that services should be provided according to a good standard of quality so that 'people with correct skills and qualifications are given the job' (Participant 1). It did seem that there would be a preference for the government to provide these services, suggesting that, despite protest action in the area, there remains a fair amount of faith in the possibility of equitable state delivery: '[services should be delivered] in a fair way and on time by qualified people working for government' (Participant 4). Indeed, the 2016 local election results returned an overwhelming victory for the ruling party, the ANC, in Ward 86 with 86.83 per cent of the vote (IEC 2016). Certainly there was an emphasis that residents required accountability from public officials—protest action 'for service delivery' frequently includes allegations of local-level mismanagement and lack of accountability by politicians and officials; it was argued that: '[services should be delivered] by people we know so that we can easily hold them accountable' (Participant 17). Finally, views about how best services could be delivered reflected Emhlabeni residents' disappointments with ANC promises of 'a better life for all', with residents stating that: '[services should be delivered] fairly, where the poor and old are taken care of first – certain things can be done faster then we don't have broken projects and half-built roads' (Participant 2).

'Poor social behaviour'

Death (2016: 202) has argued that understanding the politics of resistance requires an examination of 'the sorts of counter conducts which reproduce and are themselves produced by prevailing forms of governance and governmentality'. For him, counter conduct is a form of conduct which subverts 'dominant techniques for the production of responsible subjects' (Death 2016: 202). 'Poor social behaviour' in Emhlabeni reflects this. Residents resist frames such as 'vandals', 'tamperers' and 'criminals' to normalise self-connections on the basis that 'not everyone can afford to pay for lights and water'. There is 'the will not to be governed thusly, like that, by these people, at this price' (Death 2010 quoting Foucault 2007: 75). This is given impetus as residents note that the entire community 'struggles for services' and stands together safe in the knowledge they 'can't all be arrested'. Further to this, self-connections are argued to be a method to remind officials that 'they need to do work'—as long as people who cannot afford water and electricity have to self-connect, the state is deemed to have failed on its promises to secure full citizenship to the under privileged in South Africa.

Counter conduct in Emhlabeni reflects the micro politics of South African township life. Here politics does not only take conventional forms such as direct confrontation or open protest but also disapproval and resistance, which is 'non-confrontational, unorganised and non-strategic' (Rosol 2014: 81). In this sense, counter conduct does not undertake collective action or oppositional tactics such as those regularly employed by local protest events. Residents referred to protest in their ward, saying: 'we engage in protest – and we toyi-toyi' (Participant 1); 'we do protest and we like it' (Participant 2). Protest action is also linked with organised structures such as movements: 'there are people who engage in protest and hit the streets like members of Abahlali baseMjondolo and Mayine Azanian Movement and also SDCEA' (Participant 9). Residents mentioned the 'empowering' aspects of protest in the sense of 'standing up' and 'doing something about it'. Furthermore, organisations like Abahlali baseMjondolo (the shack dwellers' movement), the Mayine Azanian Movement (a socialist movement), and the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) present opportunities for a counter-hegemonic challenge. But this form of politics occurs in parallel with everyday counter conduct undertaken to 'survive' rather than to transform the status quo. While Emhlabeni residents stand together on the acceptability of self-connecting, the action is undertaken in a more discreet fashion at household/dwelling level across the ward. It is a form of resistance, 'often overlooked but still highly important for changing and shaping urban politics' (Rosol 2014: 71).

The clash of rationalities between the state and citizens struggling for access in South Africa has resulted in the attempted control and discipline of township residents such as those in Emhlabeni. The official narrative leans towards the obligations of democratic citizenship where there is a responsibility to pay for services and, if this is not possible, to consume less in the way of services. The counter conduct narrative however centres on demands related to material and political conditions rather than criminality. Here citizenship is gained through 'poor social behaviour', which elevates customers to citizens and disputes water and electricity as commodified goods. The infrastructure that serves as an instrument of control and discipline is adapted to serve the rationality of citizens without access.

Conclusion

The long wait for 'a better life' as promised by the ANC has resulted in residents of South African townships such as Umlazi adopting their own social values and norms. These rationalities are based on the need for survival but also reject the below par level of services mapped out for the poor, especially those who reside in informality. This rejection has resulted in the creation of a different way of being, which involves wider options for forms and quantities of services. This includes accessing water nearer the

dwelling site and electrifying shack residences. In this sense, there is a disjunct around narratives of self-services which are viewed as 'criminal' in official quarters but as acceptable social behaviour among township citizens, who use it as a mechanism to assert agency and demand accountability regarding their rights to basic services. 'Poor social behaviour' or 'illegally' connecting to water and electricity reflects ways in which techniques for the shaping of 'responsible' subjects are subverted to normalise self-connections. Counter conduct through self-connections is a daily form of resistance, effectively 'delivering' the services that parallel forms of resistance such as social protest continue to demand.

Acknowledgements

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