# Crystallizing Contention

A cumulative dissertation on youth, politics, and
urban violence in Conakry, Kampala, and beyond

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Dies ist eine kumulative Dissertation mit folgenden Einzelbeiträgen:
*(This cumulative dissertation comprises the following academic articles:)*

Philipps, Joschka. 2013. "Youth Gangs and Urban Political Protests. A Relational Perspective on Conakry's 'Axis of Evil'." Pp. 81-98 in *Living the City in Africa. Processes of Invention and Intervention*, Schweizerische Afrikastudien Vol. 10, eds. Brigit Obrist, Veit Arlt, Elísio Macamo. Berlin: Lit Verlag.

Philipps, Joschka. 2014. "Dealing with diversity. African youth research and the potential of comparative approaches." *Journal of Youth Studies* 17(10):1362–1377.

Philipps, Joschka. Forthcoming. "Politics of the future—riots of the now. Temporal horizons of youth in upheavals in England and Guinea." Forthcoming in *Elusive Futures* [working title], eds. Elísio Macamo, Noemi Steuer, Michelle Engeler (submitted on 23 March 2016).

Philipps, Joschka. 2016. "Crystallising contention. Social movements, protests and riots in African Studies." *Review of African Political Economy* (published online on 22 June 2016). DOI: 10.1080/03056244.2016.1171206.

Philipps, Joschka and Jude Kagoro. 2016 (forthcoming). "The metastable city and the politics of crystallization. Protesting and policing in Kampala." Forthcoming in *Africa Spectrum* (accepted 17 June 2016).

*To my parents, for being close while letting me roam far.*

# Contents

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[1] Please note that I have integrated the original publications; the papers' page numbers are thus not consistent with the page numbers indicated in the table of contents. The papers are arranged in the same order as discussed in the PhD synthesis.

# Acknowledgements

A symptom of having spent many hours on this dissertation, I find it difficult not to see this PhD as a crystallization process, a diversity of relationships that have crystallized into a concrete form. Which means that many voices talk throughout the following pages, voices that I am grateful for and that I wish to extend my thanks to.

There are the evident voices. I thank my supervisor Elísio Macamo at the Centre for African Studies Basel, who has been a rich and intriguing source of inspiration for this dissertation, both in terms of his conception of Africanist research and in his insistence on methodological rigor. I equally thank my co-supervisor Mats Utas for his support during my final writing period in Uppsala, his clarity, honesty, and encouragement when I needed it most, and Mamadou Diouf for facilitating my visiting scholarship at Columbia University. Special thanks go to AbdouMaliq Simone, who first introduced me to the philosophy of Gilbert Simondon and whose unsurprisingly informal supervision has pushed me to think anew. More generally, I would like to thank the Centre for African Studies Basel, which has become something of an intellectual home to me, not least due to its ever-diligent coordinator Veit Arlt and the manifest concern to carefully ground academic endeavors in the 'right' extra-academic context (extending well into the culinary realm). This created various Africanist spaces in Basel where academic relations, PhD candidacies, and friendships intersected—a special shout-out goes to Julia Büchele in this regard. I also wish to thank the Nordic Africa Institute for welcoming me in Uppsala, and the 'Italian connection' that made the Swedish winter much more bearable than anticipated.

Two other evident voices are those of Thomas Grovogui and Andrew Mwenda—my friends and family in the respective field, my main brokers, and two thinkers whom I have learned from profoundly over the years. Much love! Furthermore, I am thankful to multiple new and old connections that increasingly constitute a global 'field' where everything is on the move: Dogg Mayo, Nana Barry, Adourahmane Sagnane, Alhoussein Kaba (and family), Gitta Goefrey, Allan Kitonsa, Ron, Dixon, Anna Baral, Adam Branch, Nanna Schneidermann, Clara Weinhardt, Daniel Heltzel, Nina Theodore, Asil Sidahmed, and the whole G57 clique in Basel. Thank you. Leo Menges gets a special thank you.

I dedicate this work to my parents, Ina-Maria Philipps and Henning Keese. I'm grateful for your steady moral support, and though I fail to cite you in the following pages, for being such important inspirations for my thinking, each in your own way. Through family ties, this dedication extends to Margrit Philipps, Inge Keese, Dorit Keese, and Georg Liesenfeld—and with a wink, to my extending family. Let me just say that I blame Sara Gamha if I overstretch the metaphor of crystallization; everything just seems to fall too beautifully into place.

# PhD Synthesis
## Crystallizing Contention

*It makes me suspicious of the social sciences that I have never come across a PhD dissertation that documented how it failed to answer the questions it asked.*

Elísio Macamo, from personal notes

I started this dissertation with what now seems like a fairly naïve confidence in cross-national comparison. After my MA thesis, which had explored urban youth involvement in political protests from 2007 to 2009 in Conakry, Guinea (Philipps 2013), the goal was to compare my findings with another case to develop a broader theory on youth and protest in African cities. As a second case study, I chose Kampala, Uganda, where similar dynamics of contention seemed to have been at play during the Kayunga riots in 2009 and the Walk-to-Work protests in 2011. Through comparison, I sought to go beyond the Guinean specifics, and arrive at a more general understanding of the categories of urban youth that participated in protests and riots and those who did not. The analytical aim was to explore how these categories could be differentiated, and to inquire whether they were more or less congruent across the two cases (which I implicitly expected to be the case). In the following synthesis of my cumulative dissertation, which summarizes and interrelates the constituent papers, I also account for why this cross-national comparative project failed to materialize. The main concern here, methodological above all, is to be as transparent as possible.

The synthesis is structured in three sections. The first section, titled 'comparative ventures', outlines three of the five submitted papers that broadly fall within the initial comparative project: (1) a book chapter on the spatial concentration of protests in Conakry, (2) a journal article on comparative youth research methodologies, and (3) a forthcoming analysis of the 2011 England riots and the 2009 protests in Guinea. The second section then elaborates on my field research in Kampala and how it defied both the comparative framework I started out with and my self-positioning as an Africanist researcher of urban political violence. The third part of the synthesis summarizes two papers (4 and 5) that highlight the concept of crystallization as a tentative analytical solution to the methodological and theoretical

problems I encountered. Since the articles 2 and 4 comprise detailed literature reviews and position my earlier comparative approach and the later crystallization theory within current debates in Africanist scholarship, this synthesis is not going to fully reiterate these points. Rather, it will contextualize the learning process that inspired my transition from one approach to the other, hoping that it can help evoke and explore some of the difficulties of qualitative research in my particular field of study, and possibly beyond.

## Comparative ventures

*Article 1: Youth Gangs and Urban Political Protests. A Relational Perspective on Conakry's 'Axis of Evil'*

The first article of my dissertation, "Youth Gangs and Urban Political Protests. A Relational Perspective on Conakry's 'Axis of Evil'," is based on field research in Conakry in 2009, 2010, and 2012. It asks why protests and riots in the Guinean capital concentrate along a strip of neighborhoods that is commonly referred to as the axis, which has accommodated the bulk of the more recent migrants to the Guinean capital. Two aspects are evoked quite frequently as tentative answers to this question, both in the academic literature and in political discussions in Conakry: the area's economic deprivation and its ethnic homogeneity. Many neighborhoods along the axis feature abject poverty and the vast majority of the axis population are Peul (or Fulani), Guinea's largest ethnic category that is often seen as the marginalized outsider in Guinean politics (up until today, there has not been a Peul President in Guinea). Both poverty and ethnic concentration, however, at least if captured as independent variables, do not provide satisfactory explanations for the concentration of protests. Poverty is widespread in Conakry and by no means specific to the axis area (International Monetary Fund 2008),[1] and the same goes for ethnic homogeneity: Peul communities are concentrated in various neighborhoods in Conakry, but only along the axis were they particularly involved in political protests.[2] In short, if poverty or ethnicity were sufficient preconditions for political protests, the protests would have been less spatially concentrated along the axis.

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[1] According to the IMF, Ratoma (the municipality that comprises the axis) is the richest, not the poorest municipality of Conakry.
[2] Even during the large-scale anti-government demonstration on September 28, 2009, when demonstrators marched from the axis to Conakry's Dixinn-Foula neighborhood (Foula referring to its long-standing Fulani community), most Peul residents of Dixinn-Foula refrained from joining the demonstrators.

As variable-based explanations fail to solve the puzzle, the article suggests a closer analysis of the protesters in their own right (see Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005: 507). The key idea, drawn from relational sociology (Emirbayer 1997; Emirbayer and Mische 1998) is that, while poverty and ethnicity may seem analytically meaningless as independent variables, they should become cogent when grasped through the eyes of those who relate to them. In the case of Conakry's protesters, this approach calls for a stronger focus on the perspectives of organized youth that have been at the forefront of Conakry's protests since 2007. These groups, locally called gangs, clans, or staffs (and referred to as gangs in the paper), started forming in the 1990s in all districts and neighborhoods of Conakry, but nowhere have they emerged as protest organizers and implementers in as large numbers as along the axis. Back then, the axis area, an approximately 12 km long stretch of mostly informal settlements, constituted a specific socio-spatial context. Due to its late and informal urbanization in the 1980s and 90s, it offered emerging gangs, clans and staffs an unparalleled abundance of non-policed marginal spaces, in which they radicalized their fights over territorial control much more than their counterparts in Conakry's already established neighborhoods. While gangs, clans and staffs long remained apolitical all across Conakry, the 2007 general strike constituted a fundamental turning point in that regard, in particular along the axis. Axis youth massively united against the government forces that intruded into their territory in search for protesters, leading to violent clashes along the axis over several weeks. In the aftermath of the 2007 general strike, the Route Le Prince, i.e. the road linking the axis neighborhoods, emerged as a primary site for political rallies, riots, and protests, and its gangs, clans, and staffs played an increasingly important political role in them. As the Conté regime (1984-2008) disintegrated and regime change seemed imminent, politicians from different parties, both from the opposition and the government, increasingly relied on the axis gangs' skills in violent conflict and their power to rally the urban masses. After many axis gangs had shortly sided with the new military junta government (2008-10), most eventually positioned themselves amongst opposition parties with a quite homogenous Peul constituency.

Though ethnicity played a role in these political alliances, it meant something surprisingly different from what the concept usually implies. To the young members of gangs, clans, and staffs, who would also refer to themselves as 'ghetto youth', it had little to do with 'being Peul', for they saw themselves as a trans-ethnic subculture that was openly opposed to both political ethnocentrism and to the rigid cultural norms of Peul quotidian ethnicity.[3] However, ethnicity was important insofar

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[3] Indeed, ghetto youth would efface their ethnic affiliation by replacing their family names (which would indicate their ethnicity) by aliases, usually taken from rap and sports stars, calling themselves Dr. Dre, Barkley, Dogg Mayo, or Michael Jordan. Thus, for instance, the leader of the axis' largest and most

as the ghetto youth could strongly relate to the Peuls' sense of political marginalization. Both the Peul and the ghetto youth shared a feeling that they constituted pluralities in Guinean society and were mistreated as minorities. The sense of political victimhood thus bridged the dissociated realms of Peul ethnicity and axis gangs, and explains to a certain degree why axis gangs, despite their trans-ethnic subculture, identified more easily with ethnic-political calls for political protests than gangs from other communities. The supposedly unambiguous concept of ethnicity is thus shown to be highly contingent on who relates to it. More generally, instead of explaining the concentration of protests along the axis by independent variables, the book chapter tried to give an account on the basis of relations between youth culture, urbanization, ethnicity and politics, i.e. factors that acquire meaning only in relation to one another. Furthermore, this first article contains a somewhat implicit but important comparison between axis youth groups (which tend to protest more frequently) and non-axis youth groups (which tend to protest less frequently), a difference that is explained through a relation between agents and context. In a nutshell, I argue that axis youth gangs protested more frequently because of how they related to the plethora of non-policed urban spaces in the early urbanization period of the axis, and how they related to the sense of political victimhood amongst the Peul residents of the axis. This interpretative gesture circumscribes the kind of comparative approach that I had in mind when starting my PhD thesis. I hoped it would apply to the cases of both Conakry and Kampala: differentiating the category of marginal urban youth groups in terms of who protested and who did not, and finding a meaningful, contextualizing way of making that distinction within a relational sociological framework. The following paper, "Dealing with Diversity", outlines such a comparative approach as a methodological basis for what I thought would become my dissertation.

*Article 2: Dealing with diversity. African youth research and the potential of comparative approaches*

Building on the Conakry article, the second paper, published in the Journal of Youth Studies (JYS), sought to make a broader methodological argument about youth research in African Studies. It starts out by problematizing the frequent designation of African youth as ambivalent, as Janus-faced actors (Richter and Panday 2008), as 'Makers and Breakers' (Honwana and de Boeck 2005b), 'Vanguards or Vandals' (Abbink and van Kessel 2005), 'Promise or Peril' (Muhula 2007) or 'Hooligans and Heroes' (Perullo 2005). Such ambivalence, it seemed, had rather little to do with

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influential gang, the Blood Boys, was not a Peul but a Dialonké, but that was neither widely known (his name was *Big Manager*), nor was it relevant for the organization and political affiliations of his staff.

youth as such, and more with an oversized analytical category that had to accommodate highly heterogeneous and contradictory phenomena. In the above-cited academic titles, the large spectrum of youth-related realities was reduced to its negative and positive antipodes, oftentimes to illustrate what was already known: that "[c]hildren and youth are extremely difficult to pin down analytically" (Honwana and de Boeck 2005a: 3; for the same point, see Mbembe 1985).

The diversity and "conceptual fuzziness of the idea of youth" has been problematized and productively addressed before (van Dijk et al. 2011: 5; see also Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006; Comaroff and Comaroff 2005; Durham 2000, 2004; Straker 2007). Recently, van Dijk et al. (2011) have suggested understanding the identification processes of young people as *youth* as similar to ethnic identification processes, both in terms of an instrumental strategy to access 'youth'-related resources provided by donors or state agencies, and as an "active ideology for [youth] themselves in the pursuit of their own interests; […] an ideological force of their own" (van Dijk et al. 2011: 9). Yet, as convincing as such an analytical angle appeared, it still stuck to the same youth category that proved so utterly inflated and impractical for empirical research. I argued that, just like ethnicity (Brubaker and Laitin 1998: 428), the youth category risked compromising more nuanced accounts of how different categories of identification intersect and fluctuate in everyday life. In other words, youth are never simply youth; they also identify as students or professionals, as outcasts or future leaders, family and community members, as political and economic actors, and so on, identifications that may "connect them with […] other social categories, from which youth are often pictured as excluded and marginalised" (p. 4). If indeed the "diversity of the [youth] phenomenon seems to stand in the way of greater conceptual clarity" (van Dijk et al. 2011: 5), the paper argues, one should disaggregate such diversity through comparative methods. For instance, if otherwise similar categories of young people differ with regard to their political agency, like the above-mentioned youth gangs in Conakry, the obvious question to ask would be: why does their political agency differ? How come that the trans-ethnic milieu of ghetto youth joined ethno-political protests in large numbers along the axis and not elsewhere in Conakry? The goal would be to make theoretical sense of diversity (Pickvance 1986: 163) and to explain variation (Robinson 2011: 9-12) amongst clearly specified categories of young people. This would imply neither iron causality laws nor dependent and independent variables. Rather, it would explore what is rather context-specific and what is rather general (see Mayntz 2002) by comparing how specific youth categories relate to different contexts (in the sense of Ragin 1989: 24).

The motives for this approach were primarily methodological. As a former political science student with a mildly positivist outlook, I was surprised that in the Africanist youth debate, researchers seemed urged "to refine a category [of African youth] for which their data is inevitably insufficient," and surmised this was the reason why many of them omitted "the connections between data, methods and theory altogether" (p. 1364) (cf. Biaya 2000; El-Kenz 1996; Straker 2007). Beyond methodological concerns, I found it alarming how confined and self-referential the Africanist youth debate had become and held the belief that comparative methods, with their emphasis on context, were better equipped to enter a critical dialogue with other strands of research that had largely effaced contextual parameters from their vocabulary and yet dominated the international debate on African youth, in particular the so-called youth bulge theory advocated by economists and demographers (cf. Cincotta 2009; Urdal 2006, 2007; Urdal and Hoelscher 2009; for critiques, see Sommers 2006, 2011). In that context, and based on Robinson (2011), the article suggests three different comparative methods for Africanist youth research—individualizing comparison (emphasizing the singularity of one or more cases), encompassing comparison (delineating multiple cases as examples for the same overarching processes), and variation-finding comparison (seeking to explain variations across cases), embracing in particular the latter. Finally, it outlines three different levels on which similar categories of youth could be compared: different contexts within the same spatial unit (e.g. the same city, as in my Conakry paper), cross-national comparison and trans-continental comparison.

In this PhD synthesis, the JYS paper may stand for what I started out with—including the merely concealed hubris of critiquing an entire academic sub-field with my first peer-reviewed journal article. Today, many aspects of the paper seem rather startling: one is the obvious contradiction between its emphasis on the fluctuating and intersecting identifications of youth on the one hand, and the methodological reliance on clearly delineated youth categories to be compared in different contexts on the other. I only discovered in Kampala that the fluctuating identifications and the unsteady positioning of people (not just of 'youth') actually challenged my positivist comparative framework to the degree that I eventually gave it up. This leads me to the second startling aspect of the JYS paper, which one may tentatively call my positivist comparative research framework. A colleague of mine from the University of Basel, Barbara Heer, has recently defended a PhD thesis on 'interpretive post-crisis comparison' (Heer 2015), in which she brilliantly debunks much of the positivist baggage of comparative methodology that I entered the field with. She rightly detects:

> Positivists think that comparison can fail. Failure can happen because for example researchers make category mistakes: they set off to study apples,

but find out that one of the apples is actually a pear. Because their analytical framework is built to test theory, and not thought to be adapted to empirical reality, they cannot easily replace the pre-comparative third 'apples' with a broader category 'fruits'. Neither can they use the contradiction to reflect on what their initial misreading of the pear as an apple tells us about apples and fruits and our conceptualisations of them (Heer 2015: 29).

This reflects, broadly speaking, a good deal of my PhD research experience. In Kampala, as I will elaborate in section 2 of this synthesis, I simply did not 'find' the equivalent youth category that I had studied in Conakry—for logical reasons, as Heer (2015: 18) argues: it is problematic to expect 'otherwise similar' categories in an entirely different national context. This is to be kept in mind when it comes to the third article of my dissertation, a book chapter in a forthcoming edited volume that analyzes the 2011 riots in England and the 2009 protests in Guinea, and how rioters and protesters perceived the future.

### _Article 3: Politics of the future—riots of the now. Temporal horizons of youth in upheavals in England and Guinea_

This paper emerged in relation to a book project with the working title 'Elusive Futures,' conceived at the Centre for African Studies Basel. The edited volume's key question is how individuals deal with (future) uncertainty and, from a more methodological angle, how to do research on something as intangible as the future (on similar issues, see Cooper and Pratten 2015). The book chapter relates these themes to the field of politics, which, as Luhmann (2002: 169) has pointed out, critically relates to future uncertainty. Political institutions negotiate continuity and change in societies, politicians develop narratives about the future through which they seek to access or remain in power, and citizens tend to observe politics as an indicator of what the future may hold for the broader society (see also Mitchell 2014). If the uncertain future is a resource of political systems, the paper wonders, how do rioters and protesters relate to the future when they attack and destabilize the political order? What are their temporal horizons when they take to the streets? And how do they talk about the political future in interviews?

The article juxtaposes the 2011 England riots and the 2009 protests in Conakry, Guinea. The English case is analyzed through secondary data—reports, academic and newspaper articles, as well as filmed and quoted interviews with self-reported rioters—while in the Guinean case it draws on first-hand observations, interviews, and conversations with protesters in 2009. On the basis of primary and secondary data it is difficult to ascertain to what degree the English rioters and the Guinean

protesters constitute the same category of youth (I touch upon that issue in footnote 8 of the article). But the question here is less about whether the respective youth milieus match, and more about how the political order was disrupted with different perspectives on the future. Both the plethora of documents on the 2011 England riots and my qualitative data from Conakry are unambiguous in this regard. While my informants and interviewees in Conakry—I refer in particular to my informant Dogg Mayo—narrated their protest agency as aiming at future political change, the interviewed English rioters barely talked about the future at all; some of them denied any hopes in political change whatsoever (Lewis et al. 2011: 26), others outright rejected the notion of political protests as naïve (Treadwell et al. 2013: 11-12).[4]

The article tries to make sense of these different perspectives on the future by looking at the question of political inclusion and exclusion of the protesters and rioters. The available empirical material suggests a correspondingly stark contrast between the cases. In the English case, rioters were neither associated with political parties (the opposition equally condemned the riots), nor did they position themselves politically through political demands, protest placards, or other symbols (see Williams 2012), and the English political system actively excluded the rioters through its security and judicial apparatus. In Conakry, by contrast, politicians depended on youth from the urban margins to access or remain in power. In 2009, the parliament had been shut down, and politics, in the form of rallies and movements, largely took place in Conakry's streets. Both the military junta government and the opposition relied on Conakry's staffs, clans, and gangs to mobilize massive urban support in view of the promised upcoming elections. Young men like Dogg Mayo were actively included into political networks through money handouts, job promises, and directly addressed by politicians courting the ghetto. Military junta president Dadis Camara was probably the most explicit when he declared publicly in front of the axis area's ghetto youth: "S'ils vous appellent bandits, moi aussi je me réclame bandit!" ("If they call you thugs, I, too, will declare myself a thug!"). In other words, the uncertainty of Guinea's political future constituted a considerable political resource for Conakry's urban margins. Youths like Dogg Mayo not only benefitted from it, but also identified radical political

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[4] Given the diversity of sources, it seems unlikely that this could be a bias in the secondary data. The 2011 England riots have been thoroughly documented and analyzed by different independent research teams (Dunleavy et al. 2012; Flint and Powell 2012; Lewis et al. 2011; Morrell et al. 2011; Newburn 2014; Riots, Communities and Victims Panel 2012; Treadwell et al. 2013), widely discussed in affected communities, and massively commented upon in different media. In each of these contexts, there emerged a strong concern about the 'lack of future' amongst marginal urban youth—both in terms of professional opportunities and tangible aspirations, and both on the personal and the socio-political level.

change as *their* project, a struggle to disentangle themselves from "from (present and future) confining structures and relations [and draw] a line of flight into an envisioned future" (Vigh 2010: 151).

The contrast between the cases was all but expected when I started working on the article. In fact, the comparison with the England case originally grew out of an interest in the Comaroffs' 'Theory from the South' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012b), which I saw as an implicitly comparative research project about global *convergences*. I was intrigued by the argument that "there is much south in the North, much north in the South, and more of both to come in the future" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012a). The analytical goal was thus not to reify the North-South boundary, but, through transcontinental comparison, to supersede it and defy the myth of incommensurability (Robinson 2011). The North-South contrast I ended up with, however, pointed to a different problem, interrogating both the trope of inclusive democracies in Europe and the trope of the marginalized urban underclass in Africa, themes that may indeed be interrelated—not only in theory, but also on a more personal level of my research. As the article insinuates (when citing my conversations with Dogg Mayo and his peers), I was highly impressed by the urban ghetto youths' political engagement, hopes and dreams, not least because they contrasted so profoundly with my own background. Growing up in a German middle-class environment in the 1990s and 2000s, where political contingency was reduced to a minimum, the stability of the national political order seemed to obviate dreams of radical political improvement, which were in turn widely projected onto a global scale in terms of a humanitarian ethic. During my studies (2005-2011), however, I also became increasingly critical of the international development industry, which posed a dilemma between academic skepticism and political concerns that has ever since routinely troubled my career plans. My experience in Guinea in 2009 acquired a crucial importance in that context. Thanks to my close relation with Thomas, my friend, broker, and key informant (we would refer to our research as 'notre bébé'), I entered Conakry's ghettos less with the sense of being an ethnographer, and more with the sense of being a friend of Thomas. Consequentially, I felt that I documented their milieu as much as I documented an extension of mine: one that voiced a political critique in a common global language inspired by HipHop that I was only too familiar with (Philipps 2013: 196), though I had never voiced that critique myself. In a way, their struggle became legible through mine, and I only discovered the self-referential character of my perspective in the absence of a similar friendship during most of my research in Kampala. And only then, i.e. arguably delayed, did I become seriously interested in postcolonial theory.

## Kampala: The metastable field

Kampala's protests and riots in 2009 and 2011 seemed similar to those in Conakry, the 'strong' Ugandan state stood in an interesting contrast with Guinea's political instability, and from what I could gather, the position of the Baganda in Kampala overlapped in curious ways with the Peuls' in Conakry. Yet, in spite of my positivist approach, I chose Kampala not only because of these variables, but at least as much because of Andrew Mwenda, a Ugandan journalist, political entrepreneur and friend, who had facilitated my 2008 field research in Kampala on neo-colonialism in international relations.[5] Back then, Andrew had arranged almost all interviews with high-ranking politicians, academics, and journalists, and I saw in him a potential broker to set in motion the snowball sampling process for an ethnographic study of youth in Kampala's riots and protests.

To be clear, Andrew could hardly be more disconnected from Kampala's ghettos—his virtual profile illuminates that vividly—and already upon my arrival in Kampala for my first exploratory field research in 2012, that was the first thing that struck me. The following quotes are from my research journal.

> Oct. 2, 2012 (Arrival): After the airport, lunch with Andrew, Russian weapons dealer, and a third guy who pays for my lunch at a European-style place in Kisementi. I sit apart from them, spill lamb on my pants and when I try to escape the setting and get my newspaper, fail to relock Andrew's fancy Audi-Jeep. I am wondering what I am doing with a Russian arms dealer in a posh restaurant when I am studying protests of marginalized youth.

> Oct. 4, 2012: Going to the Ministry of Finance, Serena Hotel, and meet important people with Andrew. Extremely boring. The "best" possible thing happens: protests. I run to the place by Kisekka Market, tear gas, taking videos, talking to a few people, but nothing special, I find it difficult to get in touch with people.

By 'people', I meant 'the people I was looking for': potential protesters, informal youth groups, petty criminals, activists, and by 'getting in touch' a rather effortless conversation in their habitual setting. Most of the time during my exploratory field research, however, I found myself in air-conditioned cafés, hotel lobbies and bars, talking to politicians and journalists that Andrew had arranged interviews with. I came with my dictaphone, asked the same questions about youth and protests in Kampala, and was repeatedly disappointed by the sense of distance that these interviews left me with. Most of my interlocutors, including Andrew, looked down upon the youth involved in protests, as victims of government oppression, casualties

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[5] Unpublished research with Clara Weinhardt, a postdoctoral researcher at the Bremen International Graduate School of Social Sciences (https://bigsss-bremen.academia.edu/ClaraWeinhardt).

of Uganda's underdevelopment, or as drugged thugs from Kampala's slums instrumentalized by the opposition.

> Simon Kasyate: "I know that for a fact, those guys are just hired cats."
>
> Joschka: "Do you know where they come from?"
>
> Simon: "Yah! I mean we have this sprawling slum, they're just down-down Kampala in all these places, I mean we've got neighborhoods in this town where youth, they're looking out for the next SHOT in their arm to […] violently go and destroy when they get paid little money but they also know that in the ensuing fracas they can pick up one or two BUCKS from some guys they meet along the way. So it's more a source of livelihood they want" (Interview with Simon Kasyate, Oct. 5, 2012).

I nodded and said 'yes' during these interviews and duly took notes and followed up on the responses. But my interlocutors' distance to the protesting youth, even when it took sympathetic forms, generally translated into a distance between them and me. My curiosity levels dropped, I stopped empathizing, stopped looking at how my interviewees moved or smiled or intonated their voices when talking. Of course, I did not contradict them—after all, who was I, in an entirely new context, whose history I largely ignored, whose names and places sounded foreign to me, to judge how people felt about an 'urban youth' that, thus far, was but a category in my head? But I stopped asking the kind of questions that might have brought us closer.

I was especially reluctant to subscribe to the widespread reductionism amongst my interviewees that it was all about "MONEY! MONEY, EVERY! WHERE, it's money" (Ron, Oct. 17, 2012)—not just because of ideological reasons. Sociologically, it made no sense to me. Was not every human being driven by diverse motivations, did networks not work through myriad media, and could I be so wrong with my interpretation of urban violence as an expression of mixed frustrations that found an outlet in politics? I blamed the money emphasis on my sample of informants. Aside from journalists and politicians, I mainly interviewed political entrepreneurs, people like Ron, Sam, or Dixon, whom Andrew had connected me with, who had their own party-political career ambitions and whose connections to the young men in Kampala's slum areas seemed entirely instrumental. "They're desperate gangsters," Sam would say, "they would do anything for 5000 Ugandan Shillings" (Sam, Oct. 15, 2012). Maybe, I surmised, these political entrepreneurs were indeed middlemen between the ghetto and politics, just like Dogg Mayo in Conakry, but they were on the politicians' side, not on the side of the ghetto. I thus had to cross the line—but how?

Most of my political entrepreneur interviewees would be extremely reserved when I asked them to connect me to their "gangsters." Ron would fear that I would get

robbed, or argue that a white guy attracted too much attention in the ghetto, or note that the slum youth could not speak proper English and would be of no use to me. I could not convince him to join him as a friend. After he had told me that he had been involved in some of the atrocities during the Mabira riots in 2007, I kept a sort of moral distance from him. It shows drastically in my interviews, in particular when Ron starts talking about his work in a more personal manner:

> Ron: "It's a very-very tiresome bad business. VERY risky."
>
> Joschka: "I bet, I bet, so, to-ahm, to-to follow up, you said there was a third gang that you were working with, right?" (Interview with Ron, Oct. 17, 2012)

I missed Thomas. And I worried more and more about my access to the field. I eagerly longed for someone to relate to and discuss with more openly, a broker who would connect me to the specific 'youth' I had in mind—"someone who is *in* it, [an] equivalent to Thomas" (from my research journal, Oct. 4, 2012). But during the following 18 months, no relationship in Kampala matched even slightly my friendship and intellectual proximity to Thomas, and without him, I found it utterly difficult to relate to Kampala's urban underclass. Indeed, not until three weeks before I would finish my fieldwork would I connect with a milieu that I found commensurable with the Conakry case—not in an irony of fate, but rather as an illustration of how strongly qualitative research is contingent on the person of the researcher and his or her personal environment. In the following section, I explore these entanglements, first to illuminate the shifts and predicaments of this dissertation, and eventually to tap into their underlying methodological and theoretical challenges.[6]

On October 10, after one week of exploratory fieldwork in Kampala, Andrew's cousin Carol came back from New York. I had met her in Kampala in 2008, and since then, she had become a successful communications and brand strategist, and a stunningly beautiful woman. "So you're here to study poor Africans now?" she asked when we were driving to dinner. Carol, I found out over sushi, conceived of the world as a place where people, ideas, and places are effectively brands. In that world, she would argue, the 'Africa' brand remained one of the few that was still dominated by shareholders who needed an epitome of misery, be it to have a job or to feel better about their own places. She was working on a different African imagery, arguably neoliberal, but to her: the only pragmatic way towards dignity.

Although I had initially laughed it off, Carol's remark about me studying 'poor Africans' struck me. I had never considered that my research could seem exoticizing

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[6] Trying to maintain a sphere of personal privacy, I will use allusions and selected snippets of stories rather than spelling out personal details; I also changed a few names.

or was perpetuating a negative image of the continent, and it was the first time I was confronted with such an insinuation. There was something trenchant about it, still undefined, but as time went by, it would unsettle the ease with which I saw the world, mixed with changes in my—and in our personal lives. In early 2013, Carol and I became a couple and moved into a new apartment next to Kampala's golf course; I was planning to settle in Kampala for good. Working on my future as an adult, I started to sense what I had heard only too many times from my friends in Conakry: that the ghetto, as a social space of youth, stood in an explicit contrast, partly imposed and partly deliberate, to the general social expectations of becoming a man, expectations that I now sought to satisfy and that engendered multiple dilemmas: Whom was I going to relate to in Kampala, and for what reasons? Could I, to put it bluntly, learn from the ghetto when I was living a life apart from it? And why was I studying rioting youth in Africa in the first place? Previously, I might have responded like Sudhir Venkatesh (2013: 249), that I studied the urban underclass "because they don't have a voice." But that answer sounded increasingly hollow. For was this really about *their* voice that *they* lacked? As Sudhir's informant Margot replies,

> *They* have a voice, Sudhir. They talk all the fucking time, *You* don't have a voice is the problem. You feel like they could *give* you one. (Venkatesh 2013: 249, emphasis in original).

Indeed, when I returned from my exploratory research in Uganda, I felt like I lacked the voice that I had long believed was mine. "After Uganda, I am quite overwhelmed, don't know where to go and what to think", I wrote in my research journal (November 7, 2012). When I presented my first findings in Basel, my confusion was palpable. In a seminar on 'The Anthropology of Resistance', I offered a scathing critique of the idea of resistance and argued that Kampala's protests evidenced the most pessimist strands of Africanist scholarship (Bayart 1993; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Mbembe 1992; Médard 1982). In Elísio Macamo's African Studies Colloquium, I wondered how not to write another pessimistic narrative about Africa and confided that "I am bored and frustrated" by Bayart and the other above-mentioned authors (from my presentation notes, Nov. 6, 2012).

Back in Kampala in mid-2013, I worked on finishing my paper on youth comparison, paradoxically while I continued to fail in my attempts of approaching the youth category that I had set out to compare. In one telling incident in September 2013, I went to a dancehall club that attracted what seemed to match the category of ghetto youth. Carol had come with me. In front of the club, I struck up a conversation with a man who said he was rapper; his name was Morgans. I

beatboxed a few rhythms, and he started freestyling![7] Though I kept a cool pose, my inner self was jubilating like a little boy. The situation emerged from a natural encounter—with me in my tight jeans and leather shoes—and I was finally back in a *cypher* (collective rap session)! While the rap flowed, images shot through my head about the ethnographic research that would evolve from this moment. Enthused, we re-entered the bar and I paid drinks for the three of us, only to realize a few seconds later that my wallet was missing. Things went fast from there. Carol immediately suspected Morgans, informed the bouncer and called the police. Half an hour later, the three of us found ourselves at a police station, where Morgans threatened Carol to cut off her dreadlocks once he would be out of prison, shouting "You're not rasta! You're with Babylon!"[8]

A week later, when my wallet was still not found, and there was no evidence against Morgans, I told the police to let him go. I wrote him a text message another week later (we had exchanged numbers before): "hey morgans, this is joschka, the guy who sent u to prison. i would like to get together with u but the number does not seem to be working. get back to me if you can! peace." I am not sure today whether this message evidenced my naiveté or the desperate state of my fieldwork (or both), but I thought that, whatever had happened on that very night, it could still be the beginning of something. Though Morgans never replied, I met him in another bar a good month later. Carol was in another corner of the room, I gave it a shot, approached Morgans and hugged him gangsta-style (grabbing hands between the bodies, broad shoulders, usually passes as a sign of respect). We talked shortly; he gave me another (wrong) number and we said we would meet. Carol had observed the scene from afar; back home she was consternated about how I could, for whatever reason, hug a person who had threatened to cut off her hair. I replied, and it sounds awfully pathetic today, that I wanted to relate to Morgans to preserve my sense of humanity. This, certainly, bespeaks my naiveté in more than one way. Later, I found out that Morgans had been related to numerous rape and assault charges.

After that incident, I called Nanna Schneidermann for help. Nanna, back then, was a doctoral anthropology student at Aarhus University finishing her thesis on HipHop in Kampala. She encouraged me kindly to continue—"Joschka, don't panic. Access is a bitch!"—and connected me to her rapper friends in Kampala. We also talked about 'youth' and the Africanist youth literature. Nanna, who had tried to work with that literature, later discarded the Africanist concept of youth on the grounds that 'youth' in Kampala meant a different thing. It was not the marginal-rebellious category that

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[7] Beatboxing is a form of vocal percussion; freestyling is improvised rapping.
[8] According to Rastafarianism, Babylon stands for white-racist oppression in the world.

had become a sort of template for the debate on *African* youth[9] and that was particularly prominent in scholarship on Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, or Senegal.[10] Instead, in Uganda, the concept 'youth' related to national development, party politics, entrepreneurship and was mostly evoked in relation to Youth MPs, youth party wings, or during Uganda's Young Achievers Awards, for instance. When I mentioned 'youth' during my Ugandan expert interviews, some of my interlocutors thus understood something else from the marginal-rebellious category that I had in mind. When I initially interviewed Andrew Mwenda about the political significance of 'youth' in Uganda, for instance, he referred not to the protests (which he knew I was interested in), but to the importance of youth cadres during the first regime of ex-President Obote.[11] And when my interlocutors did understand what I meant by 'youth', they would either remark that such a concept was not widely used by Ugandans,[12] or more explicitly call it misleading and discourage me from using it. Yusuf Serunkuma for instance argued that, from a Foucauldian point of view, 'youth' seemed like an extrinsic discursive instrument that wrongly dissects the intermixed Ugandan population into distinct generations.[13]

I was utterly reluctant to give up youth as a conceptual category, however.[14] Of the two red threads that ran through my work—protest and youth—youth had always been the stronger one, not only because protest was already difficult enough to justify as a conceptual choice over social movements, contention, riots, or political violence (see paper 4). More importantly, youth was also my conceptual lens; it filtered and structured not only the meanings of protests, but also inspired what I thought about urbanity, politics, identity, or culture, for instance. More than all the books and articles I had read about culture, it was my research on Conakry's ghetto youth that had informed my understanding of culture as something transnational,

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[9] See e.g. Abbink and van Kessel (2005); Biaya (2000); Honwana (2012); Honwana and de Boeck (2005b). The oftentimes implicit understanding of youth as an inherently marginal-rebellious category persists in African Studies despite various methodological caveats that youth were not simply an empirical concept, but a social shifter (Durham 2000, 2004), an ideology (van Dijk et al. 2011), or a "politically constructed category" in "tropic guises" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005: 20-21).

[10] See Abdullah (2005); Bangoura (2005); Christensen and Utas (2008); Cruise O'Brien (1996); Diouf (1996, 2003, 2005); El-Kenz (1996); Philipps (2013); Richards (1996); Utas (2003, 2005, 2012b, 2014); Vigh (2006, 2015). This is not to imply that the concept of marginal-rebellious youth only applies to the West African region. On Tanzania, for instance, see Perullo (2005), Remes (1999), or Weiss (2005).

[11] President Museveni himself, in his youth, worked as Obote's research officer, and has continuously appealed to Uganda's youth cadres of tomorrow (interview with Andrew Mwenda, Butabika, Kampala, Oct. 10, 2012).

[12] Adam Branch mentioned that the concept of *marginal* youth was mostly evoked as part of development discourses amongst the numerous foreign NGOs in Uganda's civil war-affected north. Interview with Adam Branch, Kisementi, Kampala, March 20, 2014.

[13] Interview with Yusuf Serunkuma, Makerere, Kampala, March 22, 2014. Yusuf, at the time, was a doctoral student of Mahmood Mamdani at the Makerere Institute for Social Research.

[14] On the distinction between conceptual, descriptive, and analytical categories, see Macamo (n.d.), which much of the following discussion builds upon.

something that could evolve across geographic boundaries. As such, youth was almost impossible to give up as a heuristic tool, and I long continued to use it without an empirical reference in Kampala. In my imagination, there was a ghetto youth milieu that I simply had not yet discovered. But as time passed, I grew nervous. What if not? What if it did not exist? What if it did, but I failed to discover it? Certainly, it was out of question to stick to a youth framework that inductively illuminated the case of Conakry, but was deductively imposed on the case of Kampala. Yet, without that youth framework, social phenomena like protests tended to nebulize in front of my eyes, they disintegrated into diverse concerns, histories, and coincidences that made no sense together, or rather, whose legibility seemed so arbitrarily dependent on the alternative lens I would employ.

In that regard, my comparative framework further complicated my methodological problems. For even if I were to develop a better conceptual category than 'youth' to describe the Kampala case, it simultaneously urged me to consider whether that new category would also help me re-understand Conakry's realities. If it did not, the last resort would be to write two separate narratives that accounted for the respective uniqueness of each case (Robinson 2011: 6)—but then I would need to distinguish the uniqueness of each case from the uniqueness of my *access* to each case (Philipps 2014, 2016), and I had no idea of how to accomplish that. For if I had learned one thing in Kampala, it was that a 'case' and one's access to it were largely indiscernible. Thus, although I saw clear differences between Conakry and Kampala, I did not know what to attribute them to, and any categorization into 'empirical' and 'personal' or 'methodological' differences between the cases would inevitably ignore the core epistemological problem: that these realms were interrelated. I thus started to doubt not only the usefulness of my overarching conceptual category of youth, which held meanings together; I was also growing skeptical of methodological distinctions that would keep meanings apart. At the time, I even lacked *that* distinction; it simply felt like having gone astray:

> I don't know how to work, I've lost my discipline, I feel outside of academic debates [...]. Kampala annoys me, bores me [...], a world of expats, of bluff, strange anxieties. I have to restart my research, if it is not already way too late... (from my research journal, Nov. 11, 2013).

In November 2013, I applied for writing a cumulative dissertation instead of a monograph. The goal was, to put it simply, to compartmentalize my confusion. I was hopelessly overwhelmed by the broad comparative project I had started out with, but I hoped to define a few worthwhile and manageable questions in isolation from one another. I contemplated, for instance, writing a comparative paper about why the marginal-rebellious youth concept in Africanist scholarship was emic in Guinea, but not in Uganda, thinking that maybe the early postcolonial regimes of Sékou

Touré and Milton Obote played an important role in that. At a seminar at the African Studies Centre in Leiden (Philipps 2014), I also problematized the issue of access in comparative ethnographic youth research. It was crucial in this regard that during my last three weeks in Kampala, i.e. shortly before leaving Kampala for good, I had finally established the ethnographic access to Kampala's social margins that I had longed for, and had ventured into an ethnography of a drug trading spot in Kampala's red light district Kabalagala. Though it did not allow for broad inferences on the relation between youth and protests in Kampala, it at least allowed me to problematize the issue of ethnographic access from a position where I had finally tried with some success. Yet, as became evident in my presentation in Leiden, I still lacked a coherent narrative to describe my findings. One of the key arguments of my presentation, titled "Who's throwing the stones?", was that the people throwing stones in protests could rightfully be called 'youth' in Conakry, but not in Kampala. What was missing, as anthropologist Ria Reis remarked in the Q&A session, was a better description of what actually happened in Kampala. That still remained opaque to me. And it was only when I made this political opacity my research problem that I arrived at a new understanding of protests beyond the concept of youth.


## Crystallization

It started with a rather simple self-interrogatory question that preoccupied my mind while I was still in Kampala: how could political protests have seemed so straightforward and clear in the past when, now, they seemed so complex that I did not even know where to start to describe them? In retrospect, the crystallization approach appears to delve into that very relation between the tangible and the intangible, between the things we seem to know and understand, and the realm of the unknown and opaque. It became a research question the more I focused on what I evidently did not know about Kampala's protests.

First, Kampala's protests and riots, that much seemed evident, did not emerge from a specific milieu of ghetto youth. Youth popular culture, including HipHop, was politically promiscuous. Unlike their Guinean counterparts, Ugandan rappers tended to shy away from confrontation with the political elite, most popular music stars had supported President Museveni in 2011 and 2015, and even the underground rappers that Nanna had connected me with usually avoided politically provocative lyrics in fear of limiting their advancement opportunities (see Schneidermann 2014a, 2014b; 2015). Secondly, although protests did concentrate in particular spaces, such as Kisekka Market in downtown Kampala, these spaces were utterly fluid. In contrast

with Conakry's axis, Kisekka Market was not an enclave that could be studied as a bounded space. A trading spot for car spares, it constituted a busy hub of intersecting movements, heterogeneous interests and schemes between hawkers, shopkeepers, customers, hustlers, and individuals who would explore the day's opportunities, many of them arriving from far away. How the protests emerged from this perplexing compound urbanity, nobody knew for sure. Third, although Kisekka Market was a central space of Ganda ethnicity in Kampala, the protests and riots seemed to go beyond ethnic politics. Even the Kayunga riots in 2009, supposedly Kampala's quintessential 'ethnic riots' in which the Baganda were said to have fought for their king and against the state (cf. Baker 2015), actually featured a large population of non-Baganda rioters. The majority of arrested suspects in Kampala, I was told, had been non-Baganda.

The conveyor of this latter information was Jude Kagoro, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Bremen and also a friend of Andrew's. Jude had worked on Uganda's police for the past five years, and several high-placed police officers had independently from one another confirmed to him that the Kayunga riots had featured mostly non-Baganda riot suspects. His added piece of confusion made sense. Jude and I wholeheartedly agreed that, in a way, riots and protests always seemed to produce clarity about the rioting or protesting groups and their underlying motives, whether that clarity was true or misleading. This made me think about crystallization for the first time—"the action or an act of becoming concrete, defined, or clarified," as I later found out in the Oxford English Dictionary. Indeed, from the fluid, opaque, and illegible urban environment that I struggled to decipher, protests and riots seemed to emerge as utterly unambiguous political phenomena, accentuating contours of politics that otherwise remained intangible. Maybe, I wondered, that was why they got so much attention in the media—not because of the events as such, but because of the emerging clarity that they produced.

Back at the University of Basel in summer 2014, I investigated further into the crystallization analogy. I talked to geologists and chemists, learned about supersaturated solutions, 'seeds,' and why ice crystals concentrated around impurities. Though I remained somewhat suspicious of an analogy with the physical world (social dynamics did not follow natural laws, so would this not be deceptive?), the crystallization approach interested me in particular because it would preserve both the idea of a fluid urbanity and its political concretization in protests. It could delineate a protest as a process without reading into it a causal formula of structure and agency where pre-defined factors (e.g. youth unemployment and poverty) would interact with pre-defined actors (e.g. opposition parties and ethnic groups),

and instead focus on how both factors and actors emerged *through* that process, not least as an outcome of explanations.

*Article 4: Crystallising contention. Social movements, protests and riots in African Studies*

After my encounters with the natural scientists, I started formulating my thoughts on crystallization processes in a paper on social movements, protests and riots, mainly in relation to the respective literature in African Studies (e.g. Brandes and Engels 2011; Dwyer and Zeilig 2012; Ellis and van Kessel 2009; Larmer 2010; Mamdani and Wamba-dia-Wamba 1995; Veit 2011). Though that literature talked about key concerns of my PhD, I had always remained somewhat distant to it. I was skeptical, for instance, of the 'social movements' label that featured as a sort of umbrella term in the Africanist debate,[15] for several reasons. First, while Charles Tilly (2004: 474), a pioneer of social movement research, defines social movements as a rather specific set of political phenomena: the "sustained, collective, popularly based public making of claims […], or the people and organizations that mount such claims"—the phenomena that Africanists would refer to consisted of extremely heterogeneous forms of political action, such as throwing stones, petitions, looting, strikes, and demonstration marches (see Branch and Mampilly 2015: 7). Second, as in Tilly's definition, the Africanist debate on social movements hinged on the idea of a collective entity or identity (Della Porta and Diani 2006; Mamdani 1995), while Bayat (2005: 905) has rightly pointed out the "fragmented nature of contemporary social movements." Third, there was a surprising tendency in Africanist circles to analyze African social movements in relation to transnational civil society organizations and Human Rights discourses (e.g. Brandes and Engels 2011; Ellis and van Kessel 2009; Larmer 2010), while many documented social movements in Africa seemed to emerge without relation to these organizations or discourses (e.g. Alexander 2012; Ballard, Habib, and Valodia 2006; Dwyer and Zeilig 2012; Habib and Opoku-Mensah 2009; Harsch 2013; Maccatory, Oumarou, and Poncelet 2010).[16]

Critiques of the mainstream Africanist social movement literature exist (e.g. Macamo 2011), and recently, Branch and Mampilly (2015) have provided an influential

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[15] Though some authors preferred different concepts (e.g. Branch and Mampilly 2015b; Macamo 2011; Pommerolle 2010).

[16] Accordingly, the widespread reference in the Africanist social movement literature to Bayart (2000) and his notion of "extraversion," which highlights African political actors' access to resources from the global North, is equally misplaced, not least—and this has been bizarrely ignored—because Bayart (1986: 111) had always belittled social movements, arguing that no social category in African societies was able "to 'breach' and counteract the simultaneous 'totalisation' unleashed by the state."

theoretical alternative to it. Their book 'Africa Uprising' distances itself from the widespread civil society-based reading of social movements, and accentuates the role of the urban underclass in popular upheavals, "a group often marginal to accounts of popular protest despite their centrality to [it]" (Branch and Mampilly 2015: 9). In line with Partha Chatterjee and akin to Frantz Fanon's interpretation of the lumpenproletariat, the authors refer to the urban poor as "political society," an oppressed and marginalized category produced by colonial rule (Branch and Mampilly 2015: chapter 2). Unlike civil society, political society has no faith in moderate reform and political integration; it enters protest for the total transformation of the system, oftentimes interlaced with instances of looting and rioting, which Branch and Mampilly see as a form of economic protest (2015: 7, 32-35). While the focus of 'Africa Uprising' on the urban poor constitutes a very important contribution to the current Africanist debate (Philipps 2015), several methodological aspects appear questionable: how did their elegant theory work so well across four different cases (Nigeria, Ethiopia, Uganda, and Sudan)? How could the category of political society be maintained, given its internal heterogeneity and fluid boundaries?[17] Why did the authors embrace political opposition parties so much, including in Uganda, where its democratic integrity is dubious at best?[18] And finally, was the African urban underclass really as totally excluded from politics as Branch and Mampilly were arguing (see article 3 of this dissertation)?

In 'Crystallising Contention', I try to delineate the political position of the urban underclass differently, as an oscillation between general exclusion and partial inclusion. The ambiguity that comes with that oscillation, or, in other words, the uncertainty of whether one will be included or excluded from networks of power, I argue, matters a lot for the urban underclass's role in political protests. Conakry's ghetto youth and Kampala's political entrepreneurs may switch sides between government and opposition while being critical of both. In their everyday life, they may collaborate and congregate across the very boundaries that they invoke in protests. And their agency may draw from a variety of motives, contexts, and identifications that extend far beyond the political concern of which party is in power, as Branch and Mampilly (2015) seem to imply.

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[17] The boundary issue is paradoxically highlighted by the fact that many of Branch and Mampilly's interview sources seem to be activists working at the very nexus of political society and civil society that the authors argue was lacking.
[18] My opposition-leaning informants in Kampala, whenever in low spirits, would routinely remark that the opposition was just as corrupt as the government.

At a 2014 workshop on "Social Movements in Theory and in Practice,"[19] I tried to address these issues, presenting for the first time the concept of crystallization, which did not seem to convince the audience.[20] After the discussion, AbdouMaliq Simone came to me, an eminent urban studies scholar whose work I admire. "Have you looked into Gilbert Simondon?" he asked. "If you link your stuff more closely with his ideas, it'll be easier in such discussions." I had never heard of Simondon, but apparently he was an important source of inspiration for Gilles Deleuze and had written extensively about crystallization as an example for what he called 'individuation', the process of becoming. AbdouMaliq and I talked about it throughout the following dinner. During the next months, however, I remained uncertain whether I should use Simondon. Having skimmed through his work and a strangely obscure secondary literature on it, I failed to understand either his vocabulary or his broader arguments, which moreover were completely unrelated to protest dynamics. But in early 2015, I finally got my hands on Muriel Combes's (2013) "Gilbert Simondon and the philosophy of the transindividual," which AbdouMaliq had urgently recommended. Illuminating the overall patterns of Simondon's theorizing in a relatively clear language, Combes (2013) helped me think about crystallization not only in terms of what happens in protests at a given time and space (e.g. at Kisekka Market), but also in terms of how protests acquire meaning as political events within a broader public sphere through news media. Protests, from that perspective, crystallized not only in a specific spatial setting but extended as far as they were known (see Simondon 1995: 32). That seemed like a poignant argument at a time where things 'go viral' across space in ever shorter time spans (see Nahon and Hemsley 2013) and where media often constitute an extended terrain of political battles (Koopmans 2004; Wisler and Tackenberg 2003). With Simondon, I could think of these processes as crystallization processes, as accumulating layers of public attention forming around an initial seed, a process that Simondon would call individuation.

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[19] The workshop "Social Movements in Theory and Practice: Concepts and Experiences from Different Regional Contexts" took place at the University of Zürich, 24–25 October 2014 and was organized under the auspices of the University Research Priority Program (URPP) Asia and Europe in Zürich and the Centre for African Studies Basel (CASB).

[20] In the subsequent discussion, an eminent scholar of social movements stood up saying: "That is all good and interesting, but I don't know what it has to do with social movements. You seem to be more interested in the stories of your informants." I was at great pains to explain that this mismatch between social movements theory and my informants (who arguably worked at the core of 'social movements') was at the heart of the issue. If they did not seem to represent our theoretical idea of social movements, I pleaded, that should constitute a reason for re-shaping our theoretical lenses rather than for arguing that they were outside the given category. I failed to pick out a reaction to my response in the later discussion.

Simondon describes individuation as a universal relational process through which phenomena emerge as something intelligible.[21] This process, he argues, is best understood not as an interplay of pre-defined factors that produce a specific outcome, but, to the contrary, as an interplay of *non*-defined factors, intangible in their diversity and heterogeneity, that develop into definite forms. A precise idea, for instance, emerges from relations between our subconscious and our consciousness that cannot be clearly defined (Kahneman 2011; Lakoff and Johnson 1999, 2003), material artifacts emerge from a variety of contexts that are never conceivable in their entirety (Burke 2002), and, to reiterate Simondon's key metaphor, solid crystals emerge from a metastable supersaturated solution that is initially fluid and intangible (Simondon 1995: 31). To develop a sound understanding of how a protest emerges—as a particularly complex phenomenon— we first need to acknowledge that there are many things we don't know. We don't know, for instance, who exactly participated in that protest for what reasons. Neither do we know all the interrelated processes at play, involving highly heterogeneous elements such as mobile phone technology, urbanization, colonial history, and a plethora of minute details that may seem irrelevant at first, like the weather at the given day or the traffic in the city. We also cannot discern the relative causal weight of either the large structures or the minute details, just as one cannot determine whether the Arab Spring, the subsequent rise of ISIS, and the refugee migration to Europe would have taken place if it were not for the infinitesimal processes leading up to Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid in late 2010. In sum, we cannot claim to know for certain what a given protest emerges from, aside from the absolutely vague contention that it emerges from an unintelligible totality of past and present—Simondon calls it the *metastable milieu*. But we can delineate, however selectively, *how* it emerges from that metastable milieu.

The metastable milieu can be thought of as a space of potential. According to Simondon, it consists of relations that have not yet individuated, that have not yet turned into anything intelligible. Only when a 'seed' is introduced into the metastable milieu, these relations gradually transform into visible entities emerging around the seed. Let us consider a plant as a case in point here. A plant emerges from a seed through a relational process between sunlight and the minerals in the ground. The relations between the sun and the ground constantly exist, but they are invisible. Only when a seed absorbs them do they become visible in the concrete form of a plant. While most of philosophical thought has largely accepted the idea of capturing reality through such conceptualized forms, Simondon would emphasize

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[21] The following paragraph is partly adopted from article 5.

that a concept "absorbs into itself the relation that gave rise to it, thus obscuring it" (Combes 2013: 16). He therefore challenges us to approach anything—any conceptualized event, phenomenon, artifact, or group—with the question of how it emerges from relations, and how it indeterminately evolves through relations. That entails analysis, but not simply in the sense of breaking down a compound phenomenon into its constitutive parts. For a plant is not just 'a seed + sunlight + minerals'; it emerges through the relational process of photosynthesis. A Simondonian analysis is akin to the tracing of such relational processes, implying that any constitutive 'part' is again constituted by relations. It is in this sense that Simondon's framework is theoretical as much as it is methodological, highlighting individuation as the universal dynamic to be followed from a metastable milieu, through an induced seed, to an indeterminately crystallizing phenomenon.

The analogy between metastability and African cities thus has nothing to do with African cities *per se*. And yet, the analogy works particularly well because African cities have widely been described in academic analyses in terms of their intangible relations, particularly by authors like Diouf (1996), Mbembe and Nuttall (2004), Pieterse (2011) and especially Simone (1998, 2001, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2008).[22] Marked by utmost contingency (Whyte and Siu 2015), where "everyone's life is so implicated in the lives of others" (Simone 2008b: 80), African cities have been interpreted as spaces of intersection, experimentation, overlapping networks, and spontaneous social formations. Potentiality, the key quality of metastability, is highly present in these urban spaces, because economic pressures require of large numbers of individuals eking out a living to take chances. Many people must spontaneously follow cues, intuitions, social ties, and dynamics without knowing where these dynamics may take them. Protests and riots are but one rare example of what may crystallize from such metastable milieus, but they illustrate how an initial seed, e.g. a burning tire, can restructure formerly fluid relations into bounded camps, with rioters on the one side and police on the other, drawing in further layers of the metastable city to cover the initial event. Journalists, politicians, and the more politicized public gravitate, out of highly divergent motives, towards the emerging phenomenon, and this layering process, rather than the initial event, makes it a significant political matter.

One key analytical value of Simondon for the Africanist debate thus lies in providing an approach that allows for an urban-contextual reading of protests, emphasizing both that context's fluidity and uncertainty, and its potential concreteness. But it

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[22] It is however important to restate with Simone that "many non-African cities may also be in the same 'boat'" (Simone 2001: 105; see also Heer 2015; Robinson 2011; Utas 2012a; Venkatesh 2013).

also opens up new perspectives on an epistemological and methodological level. As I argue in the paper (p. 11),

> The upshot here is to see protest movements as processes that emerge from multiple contexts (historical, technological, economic, political, demographic, international, etc.). Their apparent homogeneity should not blind analysts to the heterogeneity they emerge from. Protests do not render formerly hidden structures visible. Rather, they restructure a heterogeneity that cannot be grasped in its entirety, and realise its inherent potential to coalesce and crystallise into a different state. Calling this crystallisation a social movement, a protest or a riot, or any other substantialist term inadvertently 'absorbs into itself the [multiple relations] that gave rise to it, thus obscuring it' (Combes 2013:16). That is neither good nor bad, but part of the crystallisation process. Through external observation and commentary, the crystallized phenomenon becomes what it appears to be. […] Theoretical models that take the crystallised 'social movement' or 'protest' or 'riot' as their starting point thus risk committing three analytical errors: neglecting their own entanglement in the processes they describe, mistaking the parts they know for the whole they cannot know, and treating crystallised entities as more or less separate from the opaque contexts that they emerge from.

This broadly shows how my perspective on protests shifted from a youth-specific conceptual lens to a more general and abstract point of view, whereby protests are understood as a coincidence of innumerable interrelated factors, which moreover only become visible as 'factors' through the practice of analysis. Heightened attention is thus placed on how empirical phenomena and knowledge production are intertwined (see Combes 2013: 7). The final article on protesting and policing in Kampala, a joint paper with Jude Kagoro, explores this perspective further, to develop a new understanding of African urban politics as a politics of crystallization, which inquires into how political boundaries, notably between the state and its discontents, are crossed, drawn, and negotiated.

*Article 5 (with Jude Kagoro): The metastable city and the politics of crystallization. Protesting and policing in Kampala*

While the former article 'Crystallising Contention' positions the crystallization framework within theoretical debates, the paper on Kampala is situated in more immediate environments. It enters Kisekka Market, a former trading spot for car spares in Downtown Kampala, as a prime example of what Jude and I term the 'metastable city', a fluid, dynamic urban spatiality where political contours are hardly discernible, where it is unclear who is for the opposition and who is for the governing NRM regime, and where individuals frequently interact and connive

across different political positions. For party politics to work in such a "market of ambiguities" (Simone 2008: 23), political boundaries and contours first need to be strategically activated. Both the opposition and the regime must emerge as entities for people to gravitate towards them, which, in the metastable state, is not yet the case. Political entrepreneurs, in the sense of Tilly (2003: 34), are crucial in activating such processes, in bundling heterogeneous histories, concerns, interests, and networks into solid political phenomena and in inspiring feelings of political or ethnic 'groupness.' Since such groupness is deliberately activated, since it waxes and wanes over time, social scientists, argues Brubaker (2002: 176), must be wary of concepts like "ethnic groups" because they presuppose the groupness whose genesis the analyst is actually supposed to account for. Our paper in *Africa Spectrum* (AS) makes a similar argument with regard to political groups in Kampala. It depicts the NRM regime and the opposition not as permanent, stable structures, but as processes, as fields of gravity whose emergence is incited and inhibited, financed, and policed.

In the article, we follow various political entrepreneurs in their work: Sam, who coordinated a youth brigade to sharpen boundaries between urban Baganda and the NRM by emphasizing that 'the government doesn't like your king!', Ron, who connived with journalists for their riot coverage to attract more rioters to participate, a police officer, who self-reportedly paid Boda-Boda motorcycle taxi drivers to join an NRM rally, and the Inspector-General of Police Kale Kayihura, possibly one of Kampala's most influential political entrepreneurs, who personally negotiated with anti-government mobilizers to win them over and who contrived both the integration of Boda-Boda drivers into the police's intelligence apparatus and the employment of millions of civilians as pro-government 'crime preventers'. In all these examples, political entrepreneurs attempted to solidify a fluid urban environment into tangible percepts, to either legitimize and support the dominance of the NRM state or to invoke widespread popular opposition against it.

Through Jude Kagoro's analysis of police, the AS paper goes beyond the scope of protest movements, and, more importantly, enables a reading of urban politics that does not reify or take for granted the standard analytical boundaries between the state on one side and protesters or opposition on the other. The idea to collaborate and write a paper together emerged in 2014, when Jude and I were still in Kampala. At that time, both of us were struggling with similar issues in our field research. One was the afore-mentioned paradoxical relationship between ambiguity and clarity that we experienced on both sides of the political conflict: both of our units of analysis, police and protest movements, seemed blurry and heterogeneous in everyday life, but gained a surprising concreteness in times of protest, notably

through news media and political discourse. Secondly, both of us struggled with our scientific ideals of impartiality, as we found ourselves identifying with the respective political side we studied, whether due to established friendships, personal dispositions, or due to the relative proximity to what we knew. The fields of gravity we were studying affected us, indeed much more than we would admit in our papers or at conferences vis-à-vis our colleagues. Although the final version of the AS paper does not address this latter issue (the anonymous reviewers and other critics of the paper suggested a different conclusion), our joint paper hoped to go beyond our respective partiality by highlighting the similarities and connections between protesters and police, the interrelations that are usually omitted by analytical frames that focus exclusively on their opposition. The theoretically most illuminating aspect, to me, was to embed both police and protesters within the same urban dynamics. Indeed, I had initially not expected police to be as 'metastable' as Jude insisted and demonstrated they were. But through his profound ethnographic access, he portrayed police well beyond the institutional image, highlighting police's heterogeneity, their open-ended network character, and the widespread sense of fragility even at police's supposed core: the IGP, for instance, told Jude that he was commonly worried about losing his job in the wake of future events that he could not foresee.[23]

Analyzing an institution like police through a Simondonian framework allowed for further methodological reflections about the crystallization approach. First, crystallization seemed not to be a process towards greater stability, as Durkheim would have it (Sawyer 2005: 116). In the metastable city at least, any crystallizing entity needed to maintain responsiveness to change and uncertainty; it had to make sure not to become either too stable and inflexible, or too unstable and indistinguishable from the metastable milieu that it emerged from. Police, and the NRM state in general, have been arguably successful in that very regard (see Goodfellow 2013, 2014). Secondly, and this was the trickier part, one had to avoid by all means to interpret the metaphor of crystallization in overly substantialist terms. "Police" would be entirely misunderstood if pictured as a crystal that accumulates layer after layer and only continues to grow. Instead, one needed to remind oneself that police refers to a relation, an oscillating relation between empirical police (dynamics the world), and one's understandings of police (dynamics in our consciousness), two realms in a constant state of flux. Police as a relation then

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[23] Though Jude did not read Simondon himself, his accounts of police matched Simondon's lines of thought in fascinating ways, which implicitly makes the paper less deductive than one might think. At the same time, the Simondonian framework still necessitated a particular and consistent writing style, and we agreed that I would re-write Jude's section on police as based on his drafts and our numerous discussions, to enhance readability.

crystallizes in the sense that it changes its shape to accommodate both objective and subjective dynamics, for instance when we are informed that the supposedly all-powerful IGP fears to lose his job, i.e. when an additional layer of information relates to a prior layer of 'knowledge' (the IGP was assumed to be in a stable position). In that regard, the key point about the layers of crystallization is not spatial accumulation (e.g. an ever-growing police force), but concerns the temporal dimension of becoming in all relations between a knowing subject and a known object.

As such, and as we highlight in the conclusion of the AS paper, Simondon's theoretical apparatus urges us to reflect not only on the empirical issues at hand but simultaneously on African politics as an object of knowledge, and to integrate within the study of social phenomena more generally a critical and self-reflexive perspective on how understandings come about. This is certainly nothing new, for postcolonial, feminist, or subaltern scholars, amongst others, have made such claims before (see, e.g. Alcoff 1991; Alcoff and Potter 1992; Chatterjee 2006; Comaroff and Comaroff 2012; Connell 2013, 2014; Depelchin 2005, 2011; Mudimbe 1988; see also Wacquant 1992; Wacquant and Bourdieu 1989). The contemporary potential of Simondon's philosophy thus resides less in a radically new critique than in its abstraction and adaptability to diverse theoretical concerns, and in its embrace of incremental becoming and potentiality—whether this concerns the world we live in or "a new language for theorizing" in relation to it (Connell 2007: 383). The following papers are snapshots of a learning process along these lines.

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### Introduction

Guinea's capital Conakry has traversed a period of remarkable politicization throughout the past six years (see McGovern 2008; Engeler 2008; Philipps 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). Strikes, rallies, riots and demonstrations have opposed a diversity of political actors. They turned Conakry's streets into a primary site for political competition and expression of political demands. Two aspects are especially noteworthy about these recent political protests: first, they regularly started and escalated within a strip of neighbourhoods called the *axis*.[1] However centrally located within the city, the axis is still considered the most marginal living space of the capital, both socio-economically and politically. The second puzzle is that almost all major protests in Conakry were initiated by urban youth gangs. These tightly organized collectives of young men tend to be the first to take to the streets, build barricades on the main roads, set car tires on fire and throw stones at the approaching police – thereby inciting the turmoil that sets protests in motion. Often in the service of major political actors (usually opposition parties), but also independently, they are capable of rallying thousands of young people from their neighbourhoods to participate in political protests.

This contribution addresses both of these strongly interdependent puzzles by empirically delineating how axis youth gangs have actively responded to the specific urban context of the axis. It argues that contextual factors have a strong impact on their political actions, yet *only insofar as gangs actively relate to them.* Theoretically, this is to emphasize that urban contexts do not cause or determine action mechanically, but provide certain resources and conditions which actors may employ, oppose and creatively reinterpret. From this relational point of view, context and actors derive their meaning only through their interaction (see Emirbayer 1997; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

The article is structured as follows. First, I sketch out the historical developments and political position of the axis neighbourhoods in Conakry. Secondly, I demonstrate the shortcomings of conventional context-based explanations. Thirdly, I suggest the relational perspective as an alternative approach to studying how urban youth gangs position themselves in relation to their environments, employ the resources of this social position, and thereby shape the meanings of their context at the same time that this context influences them.
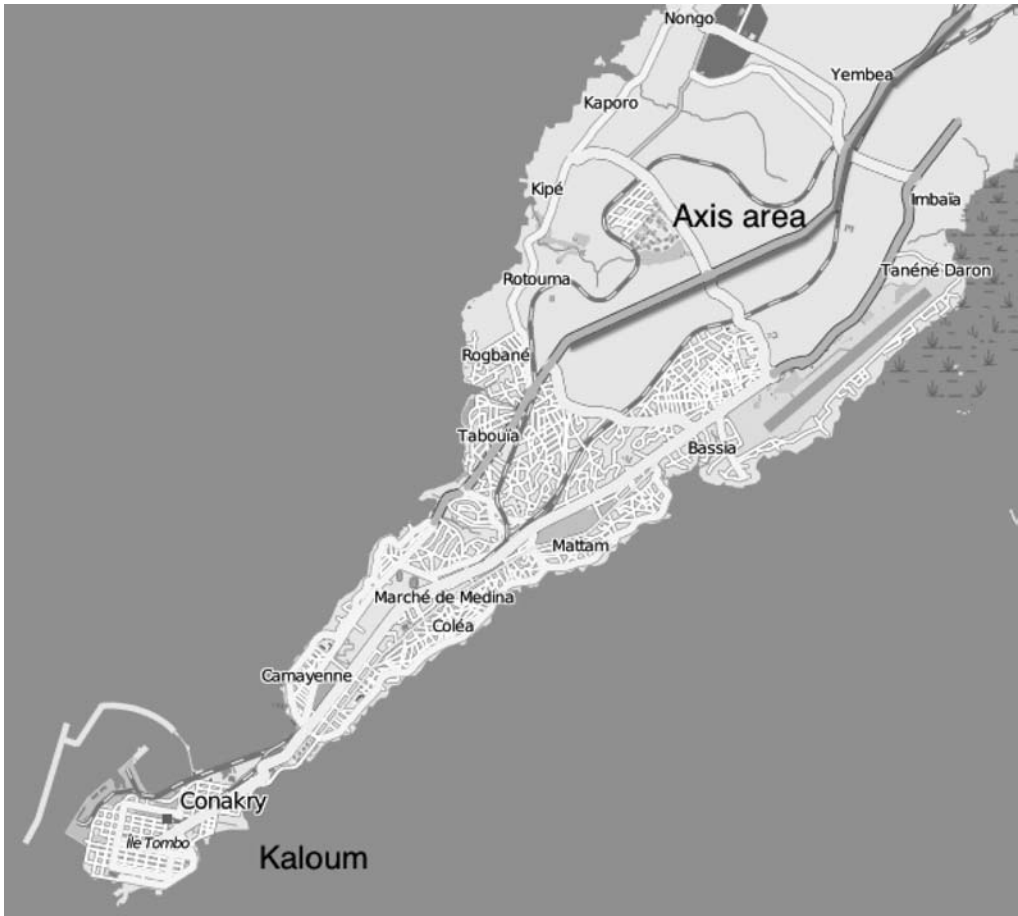
Fig.1: Map of Conakry (~~axis marked in red~~) Source: Google Maps, additional labels by the author.

### Conakry's Axis Neighbourhoods

The French colonial regime founded Conakry as the capital of French Guinea in 1904. Urbanization commenced at the tip of the peninsula and has steadily expanded inland. The city's rapid population growth started in the 1980s. Since then the population has quadrupled to roughly two million. After Guinea's first president, Sékou Touré, died in 1984, his strict dictatorial-socialist regime gave way to the liberal, laissez-faire politics of his successor, Lansana Conté, who did little to regulate migration to Conakry. Today, many parts of the city lack basic infrastructure. Especially since the financial downturn started in the early 2000s, the state has increasingly been incapable of providing stable access to water, power, let alone to garbage removal, public schools, or youth centres (see Goerg 2008).

Both the extensive population growth and the lack of public services have been dramatic within the so-called axis area. The axis derives its name from the Route Le

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Prince, the central avenue of Conakry's three throughways that traverse the peninsular city, and the only large street that connects the axis area with the rest of the city. It serves the axis population as a constant market and meeting place and is a nodal point for interwoven schemes of opportunity (see Simone 2008). If one leaves the four-lane street and enters the neighbourhoods bordering the Route Le Prince, the interior resembles a labyrinth, largely made up of beaten paths, small houses and corrugated-iron shacks, whose dwellers are amongst the poorest of Conakry. Disproportionally often, the axis quarters lack electricity and water; power cuts often stir the young people's anger and lead to small-scale demonstrations on the Route Le Prince. But also throughout the major political upheavals of the past years, the axis was the main site of violent confrontations between state forces and demonstrators (see Delamou 2008).

This is the result of a historical trajectory. Since independence, the axis area has been a *zone reservée* owned by the state. When Lansana Conté came to power, bureaucrats from the new administration illegally sold land along the axis to Peul (Fulani) migrants. There was a large influx of Peul to Conakry, both from the Fouta Jallon plateau in the northwest of the country and from abroad. The Peul had suffered tremendously under the dictatorship of Sékou Touré and were now returning from exile (see Azarya 1978, Minorities at Risk Project 2003; Schmidt 2009). Within years, many illegal neighbourhoods were established. Without the state's mediation of settlement along the axis, various informal actors took over the organization of land ownership, often creating parallelism between administrative regulations and traditional customs, making the legal status of land ownership a highly ambiguous matter (see Diallo 2006; Diop 2007).

Yet, in 1998 the Conté regime attempted to regain control over the axis area. Military and police invaded the living area of the axis neighbourhood Kaporo Rails with bulldozers, destroying the homes of roughly 120,000 people and fighting against a furious crowd of young protesters (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2001). This sparked the first large-scale, violent state-society confrontation in post-colonial Conakry. Rumours spread that the razing of the living space was not intended to build a new administrative centre in the middle of the city, as the government had declared, but to weaken the political opposition based in the area. The axis population believed that the government had deliberately targeted the UNR (Union pour la Nouvelle République), a political party with a predominantly Peul electorate that had been spatially implanted in the Kaporo Rails neighbourhood.

The Kaporo Rails conflict was followed by growing alienation between state institutions and the general axis population. Through their resistance, the latter made the state revoke its plans to retrieve state-owned land from axis residents. Except for the construction of the spacious Radio Télévision Guinéenne (RTG) building and the American Embassy on the cleared space, the government avoided any further urban interventions and the axis was largely left to itself. The infrastructure for traffic, electricity and water supply remains in a dismal condition, impeding the development of viable living space in the area. With the police virtually absent in the interior of the

axis quarters, crime levels have risen and the axis gangs have become the most violent in the whole country.

What is more, the Kaporo Rails conflict markedly politicized the axis population as a whole. As people from other axis quarters shared not only an ethnic background with the victims of the Kaporo Rails conflict but also similar urban conditions, the people's identification with the population of Kaporo Rails strengthened the axis as a collective, a political community defined through their opposition to the government.[2] This spatial-political position has not waned over the years. During the 2007 general strike against then-President Lansana Conté and his kleptocratic regime, most of the protests and riots erupted along the Route Le Prince. Conté famously labelled the area *L'Axe du Mal,* "the axis of evil", a name that was quickly reversed by axis demonstrators into *L'Axe de la Liberté,* "the axis of freedom". Two and half years later, after Conté had died and Dadis Camara had taken over rule through a military junta called CNDD (Conseil National pour la Démocratie et le Développement), political protests against the CNDD regime again emanated from the axis neighbourhoods. Equally important, the majority of spontaneous protests against power cuts, water shortages, government decisions, nominations or removals of politicians, still take place along the axis.

The neighbourhoods' status as a political hot spot is unambiguous. Not only do various journalistic accounts record where minor and major riots, demonstrations and unrest have occurred,[3] there is also a general congruence between outside interpretations and self-perception of axis residents, albeit with differing normative assessments. While outsiders often refer to the axis as an area of radicals driven by ethnic grief, axis residents tend to view the area as a space of staunch opposition against corrupt and non-democratic regimes.

### Context-based Explanations of Axis Protests

To explain theoretically the concentration of protests along Conakry's axis, such socio-political specificity needs to be causally related to other specificities, be they socio-economic, historical, political, or cultural. This section presents and criticizes two strands of arguments that seem quite appealing at first sight: one strand (A1, A2, A3) emphasizes socio-economic and political marginalization as a key factor for the concentration of protests along the axis; the other sees political ethnicity as the cause of this phenomenon (B).

*(A1) The absolute poverty argument:* One social-economic explanation of the spatial concentration of protests takes absolute poverty to be the central driver of political upheavals. Hobsbawm (1971: 110) calls such upheavals "city mob" riots, that is to say, movements "of all classes of the urban poor for the achievement of economic and political changes by direct action – that is by riot or rebellion." He goes on to argue that such movements are largely driven by the bare necessity of an improvement of the protesters' living conditions and tend to be non-ideological: "in view of the fact that large masses of the urban poor lived on the verge of subsistence even in normal times, and were precipitated into catastrophe by any increase of prices or in unemployment,

their riots were often no more than automatic and inevitable reactions to such changes" Hobsbawm (1971: 111). Especially the 2007 protests would appear to tally with this argument: due to extreme inflation, staples had become unaffordable and the urban population had few choices to fight for their survival aside from pressing the government to stop the declining value of the Franc Guinéen (see Fall 2007).[4] If one takes the axis to be Conakry's poorest area, then its residents are the most likely to be violently protesting for change.

*(A2) The social breakdown argument:* A second argument, which features marginality as the main reason for political protests, points to its potential to destroy moral frameworks of social life, which would normally impede violence, crime and riots. With unemployment and poverty imposing lifestyles of indignity, including crime, prostitution, or drug addiction, social tensions and frustrations are considerably high but cannot be mitigated by social institutions, such as the family, which also fall victim to social decay. This perspective falls in with traditional breakdown theories of collective action (Smelser 1962; Useem 1998), including Fukuyama's (1995) explanation of the U.S. urban riots in the 1960s and 1990s, Kakar's (1996) analysis of ethnic violence in Hyderabad, as well as El-Kenz's (1996) accounts of street movements in African cities.

*(A3) The illegitimacy argument:* The third argument concentrates on the illegitimacy of political institutions which are said to be resented most in highly marginalized areas (see Keohane 2007: 99–101). According to this perspective, protests against the government have been especially virulent along the axis because axis residents are more likely than others to associate the state with corruption, intimidation and bad governance, as well as with massacres against its own people (as during the Kaporo Rails incident in 1998).[5]

*(B) The political ethnicity hypothesis:* A different context-based explanation for the spatial concentration of political protests along the axis focuses on the instrumentalization of kinship by Peul politicians (on political ethnicity, see, for example, Lonsdale 2004; Posner 2003). Among Guinean scholars, political ethnicity is regularly perceived as the most crucial political problem (see Barry 2000; Faye 2008). With regard to the axis neighbourhoods, Moustapha Diop argues that Peul political actors incite the Peul population to engage in riots and demonstrations in order to destabilize the government.[6] They do so by an ethnic-political discourse that represents the Peul as political victims of non-Peul regimes. According to the hypothesis, this discourse permeates the axis more than any other area because it is the most densely Peul-populated space in Conakry.

There is no denying that context matters in Conakry's urban contentious politics. But I wish to show that a closer look at *how* it matters is urgently needed: to imply that socio-economic structures or ethnicity automatically lead to a concentration of protests along the axis is simply wrong.

*(A1) The absolute poverty argument* is easily invalidated by the data gathered by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (2008: 17). According to the IMF, Ratoma (the municipality that comprises the axis) is the richest, not the poorest municipality

of Conakry. Even if this fact may be skewed by considerable class disparities within the axis neighbourhoods, poverty can not be regarded as a sufficient precondition for political protests. If it were, protests would be less differentiated spatially, since many of Conakry's urban spaces share equally dismal living conditions.

(A2) Accordingly, this also contradicts the hypothesis that the concentration of poverty along the axis led to a disproportional breakdown of social-moral rules and conventions. The *social breakdown hypothesis* indeed strikingly obscures the fact that, notably during the economic downturn, the axis experienced pacification, not aggravation of violence. Gangs have built alliances, so-called *mouvements*, which group together different gangs to prevent conflict erupting amongst them. Today, gang fights are relatively rare compared to the situation before the decline of economic conditions in Conakry.

(A3) Third, the *illegitimacy argument* held that people judge the government above all illegitimate due to their socio-economic marginalization, and thus protest more than others. Yet, such an argument cannot explain why the axis remained quiet throughout a series of illegitimate political incidents that benefited Peul politicians.[7] Purportedly, political protests along the axis are based on ethnic identification, rather than the state's lack of legitimacy.

(B) Yet, if ethnic concentration is to be taken as an explanatory factor, other neighbourhoods in Conakry with a strong concentration of Peul would have also been disproportionally opposed to the former regimes. There are plenty of Peul (or Fulani) communities in Conakry. Gordon (2000: 301) explicitly states that "there are imperceptibly few social, economic and cultural differences between the Fulani in [Conakry]." Moreover, the political ethnicity hypothesis is forced to ignore the decidedly non-ethnic motivations symbolized by slogans or signs that accompany political protests in Guinea.[8]

A closer analysis of the young protesters in their own right (see Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005: 507) is key for answering the puzzle of the spatial concentration of protests along the axis. It is methodologically advantageous to the context-based approach because gang youths are more accessible through interviews and observations than supposedly objective structures which, at least in Conakry, remain obscure. Gangs have been involved as major actors in close to all major political protests in Conakry, rallying masses of young people to join demonstrations. They have adapted to their contexts, reflect the social, cultural, political and economic contexts of their specific environments, and thus differ considerably from area to area. We will thus translate the rather abstract query *Why have protests culminated along the axis?* to the more tangible question of *Why have gangs along the axis been more prone to organizing and performing protests against Guinean governments than gangs in other neighbourhoods?*[9] Before addressing this question in detail, I will sketch out a few general characteristics of urban youth gangs in Conakry: their relationship to the urban context in Conakry, their institutional capacities and organisational developments, and, of course, their political role in urban protests.

### Urban Youth Gangs and Politics in Conakry

Gangs are social institutions where young people – mostly men – experiment with new forms of sociability, engage in competitions over abandoned urban spaces, create gang funds and insurances, and where they form each others' opinions about the conditions in which they live. They do so mostly by means of the symbolic repertoire of global hip hop.[10] Conakry's gang youths wear baggy pants and baseball caps, pose and gesticulate like rappers, perform complicated handshakes, talk in a street slang, defy and confront authority and break with "the representation of youth by adults" (Diouf 2005: 231).

Conakry's youth gangs are social responses to urban contexts and developments of which the most obvious is massive unemployment (Vigil 2003; Abbink 2005; Biaya 2005; Rodgers 2007; Hagedorn 2008; Abdullah 2005: 180). Confronted with an estimated unemployment rate of eighty per cent (Sow 2008), a state that is incapable of providing stable access to basic public services (Goerg 2008), and the suffocating norms and expectations of overburdened family networks (see Simone 1998), gangs represent Conakry's youth's organized "efforts to upend social practices and local power regimes which they believe hold them back" (Simone 2008: 83). They fill the void of meaninglessness and boredom by creating posts, tasks and a considerable amount of agitation amongst their members. They facilitate easy access to money through drug dealing and urban protest politics. Trying to grab spontaneous opportunities, gang youth seek to get in touch with the "big men" who represent both sources of revenue and nodal points of social networks, enter schemes, and let themselves be pulled into their fields of power, thereby becoming part of highly situational political phenomena that easily turn out differently from what both the initiators and the performers expected.

In many neighbourhoods, especially along the axis, most young men are either members of, or at least affiliated to, youth gangs.[11] Far from the clichéd assumption that gangs are comprised of poor, marginalized, delinquent young men, Conakry's gangs may be made up of students from well-off families and poor illiterates who barely know who their parents are. A gang may be a small peer group of children or a highly organized institution of more than 400 young adults; some group a circle of friends, while others function like a criminal entity. Politically, certain gangs support politicians whom they trust, some treat politics like a business, and many distance themselves from the political realm. Despite this diversity of gangs, one can assert that, contrary to Robert D. Kaplan's (1996: 16) notorious depiction of African urban youth as "out of school, unemployed, loose molecules in an unstable social fluid that threatened to ignite", Conakry's gangs represent some of the most institutionalized and rigidly organized collectives in Conakry's urban society. Many have statutes, hold formal elections, enforce strict codes of social behaviour, and uphold speaking hierarchies (see Philipps forthcoming).

What is more, youth gangs in Conakry are highly dynamic institutions that adapt ingenuously to quickly modifying contexts. They may change their internal adminis-

trative structure (for example, from autocratic to democratic), their personnel structure (dismissing certain members and integrating others), and even their main collective actions (for example, from drug dealing to mobilizing local youth for political protests). For example, the members of Ghetto Mafia, a youth gang from Kaporo Rails, officially fired their leader in 2005 by an unanimous vote. Incrementally, gang governance became less top-down and elections were held regularly. Ghetto Mafia, which had been involved in various violent clashes with other gangs before, completely renounced these fights and shifted its preoccupation to the organisation of rap concerts and soccer tournaments in their neighbourhood, tasks by which they gained both a considerable repute in their quarter and a little money. Ghetto Mafia's reform process is no exception. Compared to the early 2000s, Conakry's gangs are much more formally and democratically organized today. They display highly repetitive patterns of interaction, relatively stable structures of hierarchy and authority, and a strong likelihood of doing the same things in similar situations.

This institutionalization facilitates their instrumentalization by political actors. Through middlemen, politicians generally have to convince only the gang leader in order to have hundreds of young supporters at their disposal who wholeheartedly defend the party as long as there is sufficient remuneration. Former president Dadis Camara offered the equivalent of over $50,000 to thirty-four gang leaders in Conakry for the purpose of rallying urban youth for a meeting in Kaporo Rails in 2009.[12] One year later, various presidential candidates in the 2010 election campaigns promised high-level gang "officials" that, once they were in powerful positions, they would distribute posts within the military apparatus.[13] Yet, even though material incentives provide the central link between gangs and political protests, this link is politically framed. Gang youth speak proudly about their involvement in the 2007 or the 2009 mass demonstrations[14] and valorize political protest as long it can be described as morally estimable. Political involvement that is singularly motivated by remuneration tends to be condemned (if other gangs are involved) or concealed (if oneself is engaged in it).[15] As the following two sections demonstrate, this framing is crucial to explain why youth gangs along the axis have protested more often and more violently than youth gangs in other neighbourhoods.

### The Relational Perspective:
### How Axis Youth Gangs Relate to Marginal Urban Space

In the following, I will turn the contextual question *How has marginality affected youth and their protests? into How have the gang youth's specific relations to marginality affected their protests?* My empirical starting point is that the axis became urbanized relatively late and at a time when state officials showed little interest in controlling urban space. In addition, after the Kaporo Rails conflict, the state retreated from this area and was less present along the axis than in other districts. This made it easy for gangs to radicalize their subculture without fearing the interference of authorities. I argue that this contributed significantly to the concentration of protests in the area.

Non-policed urban spaces have a considerable significance for gangs since they are the prerequisite for their social-spatial institution of the *ghetto*. Gang youth – who also refer to themselves as ghetto youth – frequently use this subcultural marker of space to denote the place where a gang meets.[16] This can be a hideout in the bushes, a gang members' room, the ruins of a house where young people smoke and deal with marihuana, or a street corner where they drink tea and exchange thoughts. On a more general level, it signifies the overall culture of ghetto youth. Conversations about the daily struggle to find food and shelter (*la galère*) can end with the remark "Ben ouais, c'est ça le ghetto" (Yeah, that's the ghetto); a rapper on stage "represents the ghetto", while a young man wearing baggy pants and confronting the police *is* "ghetto". The ghetto thus paradoxically functions opposite to its original sociological meaning (Bourdieu 1991; Wacquant 2006). It does *not* spatially confine residents who lack all the capitals that would be necessary to participate in a given society's games (Bourdieu 1991: 33). In fact, the ghetto is deliberately created by these young residents to develop a cultural wealth they can cherish and with which they can identify. By linking their experiences of oppression, exclusion and precariousness to an often romanticized and stylized global narrative of the American ghetto, Conakry's ghetto youth "transcend national, economic, and linguistic boundaries and tap into U.S. power and prestige" (Roth-Gordon 2009: 74–75). As Roth-Gordon's (2009: 65) analysis of the Guetos of Sao Paolo demonstrates, the ghetto is "one of U.S. Hip Hop's most visible exports". In Conakry, this strong adherence to the ghetto concept as propagated by hip hop culture is illustrated by gang names such as Harlem, Wu-Tang, Cash Money, Ghetto Mafia, Rois du ghetto, Chamillionaire, Black Panther, or Black Star, notably in a former French colony.

More so than gang youth in other districts of Conakry, axis gangs could profoundly tap into the potential of deserted spaces to craft their own environment and social fields – spaces "of conflict and competition" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 17), which then became socializing institutions themselves (Oliver 2006). The social field's "analogy … with a battlefield" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 17) is not far-fetched in this case. Throughout the early 2000s, killings and retaliation attacks among gangs triggered a cycle of violence that was worst along the axis and only abated in the mid-2000s.[17] Violent confrontation, scrupulous self-affirmation and organized attacks on other groups became central cultural styles by which gang youths were able to generate a distinction between themselves and those peers who proved to be weaker, more fearful, less skilled, or less numerous, thus affirming themselves as powerful ghetto authorities.

Gangs long remained the only actors to engage in conflicts over the marginal spaces. Thus, while axis ghettos indeed represent arenas "in which young people struggle against the dominant cultures" (Diouf 2003: 5), gangs did not actively relate to national politics in any significant way. As much as the axis had become Conakry's trouble spot, this did not bother the administration that had abandoned the axis after the Kaporo Rails riots in 1998.

Political conflicts only erupted when gangs and the state attempted to exercise power over the same territory. This was precisely what happened during the 2007 general strike along the Route Le Prince when the state forces entered gang territory to arrest demonstrators (see Delamou 2008). Doubtlessly, there was substantial discontent regarding government corruption and bad governance amongst nearly all strata. Yet, what made axis gangs politically specific in their violent reaction to state authority was that their prestige and status depended so heavily on territorial control, and that they could build on practices, logics, strategies, bodily skills and collective emotions acquired through gang fights during the early 2000s. In short, when the state forces intruded into their territory, axis gangs fought the government forces in the same way that they fought rival gangs in order to defend their areas (see McGovern 2008: 130). That these fights were more frequent and brutal than elsewhere can be explained by how axis gangs actively related to their specific urban environment. Their occupation of large non-policed spaces facilitated a radicalization of their confrontational subculture.

Since the 2007 upheavals, the urban space of the axis has become politically connoted. In interviews, gang members along the axis regularly evoked the area's reputation as a political hot spot. Gang member Dre proudly remarked that the axis represented the Guinean population's desire for political change;[18] others recalled their participation in the 2007 or 2009 demonstrations.[19] Axis gang youth have cultivated and adopted a spatially-based understanding of themselves as vanguards of an overall movement towards democracy and social justice.

This spatially defined political self-positioning triggers its own consequences: gangs' fearless performance along the Route Le Prince has attracted politicians who vie for the gangs' services in urban protests, rallies and riots. According to the Guinean sociologist Bano Barry (2010), the relationship between gangs and political parties along the axis has become deeply institutionalized. Major axis gangs are being paid by politicians on a regular basis, even without executing specific services.[20]

### Axis Gangs and Peul Ethnicity

Just like the preceding section analysed the relation between axis gangs and spatial marginality, this section investigates the relation between axis gangs and Peul ethnicity. Inquiring into the meaning of ethnicity for gang youths along the axis, one has to look at the micro-level of Peul ethnicity in Conakry, the "quotidian" ethnicity (Lonsdale 2004: 77) of "shared norms in the course of social interaction" (Cohen 1974: ix, x). Gordon's (2000) anthropological study of the Peul in Conakry's Dixinn district describes this in great detail. He delineates how Peul self-identify and position themselves in Conakry and what they regard as the important norms of their culture: their ambition to work hard, their self-control and piety, orderliness, strong family ties and ethnic solidarity to develop a "strong sense of difference and moral superiority" (Gordon 2000: 323, 298, 315). According to Gordon, those who do not follow the Peul way, *laawol Pullo,* "risk censure and rejection from family, in-laws and exclusion from the

flow of community life" (Gordon 2000: 318). To Gordon, such sanctions intend to preserve self-attributed Peul superiority over other ethnic groups and bespeak the anxiety felt by Peul people to lose "the foundations of Fulani life: to be disciplined, to be rigorously Moslem, and to be leaders among lessers" (Gordon 2000: 322).

To say the least, the self-proclaimed ghetto youths rarely follow *laawol Pullo.* Instead, and more so than elsewhere, the ghettos along the axis provide gang youth with a counter-cultural realm where they reverse the categories that determine the social attribution of dignity. In the face of a Peul culture that emphasizes the values of ambition, zeal, work and purity, they ascribe a great importance to hanging out, cussing, smoking marihuana. While Peul culture cherishes the "clean", original Peul language, gang youth mix various local languages, French and English, slur their speech, and create a ghetto language that their parents neither understand nor accept. Gang culture is thus particularly opposed to the ethnic norms inherent in Peul quotidian ethnicity.

Moreover, gang culture effaces ethnicity from its discourses. Ghetto youth depict themselves as united; their self-invented names (often referring to American rap stars or basketball players) cover up their family names and thereby hide their ethnic belonging. As a rapper going by the name of Barkley conveyed to me, "among the Guinean youth, ethnocentrism doesn't exist … it's among the older people, but the youth, especially the rappers … it's our role to banish [ethnocentrism]!"[21] This self-understanding is crucial for ghetto youth as it links their escape from traditional confines with a moral purpose. Not only do they defy the "backward thinking" of elders. Their self-imposed mission is to transgress the divisions that haunt their country and impede its development, to counteract the politicians' breeding of ethnocentric hatred, and to position themselves as actors for development and modernization (see Abbink 2005: 24).[22] At the same time, however, axis youth's massive involvement in recent protests has been interpreted by many experts and insiders as being ethnically motivated.[23] In 2009 and 2010, for example, Peul gang youths were encouraged to fight against Dadis Camara and Alpha Condé with the argument that both were suspected of being enemies of the Peul.[24]

How does one account for this "sociological paradox" of gang youth's cultural distance and simultaneous political identification (Cohen 1969: 1)? Against the dominant interpretation of fluid identities that change according to political and economic opportunities (see Posner 2005), I argue that the most important explanatory aspects are the congruences between gang youth and Peul communities in terms of what they perceive as their political position in society. Youth, like the Peul, represent a plurality, but tend to be treated like a minority, excluded from powerful positions, discriminated against, marginalized by the political elite, and defamed by the public (Honwana and de Boeck 2005: 1; Diop 2005). Since axis gang youth feel just as marginalized as the respective Peul communities along the axis, they identify more easily with ethnic-political calls for political protests than gangs in other areas and from other communities. Yet, the identification of gang youth with Peul ethnicity does not refer to the Peul cultural values; instead it is an essentially political identification with victims of

marginalization. It is no Mbembian play of *homo ludens* where young men skip from one social role to another (see Mbembe 1992). On the contrary, the young men's identification with (ethnic) victimhood strengthens their political position as defined by their own subculture.

Indeed, the literature on hip hop's *connective marginalities* (Osumare 2007: 15) argues that victimhood is an integral part of ghetto culture. Rap lyrics express and aestheticize urban hardship in the ghetto. For those who have long been excluded from access to positively connoted identities, they provide a strong sense of community among the excommunicated (Menrath 2003). Marginality and dignity are interrelated insofar as suffering and pain become a "means of access to a wider world, indeed a world-wide community of affliction" (Weiss 2005: 115). Being young, poor, Peul, and labelled public enemies, axis youth's unambiguous feelings of victimhood and injustice link various categories of inequality. They link the frustrations from one realm with a bundle of others and develop a painful image of themselves as tragic victims of a strikingly unjust (and thereby identifiable) reality. Through their political actions they escape their status as passive victims and become martyrs, fighters for democracy, punishers of corrupt politicians, or simply rebellious ghetto youth. However situational their goal, their overall sense of victimhood remains a stable basis for justifying even morally questionable political engagements and political violence. As the most miserable and yet the toughest of the whole country, theirs is an attitude of defiant self-affirmation in the face of multiple oppressors. This collective-emotional bundle of identifying as victims and fighting against oppression has become an important and specific part of the local gangs' self-understanding.[25]

Along the axis, this self-identification is more accentuated than in other parts of the city, not least due to the Kaporo Rails conflict in 1998. Right after the violent clashes between axis youths and the government forces, rap and reggae artists wove the state-society antagonism into a burgeoning youth culture.[26] Youth who had fought policemen and gendarmes were celebrated by their (ethnic) community. After the early 2000s had been marked by axis gangs' conflicts over territories and their apolitical stance, their pacification in the mid-2000s coincided with the general politicization of Conakry's population. Even if axis gang youth also suffered from their ethnic communities whose cultural norms they rejected, their rage against poverty and government corruption united them with the Peul community since they shared an ethnic, spatial and political victimhood.[27] Most importantly, since ethnicity provides a central linkage to the high politics of party competition, common kinship links between gangs and politicians facilitated the disproportionate rapprochement between the axis gang and the political realm.

When perceived from the perspective of gang youth, urban ethnicity appears in a new light: its political significance concerns not so much the sharing of a symbolic system to enhance a group's access to scarce resources (see Cohen 1969, 1974). Rather, various symbolic systems come into play and ethnicity itself means different things to different actors. Gang youth along the axis perceive Peul marginality in line with

narratives imported from global hip hop culture to make sense of their complex, disordered surroundings. While supporting Peul politicians in political protests, they may do so without giving up their self-identification as ghetto youth even though this "identity" contradicts the cultural norms of Peul ethnicity. Just as in the preceding section, this underlines my general argument that scholars of urban Africa are well advised to analyse contextual factors in cities in terms of how actors relate to them. Both context and actors derive their meaning and significance only in relation to one another. A close analysis of these relations may uncover surprising details whose political importance is not to be underestimated.

### Summary and Conclusion

This article inquired into why political protests in Conakry have recently concentrated in the so-called axis area and why youth gangs were so strongly involved in them. Shifting the analytical focus from a contextual approach to a relational one, the task was to inquire into how youth gangs, as principal performers of street protests, related to socio-spatial marginality and ethnicity in their specific neighbourhoods and how these relations mattered politically.

I demonstrated that, due to the availability of non-policed spaces along the axis, gangs could easily establish themselves in greater spatial and cultural distance from authorities. The gang-controlled spaces gained political significance when state forces entered the axis area during the 2007 upheavals. The gangs' determination and violence in this spatial-political conflict has in turn given them a strong political reputation, prompted their integration in political networks, and provided them with increasing political power.

Concerning Peul ethnicity, axis gang youth distance themselves from the moral frameworks of Peul culture while identifying strongly with their ethnic group's political victimhood. Given the strong importance of victimhood for their self-understanding, axis gang youth align with ethnic-political narratives not as bearers of a Peul culture and lifestyle but as vanguards in the fight against political and social marginalization, which Peul politicians and opposition parties have been quick to harness.

These findings allow for at least four general statements. As a rather trivial point to start with, for Africanist urban studies to detect the nuanced social realities of African cities, it is crucial to scrutinize what urban phenomena mean on the ground, rather than assuming to know their macro-sociological function or causal effects. Not only are scholars confronted with a lack of reliable data, which macro-sociological research usually depends on. Western academics also continue to see African urban issues through the lenses of Western urban sociology and modernization narratives (see Ferguson 1999). Second, however, vigilance is also required not to exoticize the "African city" and uncritically adopt the dominant paradigm of urban life in Africa as "fundamentally ambiguous, fluid and modifiable" (Mbembe 1992: 25). Gangs, for instance, are highly organized and formalized. They actively pursue reform processes towards greater institutionalization and the setting up of fixed procedures, often

assuming quite unambiguous anti-conventional roles. Thirdly, this contribution has demonstrated in detail that urban phenomena bear different meanings for different urban actors. Urbanists are well advised to connect with specialists on specific groups and strata to carve out how actor-context relations manifest themselves in urban everyday life. Finally, the analysis of gangs has proven once more the tremendous importance of transnational relations that connect Africa's urban populations to global products, markets, institutions, information, discourses and narratives (see Ferguson 2007), urging researchers to position their research objects within a global context.

NOTES

1 Then-President Lansana Conté famously labelled the area "the axis of evil" in 2007 when he became the target of fierce anti-government movements that emanated from the area.
2 Telephone interview with Moustapha Diop, 23.10.2010.
3 See, among others, Pivi (2009), S. Diallo (2009), M. Bah (2009), H. Sow (2010), "Martial law imposed in Guinea's capital after deadly protest" (2007), "Youths protest in Conakry against dismissal of Guinean minister" (2008).
4 Interview with Chérif Diallo, Sonfonia, Conakry, 3.4.2010.
5 Interview with Bano Barry, Sonfonia, Conakry, 17.8.2009.
6 Telephone interview with Moustapha Diop, 23.10.2010.
7 In 2008, for example, there were no demonstrations against then-President Lansana Conté's nomination of Ahmed Tidiane Souaré as prime minister even though Souaré was known to be an ally of the resented president. During the 2010 presidential elections, the axis population's support for Cellou Dallein Diallo, who is known to have embezzled state funds during his term as a Prime Minister, was noteworthy.
8 Many signs read, for example, "A bas Conté" [Down with Conté], "La jeunesse pour le changement" [Youth for change], and not least "A bas l'ethnocentrism'e [Down with ethnocentrism]. See the filmed documentary *La Gréve Générale en Guinée à Conakry du Lundi 22 Janvier 2007. Kossa – Bambeto – Autoroute. Vol. 1, 2*. n.d.
9 These are certainly two different questions. Yet, a thorough empirical analysis of axis gangs can arguably tell us more about the culmination of political protests along the axis than an abstract speculation about explanatory variables.
10 Hip hop is usually defined in terms of its four elements: rapping, DJ-ing, breakdance, and graffiti (see Hagedorn 2008: 94). Here I will apply a broad definition that includes hip hop's interrelation with other

musical genres, clothing, gestures, languages, attitudes, etc. For the social importance of hip hop for urban youth in Conakry, please visit the highly informative website www.fonike.info; here especially "Le Rap en Guinée: interview de Marco Ibrahim".
11 Please note that the label "gang" in this article comprises those social formations that Conakry's urban youth often refer to as "staff" or "clan" (see Philipps forthcoming).
12 Observations by the author and interviews with gang leader Sam and gang member Dre (Cosa, Conakry, 31.3.2010). Please note that all names of gangs and gang members have beden changed.
13 Various interviews and discussions with Thomas Grovogui in Kipé, Conakry; with Dre in Kaporo Rails, Conakry; and with Dr. Bano Barry in Sonfonia, Conakry, 2010.
14 Interviews with Sam (Cosa, Conakry, 31.3.2010), with Dre (Kaporo Rails, Conakry, 27.8.2009), and with Ghetto Mafia (Kaporo Rails, Conakry, 24.8.2009).
15 Various interviews and discussions with Dre in Kaporo Rails, Conakry, in 2009 and 2010.
16 The same is the case in Dar-Es-Salaam. Remes (1999: 13) writes: "Ghetto is a term of reference for the specific living space and the conditions youth face in the city. I was often ushered into the tiny rooms youth inhabit with the words, "Karibu geto langu" [welcome in my ghetto]."
17 Interviews with Ams Keuche (6.4.2010), Thomas Grovogui (10.3.2010), Mamadou (31.3.2010), and discussions with the Dope Cru.
18 Conversation with Dre, Kaporo Rails, Conakry, 4.4.2010.
19 For example, Dre proudly pointed out the global labels which had been attributed to the local neighbourhoods: Bambéto, Hamdallaye, Cosa, etc. were referred to by the names of globally known war zones: Baghdad, Gaza and Tora Bora. See "Le coup d'État vu de 'Bagdad', quartier chaud de Conakry", (2009).
20 Interview with Dr Bano Barry, Sonfonia, Conakry, 10.3.2010.

21  Interview with Rafik, Hamdallaye, Conakry, 29.3.2010. My translation.
22  Interview with Dre, Kaporo Rails, Conakry, 4.4.2010.
23  Telephone interview with Moustapha Diop, 23.10.2010. Discussions with Thomas Grovogui. See also Hugeux (2010), Yabi (2010), "Clashes in Guinea ahead of poll" (2010).
24  Interviews with an anonymous informant (Conakry, 6.3.2010) and Dr Bano Barry (Sonfonia, Conakry, 19.3.2010); telephone conversation with Sidiki (December 2010).
25  Interviews with members of various axis gangs, such as the Dope Cru, the Killaz, Faya Boys and Esprit de Feu.
25  Conversation with the rap group Bounkaya Faya, Kaporo Rails, Conakry, 10.3.2010. See also "Interview du reggaeman guinéen Abdoul Jabbar 'Le reggae doit changer le destin du peuple guinéen, c'est notre mission'", (2008).
27  Interestingly, the sharing of victimhood also seems to imply the axis community's sympathizing with young people. According to my 2010 survey (n=100), more than three-fourths of the axis respondents saw youths as victims of social-economic or political conditions (compared to 36 per cent in the neighbouring district of Matam). Only four per cent characterized them negatively (compared to 40 per cent in Matam), notably known as the city's hot spot of crimes, often committed by youths.

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# Dealing with diversity: African youth research and the potential of comparative approaches

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While African youth now feature among the most-researched phenomena in African Studies and Africa-focused social sciences, scholarship continues to shy away from the field's most daunting challenge. As the oversized analytical category 'youth' cannot tame the diversity and the ambiguity of the phenomenon 'youth', it remains difficult to develop tangible theories and reduce the fuzziness that characterises the current debate. In this paper, I review the most recent advances in the field of African youth studies and outline three comparative approaches to respond to the methodological challenges of diversity and ambiguity. Demonstrating how these comparative approaches can be used for youth-specific inquiries on different levels, I argue that comparison is effective in urging researchers to connect theory, methodology and empirical data more explicitly, to pay particular attention to the respective contexts that mark young people's attitudes and behaviour, and to address diversity as a puzzle rather than a ready-made answer.

**Keywords:** youth; ethnicity; generation; identity; youth culture

## Introduction

African youth have been among the hottest topics in Africanist and anthropological research for quite a while, and rightly so (for overviews, see Burgess 2005; Klouwenberg and Butter 2011).[1] Since the important contributions by Abbink and van Kessel (2005), Honwana and de Boeck (2005a) and Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh (2006b), however, the field seems to have arrived at a point of intellectual inertia. As Klouwenberg and Butter (2011, 61) remark in their bibliographic overview, 'Publications written after 2005 continue along the lines of [earlier] debates'. Many of them are clustered around notions of youth as ambivalent, paradoxical, Janus-faced actors (Richter and Panday 2008), as 'Makers and Breakers' (Honwana and de Boeck 2005a), 'Vanguards or Vandals' (Abbink and van Kessel 2005), 'Promise or Peril' (Muhula 2007) or 'Hooligans and Heroes' (Perullo 2005).

According to Comaroff and Comaroff (2005, 20), this ambivalence lies right at the heart of the modernist construction of the youth category, which places young people at once at the centre of national-political hopes for a brighter future and at the same time constructs them as the 'creatures of our nightmares'. Interestingly, even Comaroff and Comaroff (2005, 28) close their article by the same narrative, contrasting the youth's entrapment in conventional consumerist discourses with their creative attempts at shaping

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'yet-to-be imagined futures'. Their argument is curiously echoed in a politically reversed fashion on the other side of the social sciences spectrum. Various studies commissioned by development agencies, notably the World Bank (see, e.g. Cunningham et al. 2008; Garcia and Fares 2008; World Bank 2005, 2006, 2009), have repeatedly contrasted youth opportunities with youth risks.

The emphasis on youth's paradoxical nature in African Studies has been crucial and successful in shaping the field. Today, however, there is a need to move beyond this ready-made conclusion for youth-related inquiries. Not only because portraying youth in terms of fluid and ambiguous identities, emphasising their contradictory agency or highlighting once more that they are 'both *makers* and *breakers* of society, while they are simultaneously being *made* and *broken* by that society' (Honwana and de Boeck 2005a, 2) has become unsurprising. It is in fact self-evident. Youth's diversity (anywhere in the world) allows for no other characterisation than 'ambivalent' – and Honwana and de Boeck's (2005a, 2) above-cited 'fundamental paradox', while beautifully put, applies to numerous internally heterogeneous social categories.

This points quite clearly to the underlying methodological problem of African youth research: as it deals with an oversized analytical category, namely, 'youth', it has largely failed to disaggregate youth's diversity. In this paper, I advocate one potential solution for this problem – comparison. In a nutshell, I argue that the comparative perspective is useful to investigate how different contexts, be they geographical, economic, political or professional, impact young people. Not least, it allows researchers to assess causal processes – notably without having to identify 'independent' variables. For instance, why do some youth take to the streets during political upheavals while others, under presumably similar conditions, stay at home (see Philipps 2013a, 2013b)? Why do the sociocultural conditions for youth differ so drastically between Burundi and Rwanda (Sommers and Uvin 2011)? Without arguing for a return to naive positivism, I will hold that there is a necessity to explain variation – to analyse and disentangle ambivalence, rather than to restate it. One of the most promising ways of doing so is by case-oriented comparison.

In the following, I contextualise Africanist youth research in relation to youth studies, in general, outline what I deem to be its largely unresolved methodological problems to then demonstrate the ways in which a comparative approach can – on various levels of comparison – contribute to new and fruitful discussions.

## Youth – the ambivalence of an oversized category

Whereas youth studies in the global north often integrate basic and applied research, African youth research is characterised by a considerable rift between academic and development approaches (for a critique, see Philipps 2013c). The latter is mostly organised and funded by international NGOs and donor agencies and covers issues like health, education, labour market issues, etc. I will concentrate in this paper on the academic approach which, in contrast to multi- and interdisciplinary youth studies (see Furlong 2013), is largely equipped with anthropological lenses and with a comparably strong concentration on young people's sociopolitical position. Research on African youth started to blossom in the 1990s, notably in reaction to urban developments. Global youth popular cultures and youth-related movements challenged established norms and institutions just as much as they challenged the theories on African state–society relations. Africanist political sociology had long argued that society and state

mutually disempowered each other through patronage networks and kinship ties (see Bayart 1993; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Mbembe 2000; Médard 1982). Youth, however, seemed to build or to be coopted in networks that either disengaged from the state or attacked it (see Cruise O'Brien 1996; Diouf 1996, 2003; El-Kenz 1996). The (micro-) political and conflict-related characteristics of youth (especially young men) thus have been, and continue to be, an important element of the African youth debate.

In this debate, youth's paradoxical nature has been an important analytical entry point. It has been able to integrate a variety of youth-related topics and characteristics, also beyond youth's sociopolitical position. Rather than shying away from contradictory elements has taken these contradictions seriously: the parallel ways in which youth transform *and* reproduce established social frameworks, the intersection of creativity and destructiveness, and, more generally, the interplay of agency and structure could all be integrated into the analytical framework and its critical caveat that 'youth are extremely difficult to pin down analytically' (Honwana and de Boeck 2005a, 3).

Such analytical modesty is well taken. It would, indeed, be presumptuous to pin down 'African youth' on the basis of one's case study. In return, however, any qualitative inquiry is automatically confronted with the piercing question as to how relevant and representative it is with regard to the larger picture (see Basic 2013; Becker 1970; Ragin and Becker 1992). As generalisations from single cases are hard to undergird by evidence, debates about this larger picture have been framed mainly by economists, demographers and youth bulge theorists (see, e.g. Cincotta 2009; Fuller 2003; Mesquida and Weiner 1999; Urdal and Hoelscher 2009; Urdal 2006, 2007), who can at least claim to work with statistical data from multiple countries. Their hypotheses, however, tend to be de-contextualised to such a degree that there is an evident need for a more context-sensitive, yet methodologically sound and systematic theory formation.

Yet, when it comes to methodological soundness, various prominent Africanist scholars have made arguably outlandish arguments. El-Kenz (1996, 46), for instance, describes the involvement of two young men in political protests in Dakar and Algiers, as examples for 'thousands, millions like [them]'. Extending his central argument much further than the two (fictitious?) characters, El-Kenz (1996, 51,53) then states that '*[e]verywhere*, almost, violence is the mode of response to the problems that inadequate political institutions […] have proved incapable of solving' and contends that in '*all of these countries* it is youth which is at the forefront', whom he characterises by their 'socialised schizophrenia' and their confinement in an 'intellectual ghetto' (my emphases). Similarly, Biaya (2000) cites anecdotes from Addis Ababa, Dakar, and Kinshasa to argue that Africa's post-colonial urban conditions leave urban youth with basically two (!) potential 'identities' – a religious one (*identité syntonique*) and a street-cultural one (*identité syncinésique*). Confronted with such dualistic conceptualisation, one may, indeed, wonder what happened to the millions of ordinary young people on the African continent that would fit into neither category?

Such generalisations point to severe methodological dilemmas. Since researchers are (actually or presumably) expected to refine a category for which their data is inevitably insufficient, they may be inclined to omit the connections between data, methods and theory altogether. For example, all too rarely do we find a sensible clarification regarding the relation between the kind of youth under study and the conclusions that can be drawn from this sample. Even Straker (2007, 301), who explicitly attacks the 'wave of radical re-theorisations of "youth"', only provides a short survey with Guinean high school students as an empirical foundation for his farreaching critique of authors that have

studied entirely dissimilar phenomena – notably without mentioning the size of his sample.

　　This problem is partly related to the strength of a post-structuralist theory in African youth research, as evidenced by numerous references to Achille Mbembe (e.g. Cruise O'Brien 1996; Honwana and de Boeck 2005b; Weiss 2005) and the afore-mentioned article by Comaroff and Comaroff (2005; see also Klouwenberg and Butter 2011).[2] While I would not go as far as Meagher (2006, 596) to say that 'post-structuralism has done almost as much damage to African social sciences from the left as their colonisation by economics has done from the right', the post-structuralist prosaic tone, its rejection of definitional clarity and basic academic formalities certainly come with the price of analytical disorientation and methodological deficiencies, which impair the scientific potential of African youth research.

　　Of course, such lines of critique are neither new (see Mbembe 1985), nor are they currently ignored. In a recent review and a conceptual contribution on African youth research, Van Dijk et al. (2011, 5) raise the very same concern that this article deals with:

> The conceptual fuzziness of the idea of youth has had detrimental effects on the study of youth as a phenomenon. It has become increasingly fuzzier to understand precisely which groups are studied if there is no conceptual clarity of their demarcation, nor conceptual clarity of how their choices, situations and motivations can be understood.

While Van Dijk et al.'s (2011) observations of youth research are convincing, their theoretical suggestions do not seem to solve the problem. Instead of questioning the heuristic usefulness of the youth category as a whole (and the conceptual fuzziness it produces), the authors further exploit it, pressing for inquiries into the process of youth identity formation: 'Yet what is lacking in most [youth] studies is a capturing or rendering visible of a process that is very much comparable to that of the emergence of ethnic identities' (Van Dijk et al. 2011, 6).

　　There is no doubt about the critical potential of such an approach. Not only does it highlight the processes and resources that the (self-) categorisation of youth implies as well as its ramifications for the wider social context. It also allows for a reflexive turn in a kind of research that designates certain kind of young people as youth rather than others. Yet, two things should be made clear. First, despite their pertinent criticism of the youth category as a general reference, Van Dijk et al. (2011) single it out once more and risk reifying the very discourse they may seek to deconstruct. If researchers find it analytically worrisome that a huge population considered 'youth' is lumped together, then it may be effective to study young people's identifications in terms of their actual diversity and fluctuation: as students or professionals, family and community members, political and economic actors, as sports fans or music enthusiasts, just to name a few. These identifications not only connect them with elders, children, community members and other social categories, from which youth are often pictured as excluded and marginalised. They also change contextually and intersect with one another. Both the process and the outcome of such intersecting identificatory categories, say, of identifying as a young Pentecostal (Christiansen 2011) or as a *ghetto youth* (see Philipps 2013a; Remes 1999) may be extremely dissimilar.

　　Second, and more importantly, the research programme advocated by Van Dijk et al. (2011) is concerned with the construction and the configuration of a trope. It analyses the very element that makes a minority of young people visible as 'youth', while many others

of the same generation remain invisible because they do not harness the notion's 'ideological material' (Van Dijk et al. 2011, 8). This perspective ignores anything beyond the discursive level, more generally, that social becoming (in the sense of Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006b) is marked by an intricate mix of dynamics, interrelating biological and psychological changes with the presence/absence of socio-economic affluence and social mobility, for instance. As much as young people are always represented as youth in relation to an external observer, the distinction between the discursive concept of youth and the young people themselves should be upheld for both normative and scientific reasons, as it provides the very basis for problematising the biased (ab)use of the category. In the following, I will argue for a promising and relatively simple methodological alternative to deconstruction as a method to counter the current tendency of 'exoticising African youth' (Van Dijk et al. 2011, 4).

## For a comparative study of African youth

By a 'comparative approach', I refer to a wide spectrum of case-based comparative analyses, varying in terms of *what* is compared and *how* it is compared. I rely on the basic heuristic position that 'virtually all empirical social research involves comparison of some sort' (Ragin 1989). In other words, and in line with Weber's (2014, forthcoming) conceptualisation, particular phenomena only become legible through comparison with other phenomena (*comparata*) and in relation to what Weber calls the *tertium comparationis*, a concept of the general phenomenon (e.g. 'youth'). For instance, when researchers study Tanzanian hip hop and youth culture (Ntarangwi 2009; Perullo 2005; Remes 1999), they specify their research object on the basis of certain concepts of 'hip hop' and 'youth culture', and through implicit comparisons with alternative categories, they situate youth in a context that becomes unique because it is 'African' and not Asian or European, 'Tanzanian' instead of Senegalese, 'urban' compared to rural, 'subversive', rather than compliant with established norms and practices, etc. Both in analysis and practice, then, phenomena acquire their meaning only in relation to one another (see also Emirbayer 1997).

The question to be asked, of course, is why is it important to reflect on comparison when it is already being practised routinely? The most basic reason concerns academic reflection. If comparison plays, indeed, such an important heuristic role, whether intentionally or not, researchers should reflect that as part of their assumptions and mental frameworks (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Wacquant 1989). This entails the recognition that the specification and description of one's research object, e.g. 'urban youth', relies partly on the implicit and neglected second *comparatum* (in this case, 'rural youth') about which one may actually know relatively little. Implicit comparisons are partly built on established, conventional concepts of urban and rural youth, rather than the evidence that distinguishes one from the other – or the evidence that might actually conflate both.[3] In other words, implicit comparisons risk reifying our concepts of both the implicit and the explicit *comparatum*, since the former shapes the latter to a considerable degree. Interestingly, many concepts seem to become self-referential and dominant because the category to which it is implicitly compared is not problematised.

For instance, one of the most widespread conceptual tropes in African youth research is notion of 'globalised' youth, which few publications fail to mention (e.g. Biaya 2000; Honwana 2012; Honwana and de Boeck 2005a; Ntarangwi 2009). The analytical problem with statements concerning 'globalised' youth is that they assume a (comparative)

counterpoint in time where this 'globalisation' has either not been around or had much less of an effect. Yet, as Cooper (2001, 191) has demonstrated, this essentially misreads African history's 'back-and-forth, varied combination of territorializing and deterritorializing tendencies' while wrongly suggesting a contrast between 'a past of territorial boundedness [and] a present of interconnection and fragmentation' (see also Van Binsbergen and van Dijk 2004). The point here is not that every study on youth and globalisation should attempt to provide a historical comparison between the current and earlier situations. It simply calls for making comparisons explicit, to give rise to more specific and thus more interesting inquiries. Rather than relying on the largely ahistorical und unspecific concept of globalisation, one may ask, for example, what exactly the availability of the mobile phone has changed for African youth (e.g. Utas 2002) and, potentially, how it compares to other historical instances of newly available technologies, e.g. the advent of television.

Finally, comparison provides a heuristic means for inquiry into causal patterns. While the notion of causality often seems to trigger allergic reactions among a variety of qualitative social scientists, I would argue that it remains one of the most basic ingredients of social research (see Laitin 1995; Mayntz 2002; Pickvance 1986; Ragin 1989, 2008). Whenever authors contend that, for instance, 'the political problems of 2000 [in Côte d'Ivoire] were spurred on by a new form of urban culture forged by lower-class urban youth in search of an alternative model of identity' (Newell 2012, 9), or that the 'driving force in the world of rebellious youth culture […] has always been the perennial lack of job opportunities and the means to acquire necessary skills' (Abdullah 2005, 180), 'being spurred on by' and 'driving force' denote a causal relation. They imply that, if Abidjan's lower-class youth had not formed a new form of urban culture, political conflicts would have exhibited significantly different characteristics or not have occurred at all, and that, if youth were provided with sufficient education and employment, they would be less rebellious. This does not imply searching for either iron laws or dependent and independent variables, like regression analysts would have it. In case-oriented comparisons, the researcher looks at social patterns, seeking to understand and explain the similarities and differences among locally and historically specific units of analysis.[4] The latter cannot be divided into discrete variables but comprise a multitude of interrelated and intersecting dynamics.

> When a causal argument cites a combination of conditions, it is concerned with their intersection. It is the intersection of a set of conditions in time and in space that produces many of the large-scale qualitative changes, as well as many of the small-scale events, that interest social scientists, not the separate or independent effects of these conditions. (Ragin 1989, 24)

Since time and space produce historically and spatially specific phenomena, it should seem all the more interesting that young people's perceptions, attitudes, tastes, styles and evaluations of their socio-economic position in society have become quite similar and transgress cultural and geographical confines (Bucholtz 2002; Hannerz 1996; Honwana and de Boeck 2005b). The interaction of such transnational elements with a locally specific context gives rise to new particularities that invite inquiry of a causal nature. Why, for instance, has the Senegalese *Y'en A Marre* youth movement been successful in achieving their political goals without being coopted by the political elite (Wane 2012), unlike many Senegalese youth movements before (Cruise O'Brien 1996; El-Kenz 1996) and unlike the multitude of supposedly similar cases in other countries? As much as

leading scholars have stressed the paramount importance of context for situating youth agency (see Abbink and van Kessel 2005; Christiansen et al. 2006b; Honwana and de Boeck 2005b; De Waal and Argenti 2002; Maira and Soep 2005), youth research tends to shy away from these questions, even though they would test the actual significance of contextual factors by comparing different contexts and trying to understand how they shape youth agency in locally specific ways. As the following sections will demonstrate, a lot of potential is lost by such a methodological stance.

## *Three comparative approaches*

As mentioned above, there are innumerable elements that one can compare, and numerous ways of comparing them. With regard to the methods of comparison, I will rely on Robinson (2011) who, in her call for a comparative turn in urban studies, differentiates the individualising method, the encompassing method and the variation-finding method. The following paragraphs provide sketches of each method.

The individualising method is a detailed case study that 'seeks to explain the distinctive outcomes in one [or more cases] through implicit or explicit (usually qualitative) comparison with other cases that might confirm hypotheses concerning causal processes and outcomes generated in the specific case study' (Robinson 2011, 6). The analytical potential of such an approach resides in its sensitivity to the particular historical constitution of a given social phenomenon. Whether it is actually comparative, however, depends on its relation to other cases and/or theoretical debates. In youth research, Henrik Vigh's (2006) or Sasha Newell's (2012) intriguing case studies are brilliant examples of such kind, the former carving out the concept of navigation, the latter illuminating the social meaning of bluffing in Côte d'Ivoire.

The encompassing method, on the other hand, sees different cases as parts 'of overarching, systemic processes, such as capitalism or globalization' (Robinson 2011, 7). In the case of youth research, Honwana's (2012) 'Time of Youth' falls under this category. While acknowledging that each of the studied settings (Mozambique, Senegal, Tunisia, and South Africa) 'has specific characteristics that shape [youth's] predicaments and responses', Honwana's (2012, 165) main point concerns the global predicament of youth: in each case, young people are stuck in a period of *waithood*, largely 'resulting from failed neoliberal economic politics, bad governance and political crises'. Certainly, the capacity of the encompassing method to develop coherence across different cases comes with the risk of applying an a-priori framework that uses cases to confirm an overruling logic. Robinson (2011); therefore, argues for turning from an encompassing to an *incorporating* comparative rationale (first elaborated by McMichael 1990), where the systemic whole is considered as constituted by its parts (cases) and not as an independent, overarching truth.

Finally, the variation-finding comparative method seeks to explain variations of certain variables, usually across few cases and on the basis of qualitative analyses. A key method for theory building (see Collier, Brady, and Seawright 2010, 10), it develops and tests hypotheses about certain phenomena by inquiring into how they relate to different contexts. Different from individualising comparisons, which understand the research object in terms of their singularity, the variation-finding method searches for patterns across cases and, to a certain degree, implies universal causality assumptions (Robinson 2011, 5). Such a position should not be prematurely discarded as universalising, as Ragin (2008) has introduced interesting methodological advances to measure and compare

context-specific, combinational forms of causality (see also Thelen 2002). While highly prominent in social sciences (e.g. Wacquant 2008), the variation-finding comparative method remains fairly uncommon in studies on African youth. Sommers and Uvin's (2011, 2) comparison of young men in Rwanda and Burundi may be considered one of the few exceptions, delineating the ways in which the strength/weakness of governance and the rigidity/flexibility of the sociocultural context are crucial factors for young men's 'creative advancement'.

It is the first delineated individualising method that has been widely employed, with, however, little recognition of its comparative potential and its usefulness for theory building: many edited volumes and special journal issues tend to bring together a number of case studies carried out in different countries, often presenting them as examples of Africa's diverse and ambiguous young population – and leave it at that. Honwana (2012) aims at a more encompassing approach, as does Ntarangwi (2009, vii), even though he positions his analysis of 'East African Hip Hop. Youth Culture and Globalization' as an individualising study on how 'individuals, communities, and nations have experienced [the effects of globalization]' in East Africa, unfortunately tending to gloss over the manifold differences between Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya.

While my main intention is to call for a more *explicit* use of comparative methods, in general, I wish to particularly highlight the analytical potential of the variation-finding method in African youth research. Its major strength, I believe, is that variation-finding comparisons transcend the debilitating dichotomy between empirical and theoretical research. Without emphasising one at the expense of the other, they confront the researcher with empirical diversity and ask her to make theoretical sense of it, leading to hypotheses that can then again be refuted on the basis of empirical data. As such, the variation-finding method is probably the most valuable in creating an 'awareness of diversity [that] forces one to bring theoretical assumptions to the open' (see Pickvance 1986, 163). Second, this approach may question established explanatory models and, in a time where the bulk of mainstream science interprets the world at large through presumably universal statistical models, function as an important caveat through explicit historical comparison (see Ragin and Becker 1992). That being said, one should not disregard the potential of the variation-finding method to also make hypotheses about what is case-specific and what is 'rather general' (see Mayntz 2002). One of the most challenging and intriguing tasks for Area Studies today is the study of how the 'local' relates to the 'global', or the 'national' to the 'transnational'. Variation-finding comparisons can be an important tool in studying the case-specific and the crosscutting phenomena that such entanglements can produce.

## What to compare: categories, countries and continents

Comparative studies in the social sciences are conventionally associated with cross-national comparison (Lijphart 1971; Pickvance 1986). Obviously, the latter concerns only one of many different levels of comparison. In the following, I will outline three of them: comparisons of different categories of youth, cross-national comparisons and cross-continental comparisons.

I start by what I believe to be the most important level of comparison – the comparison of different categories of youth. The notion of the category emphasises that 'youth' is not only a concept but also a contingent form of designation: it designates a phenomenon that could be categorised in very different ways. Instead of calling a young man 'youth', he could be

identified as a member of a certain group (e.g. a given soccer team), as a resident in a specific neighbourhood, or as a person with certain political and religious convictions, a given sexual orientation, or as someone with a particular socio-economic position in society. Not least, such a perspective also allows us to wonder why young men are categorised as youth more often than are young women (Abbink 2005).

Bourdieu (1991) has aptly pointed out the importance of categories, first and foremost their capacity to shape the most basic order of social perception and to give rise to certain kinds of problems while omitting others. Yet, as much as scholars have problematised the youth *concept* (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005; Van Dijk et al. 2011; Durham 2004), the youth *category* remains largely unquestioned. There thus remains the risk in African youth research of associating certain themes (such as limited social mobility, marginalisation or the appropriation of transnational cultures) directly with youth, even though these aspects certainly cut across generations. In other words, the youth category may not always be the one at work when researchers associate young people with it.

This methodological problem is akin to the overuse of the ethnic category in studies of political violence (see Brubaker and Laitin 1998, 428):

> We – again, actors and analysts alike – are no longer blind to ethnicity, but we may be blinded by it. Our ethnic bias in framing may lead us to overestimate the incidence of ethnic violence by unjustifiably seeing ethnicity at work everywhere and thereby artifactually multiplying instances of 'ethnic violence'.

It is not hard to imagine how this statement could remain true when replacing 'ethnicity' by 'youth' and 'violence' by 'marginalisation', for instance. This is all the more concerning since various authors have emphasised the convergence between youth and ethnic groups: as mentioned above, Van Dijk et al. (2011) explicitly suggest that the identity formation of youth should be studied like the identity formation of ethnic groups. Paul Richards (1995) argues that 'a focus on youth can be seen as being more important than the issue of ethnicity as we try to understand the present conflicts in West Africa' (cited in Utas 2003, 19).

My point here is that the analytical focus should be on how different categories intersect rather than concentrating on one key category – be it youth or ethnicity (see Eriksen 2007, 1057). This stems not least from my own research on the political position of male youth collectives in Conakry, Guinea (Philipps 2013b). In Conakry, the youth-related protests and riots concentrate in a specific area – the so-called 'axis' neighbourhoods along the route Le Prince. While the young men from these neighbourhoods were more radical in their demands for and pursuit of political change, they related their radicalism to their position as youth and drew from the same global hip-hop cultural repertoire that young men from other districts also related to (yet without protesting as frequently and violently as youth from the axis). In other words, the young men's particular proclivity to political contestation could not be explained on the basis of the general youth category even though they explained it on that very basis.

When investigating the potential causes for the spatial concentration of protests, none of the conventional hypotheses discussed in the literature and among experts in Conakry could be upheld. Yes, poverty along the axis neighbourhoods was widespread, but comparably less than in other urban areas of Guinea's capital (see International Monetary Fund 2008). And yes, ethnicity did play a role in these conflicts, bespeaking the difficult relationship between the Peul population along the route Le Prince and Guinea's post-colonial governments. But

not only did other Peul residential areas in Conakry remain calm during upheavals, but the youth involved in the protests are also organised across ethnic divides and identify themselves as in trans-ethnic and transnational terms as *ghetto youth* (notably in a former French colony).

What then makes axis youth collectives comparatively confrontational vis-à-vis the government, if not higher levels of poverty and/or ethnic grievances? Inquiring into the historical development of youth culture along the axis and elsewhere in Conakry, I argue that the crucial factors are (1) the availability of large unsupervised urban spaces along the axis in the early stages of its urbanisation, which allowed axis youth to radicalise their subculture and to develop an expertise in urban battles, and (2) the spatially defined self-identification as marginalised victims, which makes it easier for axis youth to identify with the Peul politician's discourse on Peul victimhood despite their cultural distance to their Peul communities.

The content is not relevant here, but the method may demonstrate how comparisons operationalise the truism that context matters. In many cases where researchers are confronted with diversity, comparisons offer a clear method to interpret and organise data, not in terms of separate 'independent' variables but with regard to youth's interaction and relation with their context (see, e.g., Abbink 2005; Christiansen et al. 2006b; Honwana and de Boeck 2005a; Maira and Soep 2005; Utas 2003). Put to practice, variation-finding comparisons can thus highlight more explicitly, for instance, the significance of the gender context by comparing young men and women in an otherwise similar context, or the role of the built environment by comparisons of youth in different neighbourhoods. Research could clarify (or question) the differences between urban, semi-urban and rural contexts for youth, the different and the similar cultural styles prevalent in different socio-economic classes, etc.

Now that young populations in various countries have been studied extensively, the dearth of comparisons between different polities is particularly puzzling. For obvious reasons, cross-national comparisons of young people's relations with national politics and country-specific institutions would contribute to theoretical advances in youth studies. For example, one could study trans-ethnic youth networks in countries that have experienced large-scale ethnic conflicts and those that have not, or investigate how religious youth associations differ with regard to whether their religious views are dominant in a given country or constitute a minority.

Finally, it seems promising to compare the political and socio-economic contexts for youth within and outside the African continent. Instead of implying that the African context for youth is inherently 'different' from others, explicit comparisons would challenge the non-empirical biases of such an assumption and, in many cases, find a substantial number of parallels between African and non-African contexts. Considering the increasing prevalence of 'waithood' among youth across continents and classes (Honwana 2012) as well as the incidence of informal employment (International Labour Organisation 2013), or the transnational character of youth-driven protests in Europe, the USA, North and sub-Saharan Africa (Schifferin and Kircher-Allen 2012), case studies on African youth are easily comparable beyond the confines of African studies and may provide 'privileged insight into the workings of the world at large' (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, 1).[5]

This is not to say that things are largely the same for youth across the world. As Van Kessel (2013) suggests, youth's proclivity to draw inspiration from and to produce transnational cultures should not be taken as an indicator for 'cultural leveling', since the 'same [global] cultural resource can be put to use in radically different ways'

(Bucholtz 2002, 543; see also Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh 2006b, 20). The first hip-hop groups burgeoning in Guinea after the death of Sékou Touré, for example, actually continued the nationalist discourse of the former president (see Philipps 2013a). Paradoxically, they condemned the same 'immoral' practices that they stood for, such as smoking marijuana, having premarital sex and adopting 'Western' attitudes. Not until the early 1990s did rappers start criticising the transnational elites, aligning themselves increasingly with the global hip-hop community instead of the Pan-African position. Unlike the widespread interpretation of hip hop as a form of elite contestation (see Alim, Ibrahim, and Pennycook 2009; Androutsopoulos 2003; Auzanneau 2003; Pennycook and Mitchell 2009; Roth-Gordon 2009; Weiss 2005), it can thus also be a means for aligning oneself with politically established institutions.[6] In short, the interrelation of local and transcontinental elements in youth practices necessitates scrutiny regarding both the 'local' particularities and 'global' patterns as caveats against exoticism and universalism, respectively.

## Conclusion

Africanist youth research has been around for a while by now. The number of articles, monographs and edited volumes on the issue is considerable, as are the cross-references among researchers. Yet, after the youthful blossoming of conceptual articles (e.g. Abbink 2005; Christiansen et al. 2006a; Comaroff and Comaroff 2005; Honwana and de Boeck 2005a), most of which reified the consensus on African youth's diversity and paradoxical nature, the study of youth as a phenomenon (as opposed to a concept alone) seems to have arrived at a methodological impasse. African youth are paradoxical and diverse – so what? The same can be said about any large social category.

In this paper, I have argued for a more explicit use of comparative methods to take diversity and ambivalence not as a conclusion but as an analytical starting point. If different categories of young people differ with regard to their agency, their social, political or subcultural role in a given context, why do they differ? What are the contextual elements that matter particularly for youth in a given spatial or historical environment compared to another? Rather than attempting to find iron laws governing the worlds of young people, such inquiries would seek to find and explain patterns and processes, to differentiate what we assume to be general tendencies as opposed to case-specific phenomena and to specify why certain transnational dynamics trigger different outcomes in different cases.

Such inputs for theory building could position qualitative youth research in a more determined manner in the larger academic field. Rather than choosing Kaplan's (1994) sensationalist journalism on African urban youth as a relatively easy target (cf. Peters 2005, 278), comparative youth research could enter and enrich the mainstream debate by actively addressing youth bulge theorists such as Cincotta (2009), Fuller (2003), Mesquida and Weiner (1999), or Urdal (2006, 2007), which, to my knowledge, only Sommers (2006, 2011) has thus far attempted.[7] Finally, one may hope that an operationalised concern for youth's contexts also fortifies the research agenda's linkages with other fields, such as urban studies, political science, linguistics, history and the youth debates in and on other areas of the world.

## Notes

1. While different in style, aim, and line of argumentation, my guest blog post on http://matsutas. wordpress.com/ (Philipps 2013c) contains a few ideas that this paper addresses in detail.
2. Interestingly enough, it was Mbembe (1985, 5–6), whose pioneering work on African youth 'Les jeunes et l'ordre politique en Afrique noire' opened by the caveat that, as youth researchers, 'we find ourselves confronted here with a fragmented universe which […] cannot be thought of in a unequivocal and easily generalising way, as if it formed an indissoluble entity' (my translation)
3. For example, Newell (2012, 10) remarks that 'urban cultural productions such as fashion, slang, and genres of music and dance do not belong solely to the city that spawned them' and, that 'the village is 'remotely global', interconnected in intricate and intimate ways with wider cultural worlds' (citing Piot 1999; see also Robinson 2011; Utas 2003)
4. Importantly, Pickvance (1986, 176) cautions comparative researchers that, in what he conceptualises as plural causation, '*the same phenomenon can occur for different reasons or causes in different cases*' (emphasis in original).
5. In *Theory from the South*, Comaroff and Comaroff (2012, 47–48) seem inclined to pit theory against empirical research, advocating a 'return to Theory' to oppose the 're-embrace both of methodological empiricism and born-again realism' in the global north. My interpretation of the matter would be that empirical and theoretical research are fundamentally interdependent, and that each should support the other in countering the tendency of treating Western concepts and realities as the source of meaning for realities in other parts of the world (see Goody 2007; Mamdani 1995, 1996; Mudimbe 1988).
6. This is also exemplified by President Museveni's successful rap attempts in Uganda (see Schneidermann 2013).
7. I take this opportunity to point out that Sommers (2011, 296) misquotes youth bulge theorists Cincotta et al. when reproaching them for asserting 'that young men are '*inherently violent*' (Cincotta et al. 2003, 44)' – the actual text reads 'more prone to violence than older men, or than women'.

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# Politics of the future—riots of the now

Temporal horizons of youth in upheavals

in England and Guinea

## Introduction

A great deal of politics seems to be about the future, and much of the future seems to be managed by politics. Political networks develop narratives and ordering mechanisms that negotiate continuity and change in societies, and attempt to manage the contingency created by an entirely elusive future. In functionally differentiated societies, Luhmann (2002: 151) suggests that the political system creates the impression of a future that is being taken care of. And in many former colonies, governments find themselves confronted with widespread and longstanding expectations of 'development,' placed in the more or less proximate future (see Mitchell 2014: 500).[1] When studying as to why and how the future is significant for people, it should thus be interesting to take a closer look at politics. It should be particularly interesting to look at political upheavals, the "realm of contingency" where the taken-for-grantedness of political regimes is dismantled (Branch and Mampilly 2015: 10), and where uncertainty looms large as to who will deal with the future *in* the future.

In this chapter, I analyze interviews and conversations with young men who were directly involved in popular upheavals in England and Guinea. My central question is how these young men talk about the political future. As they actively destabilized the present political order, did they see their agency as potentially contributing to a different future? Or did they consider their actions to be short-lived and with no further political impact? Exploring these questions, I think, can tell us a lot about how different political systems, insofar as they include and exclude their citizens in different ways, shape young people's perspectives on the collective future. During my fieldwork in Guinea (2009-2012), where I had studied the involvement of youth gangs in urban protests (Philipps 2011, 2013a, 2013b), I had never explicitly asked these questions. But even without explicitly asking, informants and interviewees

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[1] Mitchell (2014: 507) delineates how "the future entered government" as a fundamental historical shift in modern political practice after the Second World War in the United States, and argues that politics became a "a mode of government-through-the-future."

generally expressed an intense longing for radical political change in the imminent future. The comparison with the English riots in 2011 is born out of a growing curiosity in transcontinental comparative research (see Philipps 2014, 10-11; Robinson 2011), treating African cases as examples for global dynamics and developments (see e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff 2012a, 2012b; Mbembe and Nuttall 2004; see also Utas 2014). Looking through the available data on English rioters' perceptions of the future, however, the Guinean and the English case stood in an unexpectedly stark contrast to one another. In a nutshell, while most Guinean young men I talked to between 2009 and 2012 embraced the notion of imminent political change, the English youth I read about seemed to have rioted with no obvious concern for the future at all. This chapter wonders how to make sense of that contrast.

Niklas Luhmann's thoughts about the relation between politics and the future, as well as on trust and confidence, provide a loose collection of ideas to be critically explored in this paper. Luhmann is concerned with the future's uncertainty as an indispensable resource for politics (Luhmann 2002: 147). Broadly, politicians project futures to obtain popular support—a bright future if they win the elections, for instance, and a worrisome future in case they don't, and any political decision for the future is valorized as "a difference to what would happen if one were to let things slide" (Luhmann 2002: 146).[2] As the political system juggles with different futures, usually on a spectrum between utopian and dystopian, and as it makes collectively binding decisions that affect the future, Luhmann (2002: 169) claims that

> The possibility of observing politics [provides] a substitute for the obstructed possibility of observing the future. The future's unknown character, its unobservability is therefore the condition for politics' high level of attention. Not least, this could explain why the observation of politics oscillates between trust and distrust. [...] Politics [functions], so to speak, as the governor [Statthalter] of the covert, unintelligible future.[3]

According to Luhmann, the public's observation of politics as an indicator of what the future may hold oscillates between trust and mistrust—both vis-à-vis the overall political system and with regard to individual politicians and political parties. Following Luhmann (2000: 97), the overall system generally requires confidence (*Zuversicht*), a trusting attitude that takes itself for granted—"(every morning you

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[2] My translation from German: "eine Differenz zu dem, was sich ergeben würde, wenn man die Dinge laufen ließe, wie sie nun einmal laufen."

[3] My translation from German: "die Möglichkeit, Politik zu beobachten, [bietet] einen Ersatz für die verbaute Möglichkeit, Zukunft zu beobachten. Das Unbekanntsein, die Unbeobachtbarkeit der Zukunft ist deshalb die Bedingung des hohen Aufmerksamkeitswertes der Politik. Das könnte nicht zuletzt erklären, daß die Beobachtung der Politik zwischen Vertrauen und Mißtrauen oszilliert. Keine der beiden Möglichkeiten kann prinzipiell ausgeschlossen werden, da die Politik gleichsam als Statthalter der verborgenen, unerkennbaren Zukunft funktioniert."

leave the house without a weapon!)." Supporting individual politicians, however, requires trust (*Vertrauen*), an attitude of actively choosing one object of trust over another—risking that you "eventually regret your trusting choice" (Luhmann 2000: 98). From the available data, the young men from the urban socio-economic margins involved in urban upheavals had not much confidence in the overall system, neither in England nor in Guinea. But while the English youth also had no trust in individual politicians, some of the Guinean ones did. This, I will argue, has to do with different modalities of political inclusion and exclusion. While the English rioters were, in the sense of Luhmann, systematically excluded from politics, their Guinean counterparts could hope for a possible future of being integrated into the political apparatus. However rare, ambiguous, fragile and short-lived their ties with politicians were, there was a slight possibility that their political actions could eventually improve their individual lives, whereas for English rioters, politics largely seemed inaccessible and likely to remain the same—at least from what we know. In that regard, this chapter critically reviews two interrelated tropes that frequently arise in discussions on global politics—the trope of inclusive democracies in Europe and the trope of the marginalized urban underclass in Africa.

## The 2011 England riots: The absent future

The England riots ensued shortly after a Metropolitan Police Service officer shot 29-year old Marc Duggan on August 4, 2011. Two days later, Duggan's relatives and local residents requested information about the circumstances of his death in front of the Tottenham police station. The demonstration later turned into a standoff between police and protesters (Scott 2011), which sparked the riots that spread with an unprecedented speed across London and to other cities (Newburn 2014). Five people lost their lives; 2584 shops were looted, and the overall financial cost is estimated at around half a billion pounds (Riots, Communities and Victims Panel 2012: 3). While the London Metropolitan Police Service (2012: 14) described the five days of rioting as "unprecedented in the capital's history," British Prime Minister David Cameron's was quick to emphasize the banality of the event: "This was not political protest, or a riot about protest or politics," he argued, "it was common-or-garden [ordinary] thieving, robbing and looting" (House of Commons 2011). In a way, Cameron was right: the English rioters in 2011 had no connection whatsoever to the networks and symbols we tend to call political. The rioters were not associated with political parties (the opposition equally condemned the riots), not organized in any legible way (see Williams 2012), and, most importantly: they made no reference to the future. Even those who most violently confronted the state's security forces self-reportedly did not imagine a different politics to come. All of the

consulted secondary sources on the English case were quite unambiguous on this issue.

One of the most detailed independent inquiries into the rioters' motivations is the 'Reading the Riots' report, produced by a collaborative research team from the London School of Economics and the Guardian newspaper (Lewis et al. 2011). Based on interviews with 270 people who were self-reportedly involved in the riots, it constitutes a central empirical reference in various sociological and criminological analyses (e.g. Body-Gendrot 2013; Slater 2011; Sutterlüty 2014; Valluvan, Kapoor, and Kalra 2013; for critiques see Henri and Hutnyk 2013: 210-213; Treadwell et al. 2013: 2,4). Their observations match with various others'[4] and see rioters as largely apathetic vis-à-vis the political future. A 19-year-old unemployed man from Birmingham, for example, when asked what he would like to see change, shrugs: "Fuck knows, dunno, don't really care about that no more. I've gone past caring. Just think there's no point in me wishing, wanting things to happen" (Lewis et al. 2011: 26). The rioters' fatalism was highlighted in all other large-scale empirical analyses (Morrell et al. 2011: 34-35; Riots, Communities and Victims Panel 2012: 8). In fact, the 'future' appeared in reports exclusively to designate what the rioters 'lacked,' what they had lost faith in. Rather than struggling for a better future, rioters seemed much more concerned with either the past (when framing the riots as a revenge against police) or the present (when describing the riots in terms of situational excitement and looting opportunities). A rioter called Daniel said he was striving for revenge:

> I was there for revenge and I will always remember the day when WE had the police and the government scared. For once, they were the ones living on the edge, they, like, THEY felt how WE felt, they felt threatened by us. That was the best three days of my life (The Guardian 2011).

Daniel and his friends were on holiday when their peers in London sent them Blackberry messages with images of the riots. They immediately cut their holidays short and came back to England nine days earlier than planned.

> I always THOUGHT to myself when I was on holiday: 'Well, this chance may never come again.' I saw it as my opportunity, like, NOW was the opportunity to get revenge. It wasn't even just the police, just the whole government, like, everything they do, they make things harder for us, like, they make it hard for us to get jobs, even when, like, we do get benefits, they cut it down (The Guardian 2011).

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[4] To name but a few examples, Sutterlüty (2014: 49) remarks "it is highly significant that they hardly spoke of hopes;" Body-Gendrot (2013: 18) speaks of "futureless young males," and Lewis et al. (2011: 26) argue that "many [rioters] felt that little was likely to change." All available data from interviews that I have been able to gather confirm this view.

Daniel's comment that "this chance may never come again" as well as the payback narrative exemplify that the riots were indeed no attempt at political reform. As much as the "mayhem saw rioters take control back, in their own minds, from the clutches of the police" (Lewis et al. 2011: 20), this reversal of police dominance was known to be short-lived and did not aim at future improvements in policing or socio-economic redistribution. However, within the moment, the reversal of established power relations provoked great enthusiasm. Daniel proudly recalls, "We actually had the choice of letting officers off the hook or seriously injuring them. Like, I threw a brick at a policewoman, I saw her drop; I could have just easily bricked her again. I didn't because it was a woman" (The Guardian 2011).

Looting accounted for half of all riot-related crimes (Riots, Communities and Victims Panel 2012: 17); many commentators distinguished it as the England riots' essential feature (see Bauman 2011; Moxon 2011; Riots, Communities and Victims Panel 2012; Stuart Hall in Williams 2012; Žižek 2011). Looting generally appears to happen within a highly present-centered atmosphere (Collins 2008: 247). A business student who self-reportedly had made £2,500 by looting, recalls a sense of urgency: "I wanna get it now. I want it now. That's what it was" (Lewis et al. 2011: 29). Karl, a young man interviewed during the riots by Treadwell et al. (2013: 11), explains:

> I am 23, never had no job […]. I got fuck all [nothing] to lose man, fucking Babylon [police] can't do shit anyway, fuck them. We run this town now, not them pricks man, I am gonna take as much as I can get. I want to get watches man, I want me a fucking Rolex.

A looter going by the name of G explains, "Opportunities come and you can't let them go, know what I'm saying?" (Treadwell et al. 2013: 5).

Oftentimes, the two key motives, revenge against police and looting, seemed to intertwine within an effervescent "party atmosphere" (see Lewis et al. 2011; Morrell et al. 2011; Treadwell et al. 2013). Rioters enjoyed what Collins (2008: 250) calls a "moral holiday," which created a sense of social solidarity amongst the marginalized social strata. Daniel, an English white man in his thirties, recalls a "bonfire atmosphere" with people cheering him on when he set a police car on fire: "I felt great and excited 'Yeah, fuck them, fuck them scum bastards' […]. It was just an opportunity. I never set fire to a police car before. [...] It's a police car, I know what they stand for" (The Guardian 2011).

The rioters came from a disadvantaged socio-economic background: 59% of the riot suspects were amongst the poorest 20% of the national population; 76% had a previous caution or conviction, and 63% were ethnic minorities (Lewis et al. 2011: 5; Riots, Communities and Victims Panel 2012: 18; Ministry of Justice 2012; Slater

2011). But even though 85% of the 270 rioters interviewed by Lewis et al. (2011: 13) said that policing and police discrimination were a key issue for why the riots happened, the riots themselves featured almost no reference at all to police racism or to the preceding protests concerning the death of Marc Duggan. Some rioters outright rejected the notion of political protests. A rioter going by the name of Dexter explicitly exclaimed: "Fucking protests, what, the riots? Like the lads from round here are gonna bother going up town for a protest! It was for 10 pairs of free Adidas. It's a fucking joke [to claim that this was a protest], anyone can see it's fucking fantasy" (Treadwell et al. 2013: 11-12). This seems puzzling. Upheavals constitute a risky moment for the political system; regimes become vulnerable when they are forced to demonstrate their power, in particular consensual democracies that execute physical force against their own citizens (see Luhmann 2002: 47-48). Why did none of the English rioters seize the moment and make future-related political demands, even though they would have had plenty of reasons to do so? And why did the political opposition, notably the Labour Party, refrain from politicizing the riots more?

Along the lines of Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, we can explore the underlying issues in terms of political inclusion and exclusion. If rioters did not communicate in the language of politics, i.e. if they made no future-related political demands, it means that they were not included in the political system. Though Luhmann can only illuminate the excluding political system and not the perspectives of the excluded individuals—a problematic theoretical stance to be discussed further below—his focus on in- and exclusion highlights the boundaries of politics, and, more symbolically, the boundaries of who can participate in the contest of different futures and who can't. These boundaries were stark and systemic in the English case, while they were fuzzy and porous in Guinea. For in the English case, political parties depend fundamentally on the systematic procedures of electoral democracy. They had little interest in considering a riot political—or else they would have aimed for systemic suicide. Instead, the familiar political order was to be restored as swiftly as possible to dissipate any doubts about the system's authority and the political parties' legitimacy in representing the will of the people. Indeed, that is precisely what happened. The English security and judicial apparatus reacted with an "extraordinary" effort to criminalize the rioters as quickly as possible (Newburn 2014: 20), organizing 1,200 riot-related hearings before magistrates within 10 days of the riots, resulting in all-night sittings across the country, and pronouncing sentences that were generally two to three times longer than usual (Slater 2011). By March 2012, the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) had made 4000 riots-related arrests and their investigations still occupied over 411 officers at a cost of £33.5 million, many of them analyzing the 200.000 hours of surveillance camera footage

(Metropolitan Police Service 2012: 126, 128-29). The MPS currently develops a 'Digital Imagery Strategy' with video surveillance technology to respond "to any future large scale public disorder in London" at an estimated cost of £43 million (Metropolitan Police Service 2012: 128-29). In short, the English political system has not only a strong interest, but also a high capacity to exclude the disaffected urban margins from politics.

The upshot for the national population, according to Luhmann, is straightforward. Whoever wants to be included in the political system needs to display confidence in that arrangement and needs to trust specific politicians to vote for. Otherwise, given the absence of feasible alternatives, "one can only feel unhappy and complain about it," or organize "protests that won't change anything" (Luhmann 2000: 103; 1996). The risks of this arrangement seem manageable for the English political system. Although the lack of trust amongst the voting public might eventually diminish the size of the system through lacking participation (Luhmann 2000: 104), and although there is evidence for a gradually decreasing political participation among young and poor voters in the UK (Flinders 2014), the turnout in the 2015 elections was still higher than in all three previous elections. And while the public's lack of confidence "may have indirect repercussions on the political system," it will first and foremost affect those lacking confidence, causing "feelings of alienation" and a "retreat into smaller worlds, […] fundamentalist attitudes or other forms of retotalizing milieux and 'life-worlds'" (Luhmann 2000: 103-104). Whether these life-worlds will gain political relevance in the future remains to be seen. In the case of organized gangs during the 2011 England riots, which can indeed be understood as life-worlds (see Hazen and Rodgers 2014; Venkatesh 2006), that was not the case. Though 19% of the arrested rioters were gang members and "otherwise hostile gangs suspended ordinary hostilities" or even collaborated during the riots (Lewis et al. 2011: 21, 22), they remained politically illegible and, in the long run, did not disrupt the system's stability. Quite to the contrary, police emerge today as an even stronger political-administrative subsystem than before and criminalization of rioters has easily excluded them from various social systems at once—a trans-systemic exclusion that systems theory is at great pains to explain (on *Kopplung*, see Luhmann 1995a: 407-495).

In sum, Luhmann can only explain why the political system excludes rioters and refrains from politicizing them, not why they made no political demands. More broadly, this shows that thinking in terms of functionally differentiated social systems makes sense from within these systems, but much less from without. This goes in particular for concerns of intersectionality (for a recent discussion, see Collins 2015). For those who are simultaneously excluded from various social systems—the jobless,

less educated, and criminalized poor with no political party to vote for—the issue is social exclusion *tout court* (see Depelchin 2005: 210; Grizelj and Biti 2014: 14). When Luhmann (1995b, 1996) explored this concern of total social exclusion after a visit to Brazil's favelas,[5] the German theorist, usually known for his unemotional and anti-normative style of theorizing, was visibly troubled by the magnitude of exclusion, which, he argued, eschewed all descriptions and explanations. He seems to unwittingly refer to himself when writing that

> To the surprise of all well-meaning [people], one has to notice that there is exclusion after all, in fact plentiful and in a form of wretchedness that eludes all description. Anyone who dares to visit the South American urban favelas and gets out alive can give account of this. But even a visit of the neighborhoods affected by the shutdown of coal mining in Wales may suffice. It needs no empirical investigations. Whoever believes one's eyes can see it, in fact in an impressiveness that all explanations fail to convey. (Luhmann 1996).[6]

It is telling when a constructivist theorist asks the reader to simply 'believe one's eyes', as if reality was suddenly a more simple, immediate matter. What it actually implies is that Luhmann's approach cannot make sense of the perspectives it excludes. The agency of the excluded, and more specifically the 'absent future' in protests and riots, inevitably requires a different frame of analysis.

African Studies research on urban youth and politics could contribute significantly to such an approach (e.g. Abbink 2005; Branch and Mampilly 2015; Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh, 2006; Christensen and Utas 2008; Diouf 2003; El-Kenz 1996; Vigh 2010; Zghal 1995). Branch and Mampilly (2015: 35), for instance, argue that among the protesting urban underclass, the "horizon for political action is now: it is all or nothing, because faith in the possibility of reform requires faith that the state will follow through on its promises." Such confidence in the state is largely absent amongst the urban margins, which makes voicing political demands relatively absurd for them, and explains to a certain degree why their protests are so often interlaced with looting. Just as political and economic exclusion seem to go hand in hand—at least from the perspective of the excluded (Branch and Mampilly 2015: 7)—upending the political order inevitably constitutes a rare opportunity to seize the material goods that usually remain out of reach under that order. Getting something

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[5] For Luhmann (1996), page numbers still need to be added (the original document is unavailable online). XXX.

[6] My translation from German: „Zur Überraschung aller Wohlgesinnten muß man feststellen, daß es doch Exklusionen gibt, und zwar massenhaft und in einer Art von Elend, *die sich der Beschreibung entzieht*. Jeder, der einen Besuch in den Favelas südamerikanischer Großstädte wagt und lebend wieder herauskommt, kann davon berichten. Aber schon ein Besuch in den Siedlungen, die die Stillegung des Kohlebergbaus in Wales hinterlassen hat, kann davon überzeugen. Es bedarf dazu keiner empirischen Untersuchungen. Wer seinen Augen traut, kann es sehen, und zwar *in einer Eindrücklichkeit, an der die verfügbaren Erklärungen scheitern*."

tangible and material out of a protest may be prioritized over making future-related political demands, not just amongst the poorest rioters but equally amongst those who have lost hope that the political order is going to change. As in the England riots, rioters will join the carnivalesque exceptionality not to seek political inclusion, but to settle accounts from the past or cash in on the present. If the political system, in Luhmann's (2002: 169) words, functions as the governor (*Statthalter*) of an unknown tomorrow, the English rioters simply enjoyed, if only for five days, their limited control over the now. As the Guinean case indicates, the future becomes much more of a resource among urban marginal youth when political inclusion and exclusion are less distinct and definitive.

## Guinea in 2009: The imminent future

In August 2009, the Guinean military junta 'Conseil National pour la Démocratie et le Développement' (CNDD) had been in power for nine months. Their bloodless coup in December 2008, following the death of former President Lansana Conté, had been widely applauded by the national population (McGovern 2009). However, criticism and impatience increased among the Guinean public when the junta delayed preparations for the promised democratic elections. Many wondered whether the junta president Dadis Camara would stick to the transition chronogram and keep his promise not to run for President in the elections. The tensions in 2009 evoked fresh memories of what had happened two years before: in 2007, a countrywide general strike with large-scale demonstrations and violent clashes of an unprecedented scale had ultimately pushed the regime to nominate a new prime minister. Since then, the political climate had gotten increasingly tense (see Engeler 2008). During and after the strike in 2007, tightly organized youth groups—so-called *staffs*, *clans* and *gangs*—had become important mobilizers for the large masses of underemployed urban youth to join protests, political gatherings and demonstrations in Guinea's capital city Conakry (Philipps 2013a), especially along the so-called axis neighborhoods along the Route Le Prince, centrally located in Conakry's district of Ratoma. Politicians were eager to attract large crowds through these groups, be it in an effort to undermine the state's fragile monopoly of power, or to undergird it. In 2009, different political movements made their proposed political futures seem propitious and accessible to these gangs, clans, and staffs, and this future depended notably on President Dadis Camara: the 'Mouvement Dadis Doit Partir' (MDDP) proclaimed that 'Dadis has to leave', while the 'Mouvement Dadis Doit Rester' (MDDR) argued that 'Dadis has to stay'. Middlemen, shifting between the ghetto and party headquarters, brokered the deals between youth groups and politicians. Partisan politics intertwined with ghetto discourses, money handouts, and promises of a brighter future. A language of imminent change

permeated the urban margins of Conakry. After the 2007 general strike had failed to democratize the country, the coming elections would. And the youth would be employed in the state that they were about to capture.

Junta leader Dadis Camara was the most explicit in seeking the support of Conakry's 'ghetto youth'. In August 2009, he organized a mass rally at Kaporo Rails, a symbolic site of state-society conflict in Ratoma. He channeled money to 37 leaders of different staffs and clans in Conakry, and gave a passionate speech, in which he declared solidarity with the axis area's ghetto youth: "S'ils vous appellent bandits," Camara exclaimed, "moi aussi je me réclame bandit!" I attended the rally at Kaporo Rails with Dogg Mayo. One of my first informants, Dogg Mayo was an agitated man in his late twenties, an Islamic Studies student in his final year of university, and the 'conseiller' of the staff *Bunker Family.* As a conseiller, he would, amongst other things, negotiate with middlemen from political parties about whether or not to support them in demonstrations, rallies, and in organizing protests in their favor. They would sit together, negotiate prices, condemn political corruption and injustice, and assert the need for radical political change. Dogg Mayo thereby occupied a particular position in Conakry's politics. On the one hand, he was a self-proclaimed ghetto youth, proudly representing in sartorial styles, gestures, and rap-inspired vocabulary the transnational margins of an urban world, to which many English rioters would probably also count themselves.[7] At the same time, he also transcended these margins. For Dogg Mayo was also linked to the very politicians at the center of national power that he despised as the corrupt elite. His position thus implied as many contradictions as it came with opportunities "to operate outside of increasingly outmoded laws and regulatory systems," opportunities that are characteristic for many African urban spaces where "nonformalized, creolized, hodgepodged social orders and territories […] obscure any clear reading of what is going on" (Simone 1998: 84, 83). Dogg Mayo, in that sense, is representative for the connections that were *possible* within the Guinean context between the urban margins and the national political center, a context in which the political future could become an important resource for youth at the urban margins.

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[7] Socio-economically marginalized, sometimes ethnically discriminated against, and frequently in conflict with the law, the English rioters shared important characteristics that the Guinean young men I interviewed between 2009 and 2012 mostly used for their self-description. Both cases of protests and riots were associated with global HipHop culture (on Guinea, see Philipps 2013a; on England, see Hancox 2011), and rap songs like UK's Lethal Bizzle's (2007) 'Babylon's burning down the Ghetto', which made allusions to the likelihood of urban riots in England four years before 2011, convey the same narratives that Guinea's ghetto youth evoked in interviews.

In early August 2009, Dogg Mayo had co-organized Dadis Camara's rally and had mobilized the Bunker Family staff to attend his speech. After the speech, Dogg Mayo approached me with an air of absolute confidence. "Je dis, c'est quelqu'un, c'est un monsieur, il est patriote! Lui en personne il est PATRIOTE !! [...] Et le chronogramme qu'il a promis encore, qu'il va respecter et il VA le respecter, c'est quelqu'un, il est honnête." Interestingly, the President had not mentioned the transition chronogram at all during his speech and had made no remarks concerning his candidacy during the promised elections—Dogg Mayo had made this part up, eager perhaps to sustain his hopes on something substantial. But in vain: just five days after the event, I looked for Dogg Mayo and met his friends in a crowded bar, all circled around a small television set. The evening news was on; Dadis Camara gave another speech, and rumor had it that he would present himself in the presidential elections. Among the young men, there seemed to be a sense of disorientation: noise, laughter, loud political comments of all kinds, a venting of frustrations, criticisms, fears, all circulating under the corrugated iron roof. Different voices with entirely dissimilar comments: "Nique le CNDD!" "Et si Dadis va PAS se présenter, EUX, ils vont le présenter." "Personne n'a de l'argent à l'heure là. Tout le monde a peur. Moi, j'ai peur, au nom de ma maman." "Je quitte ici, je vais dans mon village natal." Another assured "C'est le début ça encore, on va encore suivre ça." I heard that, in the adjacent neighborhood of Bambéto, youth had started to put up barricades to block traffic—signaling that anti-government protests were about to start. Somebody asserted "Au nom de Dieu, si moi je sors à l'heure là, tout Kaporo Rails va sortir." All around, politicians' names were mentioned in relation to corruption scandals, numbers flew across the room. That the CNDD had seized SOBRAGUI, the national beer brewery and that the army drank for free since its capture of power—owing the brewery 7 billion Guinean Francs, i.e. 1.5 million US$. "C'est pas seulement Cellou Dallein[8] qui a mangé l'argent des Guinéens. Tous les ministres, ils ont mangé." Another says "Cellou Dallein, c'est un conard. C'est un BATARD." And another: "Je suis derrière Cellou. Je suis derrière Cellou." "Alpha Condé,[9] c'est un fonctionnaire international. Il n'est meme pas marié." Somebody approached me: "Attendez, par exemple, vous comme ça là, vous avez vu quel candidat ici peut faire quelque chose ici en Guinée? QUI?" And while I stuttered something about how youth can transform the country, another one said: "Moi, mon père n'est même pas politicien. Moi, j'ai pas parti à l'école. Je connais même pas la politique."

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[8] Cellou Dallein is a Guinean opposition politician of the Union des Forces Démocratiques de Guinée (UFDG). He was a minister under Lansana Conté and is today's main opponent of President Alpha Condé.

[9] Alpha Condé is Guinea's current President and a long-time opposition politician heading the Rassemblement du Peuple de Guinée (RPG).

Later, I found Dogg Mayo in front of the TV watching Dadis Camara's speech. "C'est un gars que j'ai TELLEMENT aimé," he confessed. "Je l'ai aimé au début. Mais le fait que je commence à entendre les rumeurs, qu'il veut sortir, qu'il veut se présenter…" He looked at the TV. "Maintenant il parle de bas peuple! Mais s'il nous parle de bas peuple, nous on va CHIER sur lui! Maintenant tu es pour le bas peuple, faut aider le bas peuple." And when I started emphasizing again my amazement at "tous les gens qui sont prêts à changer le pays…," Dogg Mayo interrupted me harshly, as if my comment could have implied any sort of doubt:

> Nous, on est prêt à changer le pays-là. Si on n'est pas prêt à changer—moi, que tu vois devant toi, si quelqu'un me donne, même si c'est 100.000 Francs Guinéens [equivalent to US$ 20 at the time], il me donne une arme avec de la—comment dirais-je, de la MUNITION, je suis prêt a tuer. Là, *wallahi*, je tue. Parce que celui-ci là [gesturing towards Dadis Camara on television] veut PAS qu'on change. Même si nous, dans notre vie, il n'y a plus d'espoir mais nos enfants qui vont venir là, ceci-là veut encore que nos enfants-là mènent leurs vies comme nous. Il n'a qu'à aller se faire foutre, lui, nous, on a marre des pouvoirs militaires. […] L'équipe-là ne peut rien! L'équipe-là ne dépasse pas l'équipe de Lansana Conté.[10] Nous, on les a affronté! Et à ce moment, les gens n'avaient pas de fusils. [inaudible] Les gens vont se préparer cette fois-ci TRES BIEN avant de sortir.

Indeed, the wave of protests that started in Ratoma that very night in August 2009 can be regarded as the beginning of the end of Dadis Camara's presidency, and later of the CNDD regime. Several demonstrations and protests led up to the notorious massacre on September 28th 2009 by Guinea's security forces, killing at least 150 demonstrators at an opposition rally in Conakry. Isolated internationally and dreaded among Guineans, the junta crumbled due to internal frictions. Dadis was later shot and severely injured by his aide whom he had held responsible for the massacre. The junta's number three, Sékouba Konaté, took over power; and Guinea held presidential elections in 2010 and again in 2015.

Even though the political changes have thus far not improved the livelihoods of Dogg Mayo and his peers, it is crucial here to acknowledge how strongly the rumors about Dadis Camara's plans to run for president seem to affect the young men in the Kaporo Rails bar, instantaneously causing a diversity of reactions: a young man thinks aloud about moving back to his natal village out of fear; a search for new political affiliations begins: who is the politician to trust in now? Who has not been corrupt in the past? Given that the milieu of Ratoma's ghetto youth is often depicted as either opportunistic (supporting the politician who offers them money), merely

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[10] Ex-President Lansana Conté ruled Guinea from 1984 to 2008.

violent for the fun of it (and for the economic benefits of looting), or ethnically affiliated (almost exclusively behind Peul politicians like Cellou Dallein Diallo), this reaction is remarkable for the heterogeneity of political opinions and its inconclusiveness.

In Luhmann's (2000: 97) terms, the incident constitutes an event that contradicts "previous trusting relationships [and] may lead to a sudden collapse of confidence or trust." Trust in 'Dadis' indeed collapsed and led to overt confusion about the future. Dogg Mayo, after having vented his indignation vis-à-vis the televised image of the President, confesses: "Je comprends plus, je comprends plus, mon frère. Je n'arrive plus à comprendre, je ne sais même pas où ça aille, avec le régime là. On pensait que le gars-là [Dadis Camara] est bien." But the confusion did not last long, as Dogg Mayo simply entered new networks when others failed. Just one week after having organized the rally for the President, he quickly joined the opposition, participated in anti-government demonstrations in late August and September 2009, burning tires and throwing stones at police. He was present at the 28th September massacre but escaped unharmed. He self-reportedly voted for President Alpha Condé in 2010, the only opposition candidate who had never been part of previous governments. But Condé also disappointed his trust, so he sided with the new opposition for which he mobilized Kaporo Rails' youth through the networks of Bunker Family. Still in 2013, Dogg Mayo was as infuriated by Guinean politics as when I first met him. He reasserted his hopes of an armed rebellion against the "vampires" who sucked dry the state and continuously emphasized the inevitability of fundamental political change. His thinking about the world around him remained anchored in the future. The future constituted a space of untainted hope, a refuge from the present and, perhaps most importantly, a locus of observation. Perceived from the future, the past lost its powerful grip on reality ("Ahhha. Les cinquante ans qu'on a fait là, c'est bon, déh!") and in contrast to the past, the imagined future confirmed Dogg Mayo's political hopes, independent of whatever individual politicians may concoct. As he said in 2009, "s'il [Dadis Camara] accepte dans la positivité, on change, s'il n'accepte pas dans la positivité, on va changer. Parce que faut que ça change!" In short, the future's quality resided precisely in the fact that it was untamed by reality and fully manipulable by imagination.

Dogg Mayo in that regard seems to exemplify what young militiamen in neighboring Guinea-Bissau call *dubriagem*—in French: *se débrouiller* (Vigh 2010). Etymologically, *se débrouiller* is related to *brouillard* (fog) and "indicates a process of gaining clarity whilst moving in an opaque (social) environment" (Vigh 2010: 150). Young militamen in Guinea-Bissau, Vigh (2010: 151) argues, navigate such opaque environments through "a dual temporality" which interrelates "both the socially

*immediate* (present) and the socially *imagined* (future)." Different from more stable social contexts, where the present constitutes the stable basis from where to think about the future, in the case of Bissau's militias, the present is as much clarified by the imagined future as the future is imagined through the given possibilities of the present. Knowing how quickly things can change, the political future is thought of as volatile, manipulable, and therefore susceptible to hopeful imaginations, not least to dissipate the distress, confusion and haze of the present. *Dubriagem*, then, is much more than economic survival; it is "a process of disentanglement from (present and future) confining structures and relations as well as a drawing of a line of flight into an envisioned future" (Vigh 2010: 151).

## Summary

This chapter addressed the uncertain collective future as a key concern and resource of politics (Luhmann 2002, Mitchell 2014). It wondered under what circumstances it would also become a resource for youth at the urban margins, which turned it into a question of political inclusion and exclusion. I sketched out two contexts of riots and protests where youth from the urban margins actively destabilized the present political order, but responded differently to whether their actions aimed at a different future. In the English case from 2011, according to secondary sources, the political future remained outside the purview of rioters. The rioters did not voice demands for a better future, and English politicians did not see the upheavals as something political, mainly because they did not depend on the rioters to access or remain in power. That situation was fundamentally different in the Guinean context of 2009, where both the government and the opposition were eager to harness Conakry's urban margins for popular support. Dogg Mayo and his peers could develop political leverage on the basis of an uncertain political future and comparatively inclusive political networks. As mobilizers and participants in political rallies, demonstrations, protests, and riots, they would call for imminent political change as *their* project, and they hoped that their actions would tangibly improve their personal lives. Finally, in the dynamic and quickly changing political context of Conakry in 2009, the envisioned future significantly illuminated their understanding of an unstable present. A utopic space of manipulable realities, the future provided orientation where the present proved either too intangible or too grim to work with on their way forward.

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# Crystallising contention: social movements, protests and riots in African Studies

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**ABSTRACT**

This article critically reviews the recent debate on social movements and protests in African Studies. It problematises prevailing conceptualisations, addresses the methodological difficulties of data gathering and scrutinises theoretical references in contemporary scholarship. As an alternative to established approaches and based on fieldwork in Conakry and Kampala, the author suggests capturing the dynamic nature of protest movements through the concept of crystallisation. Inspired by philosopher Gilbert Simondon, the crystallisation concept grasps protests as processes emerging from everyday urban politics and reflexively considers the researcher as part of the phenomena he or she describes.

[Une discorde qui se cristallise : les mouvements sociaux, les manifestations et les émeutes dans les Études africaines.] Cet article examine de manière critique le débat récent sur les mouvements sociaux et les manifestations dans les Études africaines. Il problématise les conceptualisations dominantes, se penche sur les difficultés méthodologiques liées à la collecte des données, et examine les références théoriques dans les études contemporaines. En se posant comme une alternative aux approches établies et sur la base d'un travail de terrain à Conakry et Kampala, l'auteur propose de capturer la nature dynamique des mouvements de protestation à travers le concept de cristallisation. Inspiré par le philosophe Gilbert Simondon, le concept de cristallisation appréhende les manifestations comme des processus émergeant des politiques urbaines courantes et considère de manière réflexive le chercheur comme faisant partie du phénomène qu'il ou elle décrit.

The pace, scale and diversity of recent upheavals across the African continent and beyond are astonishing – and give rise to multiple analytical dilemmas. Certainly, 'the ways in which societies compose and invent themselves in the present [ … ] is always ahead of the knowledge we can ever produce about them' (Comaroff, Mbembe, and Shipley 2011, 654). This is particularly vexing however when the issues at stake carry an unmistakable ring of urgency. Let us start with some basic data. Between 2008 and 2013, more than half of sub-Saharan Africa's 48 countries went through what one could call substantial anti-government protests (see Table 1)

**Table 1.** Protests in sub-Saharan Africa[8] (2008–13).

| Country | Year | Description | Magnitude |
|---|---|---|---|
| Angola | 2011–13 | Youth movement inspired by Arab Spring protests against President dos Santos's 32-year rule; in 2012 veterans demanding social benefits. | Various journalists and rappers imprisoned. |
| Benin | 2011 | Youth and opposition protests against purportedly fraudulent re-election of President Boni Yayi. | Hundreds of demonstrators. |
| Botswana | 2011 | Trade union strike, high school students riot. | 90,000 workers in strike. |
| Burkina Faso | 2011 | Student protests, soldiers' mutiny and various popular protests against rising living costs and government impunity; President Compaoré removed in 2014. | 5 students and 7 others killed, hundreds of injuries. |
| Cameroon | 2008, 2012 | Youth protests and riots against President Biya's constitutional changes to stay in power; rising cost of living. | 'Worst unrest in 15 years', at least 7 people killed. |
| Côte d'Ivoire | 2010, 2011 | During 2010–11 Ivoirian crisis, several peaceful demonstrations, and protests against Gbagbo. | 45,000 women protesting on Women's Day, thousands of protesters. |
| Djibouti | 2011 | Student riots and Arab Spring-inspired protests against President Guelleh. | 30,000 protesters, 2 killed, 300 arrested. |
| Gabon | 2009, 2011–12 | Anti-government protests and youth–police clashes since Ali Bongo, son of long-time president Omar Bongo Ondimba, was declared winner of 2009 elections (which had been met by large-scale protests with 10,000 protesters). | 2012: 1 dead, dozens injured, 57 arrests, 'worst [upheaval] since rioting after the 2009 election'. |
| Guinea | 2007, 2009, 2011–13 | Protests, riots and demonstrations against ex-President Conté (2007), ex-President Camara (2009) and President Condé (2011–13). | 50,000 demonstrators, at least 120 killed in 2007, 157 in 2009, 12 in 2013. |
| Lesotho | 2011 | Anti-government protests by union activists, youth groups, NGOs. | Thousands of demonstrators. |
| Liberia | 2011 | Election-related protests. | Hundreds of protesters, 4 killed by police. |
| Madagascar | 2009 | Severe political violence between followers of then-opposition leader Rajoelina and state forces supporting ex-President Ravalomanana. | 1000 wounded, 130 dead. |
| Malawi | 2011 | Anti-government protests by the 'Concerned Citizens' coalition, riots in response to 'the worst economic crisis since independence'. | 19 protesters killed, 275 arrests. |
| Mauritania | 2011–12 | Series of largely peaceful protests (after Arab Spring-inspired self-immolation), diverse demands. | Thousands of demonstrators, 2 killed. |
| Mauritius | 2011 | Youth protests against corruption. | 3000 protesters. |
| Mozambique | 2008, 2010, 2012 | Food riots, increasing cost of bus fares, phasing out of subsidies, protests often organised by youth groups. | 2010: at least 12 killed, 400 injured, 300 arrests. |
| Niger | 2009 | Protests against President Tandja's attempt to remove term limits. | Tens of thousands of demonstrators. |
| Nigeria | 2012 | 'Occupy Nigeria' protests against fuel subsidy removal. | Tens of thousands of demonstrators, at least 10 killed. |
| Senegal | 2008, 2011–12 | Various social movements and youth protests against ex-President Wade's efforts to remain in power, 'Y'en A Marre' movement. | Protests with 3000–5000 demonstrators, 3 killed, Wade voted out of office in 2012. |
| South Africa | 2004–13 | Protests over land and housing issues, poor public service delivery, authoritarian governance and political decisions, 2 million people per year taking to the streets since 2008 (Alexander 2012). | E.g. Marikana strike, with approx. 47 strikers killed by security forces. |

**Table 1.** Continued.

| Country | Year | Description | Magnitude |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sudan | 2012, 2013 | Protests in Khartoum against austerity plans; repeated student movements against al-Bashir regime. | Thousands of demonstrations, 4 'mysterious killings' of students. |
| Swaziland | 2011, 12 | Anti-government and anti-monarchy protests. | Up to 5000 protesters. |
| Tanzania | 2011 | Chadema opposition protests against government in Arusha. | 9 injured, 2 killed. |
| Togo | 2012 | 'Save Togo' movement against the Gnassingbé family's 45-year rule. | Thousands of protesters, 30 injured. |
| Uganda | 2009, 2011 | Kayunga riots (2009): conflict between kingdom of Buganda and Ugandan central government; Walk-to-Work Protests (2011) against high fuel prices and Museveni's National Resistance Movement regime. | Kayunga: 27 killed, more than 600 arrested. W2W: Thousands of demonstrators, 5 killed, 360 arrests. |

– substantial in terms of numbers of protesters and casualties, with regard to the diversity of social categories involved and concerning the numerous addressed issues. While many protests can be said to have failed to deliver tangible improvements for those who have taken to the streets, others have pressured regimes to the point where they gave in to popular demands, e.g. in Senegal.

The salience of the phenomenon leaves little doubt for the necessity for research. At the same time, the analytical problems concerning the study of contemporary protests are manifold and largely unresolved. In this first part of the article, I address the following concerns: the choice of concepts, methods of data gathering, and theoretical backgrounds and foci in academic debates. In the second part, I suggest the notion of crystallisation as a conceptual tool for the analysis of contentious politics in Africa and beyond.

## Concepts: the buzz about social movements

Charles Tilly (2004, 474) has underlined that 'conceptual choices lead to different methods, materials, explanations, and treatments of evidence.' Whether one takes the concept of social movements, contentious politics, protests or collective action, for instance, shapes our analytical lenses significantly. The overlapping of dissimilar phenomena in African contexts, such as non-violent demonstrations and violent clashes with police, or long-standing social movements and instantaneous riots, further complicates these conceptual choices (Branch and Mampilly 2015; El-Kenz 1996). It is therefore somewhat surprising that 'social movements' have become a sort of umbrella concept in African Studies – some of its proponents even seem intent on superseding the timeworn civil society controversy (cf. Brandes and Engels 2011, 9; see also Ellis and van Kessel 2009b; Larmer 2010; Macamo 2011; Pommerolle 2010; Veit 2011). Curiously, the discussion has leapfrogged any reflection about conceptual alternatives ever since Mamdani and Wamba-dia-Wamba's (1995) foundational 'African Studies in Social Movements and Democracy', throughout its revival by Ellis and van Kessel's (2009b) 'Movers and Shakers', Dwyer and Zeilig's (2012) 'African Struggles Today' and despite several academic journals' special issues on social movements, a term whose conceptual foundations are surprisingly shaky.

Mahmood Mamdani (1995a, 1995b), whose pioneering work still enjoys the status of the 'hitherto most influential [contribution] on social movements in Africa in general'

(Brandes and Engels 2011, 3), for example, sees social movements 'as the crystallisation of group activity autonomous of the state' (Mamdani 1995b, 7). While I will take up the valuable notion of crystallisation later on, this succinct definition is debatable for several reasons. On rather formal grounds, it makes no further specifications of such group activity and risks defining *any* group activity crystallising in autonomy of the state as a social movement. More importantly, however, it seems hard to draw the line between the state and the opposed social movement to define the latter's autonomy. Social movements may draw from and depend on resources and networks that transgress or transcend the boundaries between society and state. Local Councils in Uganda, for instance, though a foundational element of the state, have been used as an infrastructure to gather popular support for a variety of causes, including anti-government protests.[1] Finally, the definition intertwines the 'group' with their 'activity'. What happens if others join the activity from outside the group, which is all but rare in social movements (Maccatory, Oumarou, and Poncelet 2010; Zghal 1995)? As much as scholars insist that the social movement concept implies no homogeneity, there are few possibilities to think of social movements as non-homogeneous when they are defined as social entities doing the same thing.

Della Porta and Diani's (2006) canonical definition is indeed more appreciative of the heterogeneity of social movements, which the authors define as 'interlocking networks of groups, social networks and individuals, [connected by] a shared collective identity that tries to prevent or promote societal change by non-institutionalized tactics.'[2] Yet, by considering 'non-institutional tactics' a defining feature, the authors neglect the manifold interdependences between formal and informal institutions. Though particularly noteworthy in African contexts, this hints more generally at the fallacious tendency of mainstream political science to analyse politics in terms of formal organisations rather than as an interaction of both formal and informal processes (see Migdal 2001). 'Identity' has moreover rightly been criticised as a simplification of the dynamic, often indeterminate process of identification, especially in relation to ethnicity (Brubaker 2004; Brubaker and Cooper 2000).

What I am obviously grappling with here is how to better account for the fuzzy, 'fragmented nature of contemporary social movements' (Bayat 2005, 905). Can we talk of social movements if they defy rigid boundaries between state and society, between institutionalised and non-institutionalised tactics, and if they escape clear definitions of bounded groups and identities? Bayat (2005, with reference to Anderson [1983]) answers in the affirmative – provided that one accentuates the 'imagined solidarity' that turns social movements into a negotiated entity:

> An 'imagined solidarity' is [ … ] one which is forged spontaneously among different actors who come to a consensus by imagining, subjectively constructing, common interests and shared values between themselves. But such imagining by the different fragments is by no means carried out in homogeneous fashion. Just as in the case of the nation which is imagined differently by 'its fragments', social movements' actors also imagine common aims and objectives not in the same fashion, but differentially. Fragmented actors therefore render imagined solidarity, the social movement, a negotiated entity. Theirs is a contested imagining. (Bayat 2005, 904)

As I will elaborate in the second part of the article, one can push this approach further: the process of an originally fragmented or fluid political sphere crystallising into a legible constellation of political entities is not alone a product of those directly involved. It happens in

dialectic relation with their environments, including the media, the public and even in relation with us social scientists – which brings us to the next concern of data.

## Data: the search for the phenomenon

What data do researchers use for their analysis on social movements and how do they make sense of it? I will concentrate here on two quite different research strategies and their respective problems: large-scale meta-analyses of news articles, and single case studies based on ethnographic fieldwork. Meta-analyses of news reports need to distinguish the news *about* the protests from the protests per se – the two are obviously not the same thing. This is a glaring omission in Ortiz et al.'s (2013, 5) 'World protests 2006–2013', for example, which analyses 843 protest events and interprets online news reports as exhaustive and accurate information. The study finds 'a steady increase in the overall number of protests every year', a higher prevalence in higher-income countries and the majority of violent riots occurring in low-income countries (*Ibid.*, 5). It ignores thousands of small-scale protests that are less attractive for online news coverage – in Senegal, the Ministry of the Interior apparently registered 3295 demonstrations in 2011 alone (according to Harsch 2013). Even the case of Guinea is entirely absent from the list, despite its numerous large-scale protests that have ushered in a new era of politics since 2007 (McGovern 2008; Philipps 2013a). Besides such selection bias, Ortiz et al. (2013, 12) also seem to adopt a journalistic jargon, writing that 'The World Awakes' with an 'overwhelming demand [for] "real democracy"' – a concept whose ambiguity, and more importantly, whose frequent instrumentalisation in global politics, is nowhere discussed (*Ibid.*, 5).[3]

The example of Ortiz et al. (2013) finally points to a more important, general concern: since news media distil the meanings of contentious politics, they are an essential part of the protests they describe (see Koopmans 2004; Wisler and Tackenberg 2003). Across the globe, media are embedded in political networks and journalists may often have a personal stake in covering protests either as 'criminal riots' or as 'pro-democracy demonstrations'. Anti-government activists and social movement leaders, just like senior police officers and politicians, tend to have 'their' journalists within reach, for they are utterly aware that today's contentious politics are only effective if they spread the right kinds of images, appeal to shared narratives and reach a larger public, especially beyond their national borders. The presumably external foreign observers of protests thereby become a key audience: close enough to sympathise but too far away to capture the subterranean dynamics of protests, they are targeted through news media that couch protests in trans-locally familiar terms and co-produce its signification.

In return, the televised images and media narratives then reflect back onto the phenomenon. Like in many other countries, young men in Guinea-Conakry have given their neighbourhoods the names of prominent global war scenes they see on television: Baghdad, Gaza, Kabul, Tora Bora; since 2011, the label Benghazi has been added. Many of the capital city's young men use these names to tap into the fame of global media attention in an almost-forgotten nation (were it not for the recent Ebola outbreak) and associate their protests against the government with a diffuse rebellion of the powerless against the powerful, a struggle that is as much inspired by global news narratives and transnational youth culture as by national politics. Fieldwork then, as another method of data gathering,

has to go beyond an exploration of the immediate local context, and needs to follow the trans-local relations that produce the meanings and effects of contestation.

Most empirical literature on social movements in Africa is based on empirical fieldwork in single case studies. Mamdani (1995a, 611) has avidly advocated an empirically grounded study on the 'everyday activities' of those involved in a social movement, which is to safeguard research against attributing to social movements the teleological agenda of achieving state consolidation according to Western standards. The methodological problem with ethnographic case studies on protests and social movements is that analysts can hardly distinguish the issue from their specific access to it. Research access is contested and restricted, particularly in regimes with strong security and intelligence apparatuses where interviewees and informants do not easily divulge information that might put them at risk. Whom a researcher can talk to, what can be found out and what remains concealed, depends crucially on the researcher's position and active positioning in the politics that he or she seeks to analyse: what are the researcher's networks, what language(s) does he or she speak, what can interlocutors expect from an interview with him or her? Who is likely to trust him or her and confide what is going on below the surface of the official storylines? In short, the data's confidentiality requires particular interpersonal trust between the researcher and his or her informants, and this has two important methodological ramifications.

First, and more generally, since research access to relevant networks is contingent on political positioning, the researcher is rarely as external to the phenomenon as conventional academic principles suggest. Second, and more specifically with regard to qualitative case studies, selection biases in fieldwork loom large (see Macamo 2011, 50). Confronted with the above-mentioned heterogeneity of protesters, researchers inevitably analyse those categories, networks and ideas that they can access. Concomitantly, they tend to omit those that they have trouble connecting with. This partly explains why non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and outspoken activists are more prominent objects of study than the supposedly anonymous and unorganised urban poor (see Branch and Mampilly 2015; see also next section). Moreover, since there are usually few empirical case studies on the same protest movement, selection biases are rarely detected. Individual accounts may implicitly suggest that they depict an overall phenomenon when they only consider a very small part of it, which in turn makes researchers' framings powerful for how the underlying problem is defined and reacted to, also outside academic circles. Theory formation therefore needs to self-reflexively consider the implication of the researcher in the processes she analyses. The crystallisation approach presented in the final section of the article will explicitly do so.

## Theory: the quest for African specificity

Recent theoretical contributions on protests and social movements in Africa have focused on the question of whether there is anything specifically 'African' about them, and sometimes struggle with considerable uncertainty. Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2009, 42), for instance, elaborate at length on the various interpretations of contentious politics in Western settings (breakdown theories of collective action, resource mobilisation theory and so on), only to conclude that 'it is not clear whether this is the case in Africa too.' But what does 'Africa' entail anyway? While Dwyer and Zeilig (2012, 47) note the differences

between social movements in South Africa and the comparatively neglected rest of the continent (see also Ballard, Habib, and Valodia 2006), Branch and Mampilly (2015, 4) argue for an explicitly continental approach that also includes North Africa. Meanwhile, a relative consensus seems to have emerged on the transnationality and internationality of social movements in Africa. Although most authors assertively point out that African social movements are by no means 'simply the product of global pressures and circumstances' (Larmer 2010, 258), most tend to situate Africa's twenty-first century protests in a historical context of increased presence of international donors and NGOs on the continent since the 1990s (see Brandes and Engels 2011; Ellis and van Kessel 2009a, 4; Larmer 2010; Pommerolle 2010; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans 2009; Veit 2011). In their introduction to their edited volume, Ellis and van Kessel (2009a, 4–8) highlight almost exclusively international and transnational factors: the mobilising effect of 'the international human-rights discourse', the importance of 'funding from external donors' and the ideological inputs from diasporas are seen as 'the most prominent elements of numerous African social movements'.[4] Accordingly, the central theoretical concept that Ellis and van Kessel (2009a, 6–7) suggest for the analysis of social movements in Africa is the notion of *extraversion* (Bayart 2000), designating African political actors' access to resources through international and transnational networks.

Pommerolle's (2010) article 'The extraversion of protest' elaborates this concept. Pommerolle (265) argues that donors and international development institutions have introduced their modalities of protest as a 'constituent part' of national politics. Donor-funded workshops on democracy and human rights, for instance, proclaim and foster a non-confrontational ideal of activism. The mushrooming professional networks between NGOs, the state and donor-funded institutions discourage radical forms of protests and, as Pommerolle (274) writes, conflate 'spaces of state control and spaces of protest'. This conflation leads her to hypothesise 'that transnational mobilisations contribute to a reforming authoritarianism [and] to the implementation of reforms which depoliticise social and political issues and reproduce the established order' (277). Given that 'transnational networks in Africa' are continuously increasing, Pommerolle (276) discards the criticism that the extraversion approach neglects 'the importance of other types of actors (peasants, the young urban unemployed, mine- and plantation-workers and others)'.

Yet, recent upheavals across the continent seem to contradict Pommerolle's argument: they were highly confrontational, rarely relied on external endorsement and often gravitated around local concerns despite global causes. In the case of West African social movements against the high cost of living, Maccatory, Oumarou, and Poncelet (2010, 347, 356) observe that the '"protest" organisations were fairly distinct from the now large numbers of mainly development-oriented NGOs', and that 'transnational networks [ … ] do not seem to have had any significant effect on the dynamics of the protests and the interaction with governments.' Unemployed urban youth were one of the central forces in recent social movements (see Diouf 1996, 2003; El-Kenz 1996; Philipps 2013a), and labour issues often played an important role (Alexander 2012; Dwyer and Zeilig 2012; Habib and Opoku-Mensah 2009). These empirical objections are strongly related to theoretical concerns. Indeed, Bayart (2000) originally used the extraversion concept to characterise not political protests but how the state reacts to them – including the political elite's strategic use of democracy discourse to attract international support and development aid. His focus on the state's tactics to preserve its stability despite its glaring dysfunctions is

exemplary for Bayart's overall approach, and, as I would argue, for classic Africanist political sociology in general (e.g. Bayart 1986; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Médard 1982).[5] In that regard, the extraversion concept takes Africanist social movement theory formation right back to the very school of thought that postulated that no social category in African societies was able 'to "breach" and counteract the simultaneous "totalisation" unleashed by the state' (Bayart 1986, 111). To develop a better understanding of social movements in Africa, research needs to explicitly challenge and convincingly confute these perspectives (see, e.g., Meagher 2006; Olivier de Sardan and Le Meur 2009).

The most recent contribution to the debate by Branch and Mampilly (2015) takes an important step in this direction. In *Africa Uprising*, they make a strong case for a historical analysis of African protests (for a similar argument, see Dwyer and Zeilig 2012). Their approach contrasts decidedly with the '"civil society" model primarily derived from the Western experience' (Branch and Mampilly 2015, 7). With reference to Frantz Fanon and Partha Chatterjee, they concentrate on political society, i.e. the urban masses at the margins of society who consistently constitute the majority in demonstrations, but have remained a shadowy figure in narratives of urban popular protest:

> From the colonial period until the present, accounts of protest tend to describe clearly the political parties, labour unions, or student groups that were involved, only then to casually remark that tens of thousands of people took to the streets but without giving any idea as to who they were, why they were protesting, or what they sought to bring about. The urban underclass's participation in protest is typically seen as controlled by the elite leadership, autonomous only when protest turns violent, and even then its actions are dismissed as mere looting, rioting, or the rage of a shapeless crowd. (*Ibid.*, 19–20)

According to Branch and Mampilly, the urban underclass, though exceptionally heterogeneous, shares a position in society from where the entire system seems set up against them, and a position in protests where the 'horizon of political action is now: it is all or nothing.' While political society thus aims at revolution and immediate gains for the margins, civil society hopes to further improve its standing through state-administered reforms. And yet, the two categories, which the authors insightfully analyse as a product of colonial rule, urgently depend on one another for protest movements to succeed. This creates dilemmas concerning both the political goals and the different repertoires of contention, and renders analytical divisions 'between political and economic protest, between demonstrations and rioting, between violence and non-violence' highly unproductive (*Ibid.*, 7). Social movements, protests and riots are simply too entangled in a context where different networks of political and civil society constantly compete and negotiate over the nature of political change. This argument is key to the crystallisation framework to be developed in the second part of this article.

Before this, let us summarise part one, which reviewed the recent debate on social movements and protests in African Studies. First, the usefulness of 'social movements' as the dominant conceptual frame was questioned, given the social movements' fragmented and contested nature that most definitions do not account for. Second, I addressed the methodological difficulties of gathering representative data, both through macro-analyses of news reports and through qualitative fieldwork. Emphasis was put on the need to consider the constraints of using journalistic sources and to reflect on researchers' specific access to, and implication in, the processes they describe. Third, the theoretical focus on transnational and international factors and

the extraversion concept, borrowed from classic Africanist political theory, were shown to be empirically and theoretically problematic. The notion of *crystallisation* will not entirely solve these problems, but it should provide constructive cues to address them. More than anything, it should serve as an analytical toolbox for the messier and often ignored processes of contentious politics where highly heterogeneous actors, histories and practices crystallise into purportedly homogeneous movements. Before entering the theoretical debate on crystallisation, I wish to provide some illustrative examples for such intricacies (for similar evidence, see Abbink and van Kessel 2005; Christensen and Utas 2008; Diouf 1996, 2003; El-Kenz 1996; Honwana and de Boeck 2005; Utas 2012; Vigh 2010).

## Everyday politics: exclusion, inclusion, confusion

During the past six years I have tried to understand the modalities of youth participation in protests in Conakry, Guinea and Kampala, Uganda. Although many youth seem to join protests individually and spontaneously,[6] both cases left little doubt about the existence of institutionalised protest networks. The networks I studied connected young men, often-times from the urban margins, to central political actors including political parties, police, unions, student organisations and individual politicians. Along the Route Le Prince in Guinea's capital Conakry, for instance, a stretch of neighbourhoods that then-President Lansana Conté labelled the 'Axis of Evil', opposition parties regularly paid local youth formations, so-called staffs, clans and gangs, for rallying and mobilising the youth from their neighbourhoods for protests and demonstrations. Unemployed youth were promised prospective careers in the army once the government were to be over-thrown (Philipps 2013a, 2013b). On the government side, many members of the pro-government youth staff 'Power' enjoyed careers in cocaine trafficking for the cartel of Lansana Conté's son, and have in turn supported the regime in place. When Conté died in 2008, the new president and military junta leader Dadis Camara explicitly sought the support of what Branch and Mampilly (2015) would call political society: 'If they call you thugs', Camara exclaimed at a political rally in 2009, 'me, too, I will call myself a thug!' (Philipps 2013a, 90). The applauding youth groups in the audience subsequently shared the funds that Camara had given to them for their support, and only one week later, aligned with the opposition to participate in the pro-democracy protests that eventually contributed to the military junta regime's collapse.

Uganda's opposition groups and government institutions also employ a vast number of intermediate groups to organise the urban masses of political society in their favour. These intermediate bodies include student organisations, journalists, NGOs, youth associations and criminal entities. Some of these groups, such as the *Mugati* Party based at Makerere University, can be used by any political side willing to pay money for political manipulation, such as tearing down election posters or spreading rumours. Rank-and-file members of Ki-Face, Uganda's supposedly largest criminal squad, confided that their branch leader ('a real gentleman who drives nice cars') is in touch with politicians. They attack or protect these politicians in protests and election campaign rallies, often-times without knowing them, or knowing them only through a photo that the branch leader shows them beforehand. Social movements such as the Save Mabira Forest campaign in 2007 are riddled with such subterranean politics. When the Ugandan government

announced plans to give 7100 hectares of Mabira Central Forest Reserve to the Sugar Corporation of Uganda Limited (SCOUL), various activist groups organised a broad counter-movement against deforestation. It climaxed in what observers called the 'largest protest rally in Uganda's history' – and eventually in an 'Anti-Indian Riot' (Child 2009, 247, 251). SCOUL was associated with the Indian-owned Mehta Group and many Ugandans took the Mabira case as an example of the Indian community's economic dominance in their country. Hönig (2014, 68) argues 'the Save Mabira agitation provided cover for *free-riders* who launched attacks on Ugandan Asians' (my emphasis). My interviews with an informal organiser of the Mabira protests in Kampala however intimated that the racist agitation was deliberately concocted and incited to attract the urban masses.

The linkages between politicians and the urban masses point to an everyday reality of politics where the urban margins' general exclusion oscillates with their partial inclusion. Urban lumpenproletarians, even though they objectively face the entire system set up against them, may nonetheless seek, and find, some opportunity to prey upon it. This possibility of benefiting from the oppressive system makes their political position, and political alliances in general, very unstable. Several of my informants have switched sides between the government and the opposition numerous times. Some work for both in parallel. In Kampala, for instance, a young police spy told me that he collaborates with the same opposition networks that he is supposed to monitor. When the police refuse to pay him and he urgently needs money, he asks protesters to assemble. He then 'quells' the protests with the money that the police quickly disburse. Conakry's staffs, clans and gangs may support opposed political sides in protests, and, while some may see protests as an opportunity to loot shops and get something to eat or sell, others participate because they believe in the revolution and a better tomorrow. But these different groups and individuals still congregate in everyday life, bound together by the ubiquitous ghetto pragmatism that everyone has got to hustle – what does it matter where the money comes from? Who is to judge the other? In everyday life, then, social and political boundaries often eclipse, dissolving into networks and constellations that often bely the most basic theoretical models of politics and political conflict: in Guinea, ex-minister Justin Morel Junior hangs out with members of the downtrodden underclass; in Uganda, former Ugandan top intelligence official David Sejusa became a radical opposition politician overnight. In either context, my informants inevitably struggled with how to position themselves politically, for there was little to orient them. Who represented the state and who were its real opponents? Where was real power located anyway – on the national or the international level? And since the answers to these questions are evidently not clear-cut, uncertainty constituted the very context in which politics took place (see Simone 1998, 2008a; Utas 2012). Yet, rather than treating such uncertainty as a social fact and studying its effects, political scientists have often preferred to exploit the absence of unambiguous narratives and impose their own interpretations of how African politics 'actually' works, sometimes notoriously flattening the diverse and complex political landscapes in Africa to the level of what 'western common sense interprets as "corruption" of the State or "political decay"' (Bayart 1993, 241). It is in this academic and empirical context that I suggest the concept of crystallisation for the analysis of social movements, protests and riots.

## Discussion: protest movements as crystallisation processes

To develop a better understanding of how social movements, protests and riots evolve and intertwine, I suggest framing them as crystallisation processes, focusing on how they emerge from everyday politics. I use the concept of crystallisation in the figurative sense that protest movements turn opaque and hybrid political networks into 'concrete, defined, or clarified' entities,[7] if only situationally. I draw on the work of Gilbert Simondon (1958, 2007; Combes 2013), who uses crystallisation as an example for what he terms *individuation*, i.e. the process of emerging as something distinguishable. Simondon's work helps us understand protest movements as processes rather than entities, and as crystallised diversities rather than collective agents. It also sheds light on their emergence from what he calls a *metastable* milieu.

Before a protest emerges, its diverse elements reside in what Simondon calls a metastable pool of potential. This pool of potential includes not only the people, ideas and political networks that are obviously relevant for protests to emerge, but the interrelated totality of things past and present: the legacy of colonialism and Structural Adjustment Programmes, mobile phone technology, the past eviction of market vendors, current exchange rates, the health of the President etc. In the process of individuation, these elements, heterogeneous as they may be, rearrange and solidify into a distinguishable movement of people who display symbols of unity. They crystallise as collectives in relation to an out-group (Simondon 2007), such as the state, which also acquires a bounded identity in the process, usually through police action and protection of the current political order. A staple in social psychology (see Tajfel 2010) is that the more conflictive the relationship between two sides, the more each perceives itself as internally homogenous. Demonstrators, just like the policemen on the opposite side, 'become entrained in each other's emotions and bodily rhythms, and caught up in a common focus of attention', feeling 'solidarity and intersubjectivity' and thereby building up 'strength, confidence, and enthusiasm for whatever the group was doing' (Collins 2008, 19). Indeed, even those who otherwise epitomise the margins of society can spontaneously join the movement (see El-Kenz 1996, 42–45).

The upshot here is to see protest movements as processes that emerge from multiple contexts (historical, technological, economic, political, demographic, international etc.). Their apparent homogeneity should not blind analysts to the heterogeneity they emerge from. Protests do not render formerly hidden structures visible. Rather, they restructure a heterogeneity that cannot be grasped in its entirety, and realise its inherent potential to coalesce and crystallise into a different state. Calling this crystallisation a social movement, a protest or a riot, or any other substantialist term inadvertently 'absorbs into itself the [multiple relations] that gave rise to it, thus obscuring it' (Combes 2013, 16). That is neither good nor bad, but part of the crystallisation process. Through external observation and commentary, the crystallised phenomenon becomes what it appears to be. Academics obviously play a significant role in it. As soon as a protest emerges, social scientists and other 'experts' feature in radio and TV shows, write op-eds in newspapers, shape social media discussions and define the issues at stake. Innumerable issues crystallise into specific political concerns. Analytical commentary thereby feeds back into the crystallisation processes it describes. Theoretical models that take the crystallised 'social movement' or 'protest' or 'riot' as their starting point thus risk committing three analytical errors:

neglecting their own entanglement in the processes they describe, mistaking the parts they know for the whole they cannot know and treating crystallised entities as more or less separate from the opaque contexts that they emerge from. In contrast, Simondon's theory of individuation points precisely at these contexts, and thereby provides theoretical tools to reconnect current scholarship on protests in sub-Saharan Africa with more general concerns in Africanist urban sociology.

For Simondon's metaphor of the metastable milieu from which crystallisation processes emerge, is an apt analogy to describe African urban dynamics and politics, marked by a particular connectivity across divides, where 'everyone's life is so implicated in the lives of others' (Simone 2008b, 80), and where social heterogeneity, interconnectedness and acute economic pressures entail that individuals who are eking out a living often must spontaneously take chances in following social connections without knowing where they may take them. This induces a particular potentiality for homogeneous collectives to rapidly emerge from highly heterogeneous backgrounds – and to quickly fade back into heterogeneity again. Classic Africanist political sociology has been intrigued by this metastability. Chabal and Daloz (1999), for instance, analyse how 'disorder' stabilises politics and becomes a political instrument. Bayart (1993, 225) highlights a stable political order that is simultaneously under constant threat, making politics a 'matter of life and death' – notably without disturbing the 'equilibrium for the regimes'. In a similar manner, accounts of political upheavals (e.g. Cruise O'Brien 1996; El-Kenz 1996) have often evoked the idea that protests do not really bring about political change (Branch and Mampilly 2015, 5), as if they left no traces whatsoever. Such ahistorical stances have rightly been criticised as essentialist (Meagher 2006) and ignorant of 'the process of popular resistance' (Mamdani 1995a, 611). The cases of Guinea and Uganda help contradict this image in different ways. The 2007 Guinean general strike was followed by the appointment of a new prime minister, Lansana Kouyaté. Though Kouyaté's power was severely curtailed by the regime in place, and although the political-economic situation remained largely the same, the 2007 movement constituted a 'major transformation of political life' (McGovern 2008, 125–126, my translation). Proving the effectiveness of popular anti-government movements, it inspired subsequent protests that led up to the country's democratic elections in 2010. Uganda, on the other hand, would be an ideal example for the presumed incapacity of protests to bring about political change: the 2009 riots were only rhetorically reacted to – the promised youth fund never reached the target population – and the Walk-to-Work protests in 2011 mainly resulted in an increased militarisation of the police force in an effort to keep potential urban demonstrators in check (Branch and Mampilly 2015, 145–150), as evidenced by the recent 2016 elections. Though these are clearly not the political changes that protesters had envisioned in 2011, they do constitute changes, and remind us that the effects of protest movements are just as heterogeneous as the contexts from which they emerge. The most vivid example in this regard is the so-called Arab Spring, which emerged from a political context that seemed unlikely to produce large-scale upheavals: 'beginning with a very small seed', i.e. Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, it grew across and beyond the region, with 'each already formed layer serving as the structuring basis of the next' (Sauvanargues and Roffe 2013, 59). These succeeding individuations followed no teleological, computable dynamic, and have no final form. The current situation in Syria, the rise of the so-called Islamic State and the refugee migration to Europe are

proof of this: though directly related to the previous protest movements, they were not premeditated, and now constitute the metastable milieu from which new phenomena emerge.

While such a perspective may easily be misread as indifferent vis-à-vis the fate of social movements and as neglecting political agency (cf. Kaplan 1994), I humbly suggest two ways of reading it the other way around: first as a stimulus for rethinking political agency in a context of the virtual, where things 'go viral' in ever shorter time spans (see Nahon and Hemsley 2013), and second as an impetus to conceive history as truly open-ended. First, as political thought and agency increasingly take place in the virtual world – with the Internet as the prime example of a metastable pool of potential – both social movement scholars and activists need to make sense of how the virtual realm enables connections between disparate heterogeneous elements and makes them crystallise into definite political events. Second, at a time when widespread upheavals provide ample evidence of history's open-endedness, the crystallisation approach not only emphasises that anything can happen. In a post-colonial sense, it also accounts for how the past constantly re-emerges in new ways in the present.

## Notes

1. Various interviews with informants, Kampala 2013–14, including lower-level Local Council staff.
2. This definition is used or referred to by Ellis and van Kessel (2009a), Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans (2009) as well as Brandes and Engels (2011).
3. For a similar narrative, see Schifferin and Kircher-Allen (2012). For a substantial caveat in this regard, see Schaffer (2000).
4. The only empirical aspect they raise without referring to international and transnational networks is, ironically, the 'embedded religious element associated with many social movements in Africa' (Ellis and van Kessel 2009a, 11).
5. For a similar critique of African Studies, see Mamdani (1992, 1995a).
6. I was unable to access and interview the urban youth who spontaneously joined protest movements. This significant and problematic methodological blind spot seems as self-evident as it seems difficult to overcome. Even Branch and Mampilly (2015), despite their theoretical focus on the anonymous urban masses, have surprisingly little primary data to share.
7. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, crystallisation in figurative terms signifies 'the action or an act of becoming concrete, defined, or clarified'.
8. This list is intended to provide a superficial and non-exhaustive overview based on online news articles; the risks associated with using such data are considered below. See also Branch and Mampilly's (2015, 68–69) list of 105 major protests on the African continent from 2005 to 2014.

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# The Metastable City and the Politics of Crystallisation: Protesting and Policing in Kampala

Joschka Philipps and Jude Kagoro

**Abstract:** When protests break out in downtown Kampala they tend to transform a fluid urban environment into bounded political camps, and myriad ambiguous concerns into comparatively clear-cut political issues. This article traces this process and conceptualises Kampala's urban politics as a politics of crystallisation: as attempts to structure highly fluid dynamics into something concrete. The article is based on ethnographic research amongst opposition activists and the police forces. Both seek to activate political boundaries and make people gravitate towards their respective side. But in line with the fluidity of urban everyday life, they also work and collaborate across these boundaries. The national regime and the opposition thus function not as permanent, stable structures, but as processes, as fields of gravity whose emergence is incited and inhibited, financed, and policed. Drawing on Gilbert Simondon's theory of individuation and AbdouMaliq Simone's work on urbanity, this analytical framework offers a dynamic reading of urban contentious politics in general, and a reinterpretation of the paradoxes of power in African politics in particular.

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Hybrid regimes embody "paradoxes of power," Tripp (2010: 9) argues; they exhibit divergent realities "depending on what processes or actors one is analyzing." As Tripp shows, Uganda is an exemplary case in this regard. On first sight, for instance, the Ugandan state, dominated for over 30 years by the National Resistance Movement (NRM) under President Museveni, seems extremely stable. Internationally backed as a geostrategic ally of the United States, nationally supported by a wealthy business elite, equipped with a massive security apparatus (Kagoro 2014), the state institutions and the governing party are fully intertwined in an intricate political patronage system that secures the overall status quo. At the same time, however, there is a widespread sense of instability within "the political matrix in Uganda," which is "fluid and constantly changing," resulting in a variety of frictions within the NRM and indicating that "the biggest threats to the NRM's power emanate from those closest to Museveni" (Tripp 2010: 64, 56). Instability also emerges from outside the regime. The Kayunga riots in 2009, the Walk-to-Work protests in 2011, and the deadly clashes between opposition supporters and police during the 2016 election campaigns have manifested profound tensions and frustrations among large parts of the urban population, who feel marginalised from the supposedly ubiquitous national development and enraged by widespread corruption. And yet, to add another paradox, "corruption" and "Big Man politics" (Utas 2012) also tended to be intricately engrained in the very dynamics of popular resistance (Philipps 2016).

Africanist political sociology is shot through with such contradictions, or, one should specify: paradoxes and contradictions have become a prominent way for academics to frame African political and social dynamics. The discussion on African youth was particularly explicit in this regard, with key titles conceiving youth as *Makers and Breakers* (Honwana and de Boeck 2005b), *Vanguard or Vandals* (Abbink and van Kessel 2005), and *Hooligans and Heroes* (Perullo 2005), highlighting that "children and youth are extremely difficult to pin down analytically [because] they often occupy more than one position at once" (Honwana and de Boeck 2005a: 3; see also Philipps 2014). But even the foundational discussion in the 1980s and 1990s on "the African state" (e.g. Médard 1982; Bayart 1993; Chabal and Daloz 1999) versus an African "civil society" and African social movements (e.g. Harbeson, Rothchild, and Chazan 1994; Mamdani and Wamba-dia-Wamba 1995) have demonstrated profusely how divergent, heterogeneous, and sometimes contradictory the realities are that emerge from African polities in the academic disciplines that reflect on them. In that empirical

and academic context, Tripp (2010: 9-10) finds it problematic that "the limitations of social science […] make embracing two contradictory realities at the same time nearly impossible, [when] that is what hybrid regimes require of us."

In this paper, which focuses on protests and policing in Kampala, we hope to provide a theoretical-methodological framework that makes embracing contradictory realities easier.[1] Based on the work of French philosopher Gilbert Simondon (Combes 2013; Simondon 1958, 1989, 1995), the key idea is to think of realities not in terms of "objects and substances" (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 25) – for contradictions become problematic when one "thing" also appears to be something else – but in terms of crystallisation processes: as solid forms emerging from a fluid environment. Such a perspective traces politics in dynamic terms, examining how different actors – we refer to them as "political entrepreneurs" (Tilly 2003: 34) – work on different political realities as projects: how they construe and scheme political stability or instability, how they mobilise popular support for regime sovereignty or for anti-government protests, and how they generally create contours in a fluid political field by crafting in-groups and out-groups.

We will elaborate this perspective in three steps. The first section outlines the fluid urban environment as a political context, taking the case of Kisekka Market, a market for spare car parts in downtown Kampala. At Kisekka, shopkeepers, hustlers, police spies, and middlemen are oftentimes unaware of who supports the opposition and who the government. While all are fated to interact with one another, politics remains within the realm of the intangible: less a matter of fixed and known identities than of dynamic and unknown identifications (see Brubaker and Cooper 2000). From this ambiguous context, however, highly unambiguous phenomena can emerge; Kisekka Market, for instance, has long been known (and stigmatised) for its protests and riots. In the second part of this article, we delineate how this transformation happens, or more generally, how political entrepreneurs attempt to turn a highly fluid environment into something concrete by sparking processes that engender political alignments. The third section looks at police, arguing, maybe unconventionally, that the police work through similar dynamics as Kisekka Market. With their fluid borders and vast networks, police

forces extend way into the civilian population and sometimes even overlap with the very opposition networks that they seek to control. Moreover, since even the core of police is fraught with uncertainty and instability, the police are evidently part of what we call the "metastable city" – and to police it, they need to remain flexible and fluid while also creating or maintaining the impression of being a bounded state institution. Politics, from this perspective, is only secondarily about the conflict between a government and an opposition. Prior to this, and more fundamentally, it is about crafting concrete realities, groups, and movements that gather momentum and followers in a context of contingency and uncertainty (see Philipps 2016; Simone 2001; Utas 2012).

This idea draws heavily on the philosophy of Gilbert Simondon (1958, 1989, 1995; see also Combes 2013), currently gaining popularity as a strong inspiration for the work of Gilles Deleuze.[2] Simondon's primary concern is to understand how phenomena emerge as distinguishable and tangible, a process he calls "individuation." This process, he argues, is best understood as an interplay of innumerable factors that are intangible in their diversity and heterogeneity, but gradually develop into definite forms. Specific ideas, for example, emerge from relations between our subconscious and our consciousness that cannot be clearly defined (Lakoff and Johnson 2003); artefacts emerge from a variety of contexts (cultural, material, historical, technological, etc.) that are never conceivable in their entirety (Burke 2002); and, to reiterate Simondon's (1995: 31) key metaphor, solid crystals emerge from a metastable solution that is initially fluid and intangible. African cities have widely been described in terms of similarly intangible relations by authors like Diouf (1996, 2003), Mbembe and Nuttall (2004), Pieterse (2011), and especially AbdouMaliq Simone (1998, 2001, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2008). Simone gives a captivating depiction of what one may call the metastable city: a space of potentiality and spontaneous formations where economic pressures require that large numbers of individuals eking out a living take chances and spontaneously follow cues, intuitions, social ties, and dynamics without knowing where these dynamics may take them. In this context, uncertainty is ubiquitous – as a constraint but also as a resource. As Simone (2008: 22) describes in the case of Bepanda Market in Douala, Cameroon, uncertainty provides

> much room for dissimulation[,] much room for making things seem as if they are real when they are not, or making them real

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2    We also relied on Combes's (2013) English citations of Simondon, translated by Thomas LaMarre.

simply through the sheer mobilizing of money, interest, or sup-
port on the part of those schemed or part of making a scheme.

The metastable city can thus be characterised as a site of crystallisa-
tion, where vague and fluid ambiguities can be turned into concrete
realities that people work and align with to probe into their potentiality
(Cooper and Pratten 2015: 1; see also Newell 2012).[3] In capital cities,
such alignments easily gain an explicitly political character, for it is here
where political power is continuously staged and attacked, solidified and
undermined, through incessant negotiations of reciprocity and solidarity
with the broader urban public (see Bekker and Therborn 2012;
Christensen and Utas 2008; Diouf 1996, 2003; Utas 2012). To illustrate
this rather abstract idea, we enter Kampala's former Kisekka Market as
an exemplary site of metastability.

## The Metastable City: The Case of Kisekka Market

A place of multiple interactions towards uncertain outcomes, of diverse
activities and heterogeneous realities, Kisekka Market illustrates key
features of the metastable city – all the more since it is also associated
with Kampala's most unambiguous protests and riots (see Goodfellow
2013: 6-7). Up until 2014, when the market was demolished in order to
be rebuilt, it is said (though this has not been confirmed) that major
incidents of political violence were concentrated or spread from here. In
2007 and 2008, riots erupted over the lease of the Kisekka Market land
to a retired army colonel (see Goodfellow and Titeca 2012: 267). In Sep-
tember 2009, the Kayunga riots that spread throughout Kampala seemed
to have sprung from Kisekka Market (Baral and Brisset-Foucault 2009;
Branch and Mampilly 2015: 122; Golooba-Mutebi 2011: 10-11; Human
Rights Watch 2010a), and since the massive 2011 Walk-to-Work protests
(see Branch and Mampilly 2015), opposition politicians have frequently
aroused militant support and sparked anti-government protests when
appearing in the vicinity of the market.[4] It is in that context that Kisekka

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3    As a theoretical side note, this inverts how we tend to think about hybridity
     (see Albrecht and Moe 2015): while hybridisation implies, quite controversially,
     that previously bounded entities turn into a less distinct mix, the idea of crys-
     tallisation sees the indistinct mix as a universal primary condition from which
     intelligible entities, i.e. realities, unfold in indeterminate ways.
4    On the riots in Kampala and the institutionalisation of "noise" in Uganda's
     urban politics, see Goodfellow (2013).

Market had come to be known as, and stigmatised as, the "hotbed of rioters and demonstrations in Kampala's central business centre" (Mukisa 2014) – although, to reiterate, these riots were only a tiny fraction of what was going on at Kisekka Market, only a snippet of its diverse incidents, coincidences, and potentials.[5]

Kisekka Market's metastable character also bespeaks the ways in which the past routinely resurfaces in the present. Nowadays centrally located in downtown Kampala, the area of Kisekka Market used to be a swamp in the Kingdom of Buganda. As all land in Buganda, it was the king, the *kabaka*, who owned the land; still today, he is widely considered the Baganda's landlord, an issue that we shall return to below. The market emerged in the late 1980s as an informal trading spot for spare car parts, many of them stolen, exchanged, and sold through opaque networks associated with Uganda's *magendo* underground economy (see Prunier 1983). In the early 1990s, 26 row houses were built to accommodate the ever-increasing workforce, estimated to be "at least 10,000 people" in 2014 (Mukisa 2014), in a narrow space between Nakivubo Channel and Nakivubo Road. Since this space was inaccessible by car, the trades at Kisekka Market relied on middlemen. Hundreds, some say thousands, of brokers would intercept customers arriving by car at Nakivubo Road. They would negotiate a price and get the demanded spare part from inside the market, keeping the difference between the price they charged the customer and what they paid the shop owner. These could be substantial sums, given the high value of the traded goods and the ambiguity of prices. Customers, too, could profit from good deals if they had the right connections and a working knowledge of how Kisekka Market functioned. Much depended on being in the right networks, on being at the right place at the right time, and on being cunning enough to tilt the trades to one's advantage. Such an aura of potentiality was not restricted to the hawkers, brokers, shopkeepers, dealers, mechanics, flows of customers, and hundreds of food vendors: many youth from the city's outskirts would roam the market in search of random possibilities, action, and income, and interlocutors repeatedly emphasised that Kisekka Market attracted Kampala's sharpest and toughest hustlers, widely known as *bayaye* (see Frankland 2007), looking not only for individual deals but for projects, ideas, and formations that

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5    Anna Baral's insights from her ethnographic fieldwork at Kisekka Market have been helpful in this regard, all the more as she problematises rather than retraces the emergence of the market's stigma as a hotbed of rioters.

could yield something.[6] As one informant vaguely put it, "I won't be paying anything, and I will be making something. […] So when something just comes up, you're already *tuned*." The second "something" refers here to riots and protests.

The riots usually responded to previous political events in Kampala: arrests of opposition politicians such as Kizza Besigye and Erias Lukwago, election results that were suspected or proven to be fraudulent, controversial legislative decisions and executive measures (see Goodfellow 2014). Though each instance certainly featured specificities, market vendors described a recurrent pattern of rioting over the past years: a small group would block Nakivubo Road, chant slogans, and sometimes ignite car tires, growing into a sizeable crowd that anticipated the arrival of police. Confrontations ensued between stone-throwing and sometimes looting protesters and anti-riot police using teargas, rubber bullets, batons, and water cannons. Such stand-offs could last several hours, as Kisekka Market's dense architecture made it difficult for police to clear the space of protesters. With an audience of journalists filming the scene and onlookers from the surrounding "arcades" – multilevel buildings with additional shops that feature open facades and balconies – the confrontation between protesters and police was embedded in observation. Since the 2009 Buganda riots, which spread throughout the capital city and to other urban areas in central Uganda (Branch and Mampilly 2015: 122), there was an anticipated potentiality that the upheavals could proliferate beyond the confines of Kisekka Market, both spatially and in the sense of building political momentum as a media phenomenon, through newspapers, television, and radio shows, through the *radio trottoir* (Ellis 1989), and through the Internet. During Uganda's Walk-to-Work protests in 2011, for instance, online video snippets of the police's violent arrest of opposition leader Kizza Besigye became an important factor for the movement gaining further momentum through an increasing focus on police brutality and the right to protest (see Baker 2015; Kagoro 2015a; Goodfellow 2013, 2014).[7] Layer by layer, to draw on the crystallisation metaphor, the scope and significance of the event could thus evolve and change.

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6    Interviews with Julius, 5 April 2014, Wabigalo, Kampala; Marc, 9 March 2014, Kazo, Kampala. The same goes for other markets and similar public spaces (see Frankland 2007). The names of all of Joschka Philipps's interviewees and informants have been anonymised.

7    The incident happened not at Kisekka Market, however, but at the Mulago Hospital roundabout.

Despite the recurrent patterns of rioting, their origins usually remained opaque. Indeed, amongst all interviewees and informants for this research – including opposition activists, police spies and officials, dealers at Kisekka Market, and investigative journalists – consensus was restricted to the claim that the opposition had regularly given out money to spark riots, and that the government had paid money to impede them. Some argued that a clique in Kisekka Market's Block A was in touch with the opposition; others hinted that the Bangawa group, a Baganda youth organisation based in and around Kisekka, were behind the large majority of riots happening at Kisekka. Most said the middlemen started the riots, but many others argued that rioters were mobilised from elsewhere and had no relation to Kisekka Market. Several interviewees argued that the driving force behind the riots was Ganda ethnicity, while others emphasised urban youth unemployment and outrage against government impunity. Throughout the research, several of these claims could be partly verified, while none of them could be decisively refuted. Ambiguity persisted, and started at the individual level of who is who, and who is for whom at Kisekka. According to an anonymous police officer, there were between 500 and 1,000 police spies among the 10,000 workers at Kisekka Market, and this was widely acknowledged by the dealers and brokers themselves.[8] "Government spies are there," one shopkeeper at Kisekka said. He went on:

> The people who came to work focused on getting money are there, everybody is there, [but] we don't *see* – you don't see where is which one or what".[9]

Relationships between shopkeepers and middlemen also oscillated between trust and mistrust. "They are all about survival," one shopkeeper argued of the middlemen, "they work for you but they can also destroy you," citing examples where looting and rioting middlemen had stolen from shopkeepers they had just dealt with hours before.[10] In short, appearances could rarely be taken at face value, and the crucial concern in interactions was not necessarily what was real, but what could crystallise into some beneficial reality to pursue.

Ambiguity also pertained to the one thing that seemed beyond doubt at Kisekka Market: allegiance to the *kabaka*. Though almost every interviewee at Kisekka Market was quick to emphasise that "love for the *kabaka* is strongest here in Kisekka," that "you can be killed for saying

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8    Interview with anonymous police officer, 22 March 2014, Kampala.
9    Interview with Mohamed, 29 March 2014, Kisekka Market, Kampala.
10   Interview with Ian and Daniel, 30 March 2014, Kisekka Market, Kampala.

anything even slightly degrading about the king here" because "we see him as superior in all aspects,"[11] the *kabaka* also remained, as an informant would remark, "a mystery person."[12] Gerald, the informant, said most youth knew little about the king since he did not talk much in public (see also Brisset-Foucault 2013b: 6). "What*ever* we, the youth, know about the king, and whatever we believe in, stays what we believe in," he said. Since the previous *kabaka*, Mutesa II, was exiled under the Obote regime, and the current *kabaka*, Mutebi II, was hindered by police from entering "his" territory of Kayunga District in 2009, the *kabaka*, to many, epitomised the oppressed dignity of the Kingdom of Buganda, which was continuously put down and ridiculed by a corrupt central government (on the same narrative, see Mutibwa 1992, 2008). Love for the *kabaka*, then, could be more "political" than "ethnic," more concerned with marginalisation and government corruption than with Ganda culture, and a vehicle of expression for multiple concerns, emotions, and positions.[13] This was evidenced during the 2009 Kayunga riots, which followed the police's interception of the *kabaka* at Kayunga District: surprisingly, a substantial number of rioters, possibly even the majority, were non-Baganda.[14] Side by side with Baganda youth, they would chant slogans, loot, and attack military forces while some of their peers stopped and beat people who could not "walk like a Muganda" – meaning those who could not identify their lineage within the Baganda clan system. In the midst of highly heterogeneous and contradictory concerns and energies, along with a carnival of disparate forces, ethnicity emerged as an overarching conceptual frame to designate what is largely understood today as an ethnic riot, in which "*the Baganda* took to the streets of Kampala to protest the police action" (Baker 2015: 378; emphasis added).

In a context where such highly contradictory dynamics can coalesce into such consistent representations, Simondon urges analysts not to sever the event from its representation, but to understand the event as a seed, around which further layers of representation crystallise. Since these layers may alter the form and significance of the initial event quite considerably, they are often deliberately crafted to pursue specific politi-

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11    Interviews with Saadiq, 22–24 March 2014, Kisekka Market, Kampala.
12    Interview with Gerald, 22 August 2013, Makindye, Kampala.
13    For a strikingly similar case in Guinea-Conakry, see Philipps (2013a, 2013b).
14    According to numerous interviews with police, less than half of the arrested suspects were Baganda. For instance, conversation with Moses Kafeero, who, at the time, was regional police commander of the Kampala Metropolitan Police, 16 December 2015, Kampala.

cal agendas (see Philipps 2016). The NRM, for instance, benefitted tremendously from depicting the riots as an instance of "ethnic violence" to undermine Ganda opposition vis-à-vis the central government. As Goodfellow (2014: 13) notes, the government

> lost no time in capitalizing on [the violence]. Officials declared that the riots had been planned by the Kingdom's leaders, and began a clampdown on public space, arresting journalists accused of inciting the violence and closing CBS radio [Buganda's main media institution], which was taken off air for a full year.[15]

This leads us to outlining the politics of crystallisation in Kampala.

## The Politics of Crystallisation

Though the concept is new, politics of crystallisation have been widely discussed in terms of framing, brokerage, boundary activation, and polarisation, most explicitly in McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly's (2001) works on "dynamics of contention" (see also McAdam and Tarrow 2011; Snow et al. 1986; Tilly 2003, 2004). Even if the crystallisation approach is situated in quite a different theoretical tradition, it analyses similar phenomena – for instance, how political entrepreneurs craft political groups and representations, and how these groups and representations serve as reference points in periods of contention. One key difference is that the crystallisation approach focuses specifically on how these contours emerge from a context of political opacity (Vigh 2015). It describes a process whereby a highly fluid environment becomes solidified into something concrete, whereby ambiguity is transformed into tangible realities. To Simondon (1958, 1989, 1995), this "individuation" process is universal: anything that is perceived as a concrete entity – a group, idea, or institution – is in fact the product of intangible and diverse relations. These intangible relations, in turn, only become perceptible through the things they produce. A plant, for instance, emerges from a relational process between sunlight and minerals in the ground. The relation between the sun and the minerals is usually intangible, but emerging from a seed, the plant absorbs these intangible relations and transforms them into a concrete form. An "individuated" entity thus "absorbs into itself the relation that gave rise to it, thus obscuring it" (Combes 2013: 16). Simondon therefore challenges us to approach anything – any event, phenomenon, or artefact – with the question of how it emerges from

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15   See also Baral and Brisset-Foucault (2009), Brisset-Foucault (2013a).

relations. It is in this sense that Simondon provides an analytical method as much as a theory, in which individuation constitutes a universal process of becoming that can be retraced from a metastable milieu, through an induced seed, to an indeterminately crystallising phenomenon. Thus, as much as Kampala's urban protests may seem particularly amenable to Simondon's analytical framing, it needs to be emphasised that the crystallisation metaphor originally relates to a much broader philosophical claim and easily applies to quite different phenomena as well. The process of things going viral on the Internet, for instance, is another important case in point (see Nahon and Hemsley 2013).[16]

The crystallisation approach advocated in this paper highlights the contingency and the unpredictability of such processes. Simondon's analogy to the natural sciences notwithstanding, the approach also emphasises the importance of human agency (see also Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005; Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; Emirbayer and Mische 1998).[17] In short, in a political context where it is particularly uncertain how things will play out, political actors will be all the more intent to strategically make things crystallise in their favour. To describe these politics of crystallisation, we focus on what Charles Tilly (2003) calls the "political entrepreneur": a "transversal figure" (Wilson 2009: 16) who tries to carve out the contours of an initially fluid political field to gain political capital. As Tilly writes with regard to the conflict in former Yugoslavia:

> [Political entrepreneurs] specialize in activating (and sometimes deactivating) boundaries, stories, and relations, as when Bosnian Serb leaders sharpened boundaries between Serbs and their Muslim or Croatian neighbors with whom Bosnians of Serbian lineage had long mingled, married, traded, and collaborated. They specialize in connecting (and sometimes disconnecting) distinct groups and networks, as when those same leaders integrated armed Serbian gangs into larger nationalist coalitions. They specialize in coordination, as

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16  For the overall theoretical argument on social movements, protests, and riots in African Studies, see Philipps (2016).

17  In this regard and many others, the crystallisation approach decidedly runs counter to Robert Kaplan's *The Coming Anarchy* (1994). Though Kaplan uses a similar sort of "crystallisation" imagery (he likens West African young men to "loose molecules in a very unstable social fluid, a fluid that was clearly on the verge of igniting"), his perspective discards human agency as much as the open-endedness of history. Mainly intent on creating an apocalyptic image of the global future, Kaplan abuses "the experience of a number of African countries [as] merely a dress rehearsal for an ecological fate towards which humanity is ineluctably moving" (Mkandawire 2002: 183).

> when those leaders organized joint action on the part of those coalitions. Political entrepreneurs specialize, finally, in representation, as when Bosnian Serb leaders claimed to speak for all Bosnians of Serbian lineage [...]. In these ways, political entrepreneurs wield significant influence over the presence, absence, form, loci, and intensity of collective violence. (Tilly 2003: 34)

Sam, who owned a shop at Kisekka Market, was a paradigmatic political entrepreneur from the opposition who tried to turn fluid dynamics into tangible events and political camps.[18] An ambitious young politician who stood for a parliamentary seat, he had built diverse networks within three different opposition parties of which he was a member. Much of his political clout came from commanding a so-called youth brigade with a branch in Kisekka Market that could spread rumors, execute protests, blackmail political rivals, or confront police in favour of any politician who "gets a problem" and is willing to pay for its solution. He recounted stories of how he organised 30 of his Kisekka Market members into "command," "information," and "implementation" sections during the Kayunga riots, and mobilised urban Baganda youth by emphasising that "the government doesn't like your king!" Another time, they staged a violent attack on an opposition politician, to then publicly allege that the perpetrators were government thugs. Once, they destroyed a public toilet to tell bystanders and residents that the government was going to tear down the informal settlements and build new houses in the area, sparking protests against the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA). Once the information was out, it crystallised into a phenomenon, and had already gathered momentum by the time the KCCA dismissed the allegations and rumours as false and fabricated.

Media coverage was central in these schemes; the goal was to "throw information at the public eye,"[19] possibly even vis-à-vis international audiences and donors that both the regime and civil society heavily depended on (see Tangri and Mwenda 2006, 2010; Tripp 2010; Kagoro 2015a).[20] Both police and activists therefore informed and paid journalists to report about the spectacle from a specific angle.[21] A former opposition activist elaborated,

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18   Interview with Sam, 15 October 2012, Makerere, Kampala.
19   Interview with Sam, 15 October 2012, Makerere, Kampala.
20   Interviews with various informants, e.g. Sam, 15 October 2012, Makerere, Kampala; Dixon and Ron, 17 October 2012, Makerere, Kampala; Gerald, 4 October 2012, downtown Kampala.
21   Conversation with Gerald, 4 October 2012, Kampala.

> And, the good thing, how all this [protest mobilisation] is
> achieved, is media. Cause we *buy* media. Guys buy the media, […]
> and the media reach the scene, very early enough and keep wait-
> ing. Then they start filming. Police will start beating the [journal-
> ists], hé? Not to cover the event. They are calling the radio station.
> "Ahhh, police are running, roughing up, they are taking my cam-
> era," directly reporting [live], you get? So those on radio also tell
> others […]. By evening, the whole city is on fire.[22]

External observation and media coverage was crucial in particular be-
cause of the observers' partial knowledge of what was taking place –
partial in terms of both its incompleteness and the political biases that
would guide the observers' interpretations of what they saw. Police and
protesters actively appealed to that partiality: protesters would place
women activists close to cameras to visualise their vulnerability;[23] in
front of other cameras, police commanders would explain the need to
protect law-abiding citizens from irresponsible rabble-rousers. Journalists
gravitated towards these different versions as avenues for advancement.
"Everything is politicised," said *Daily Monitor* journalist John Njoroge:

> You cannot get by, in Uganda, just by simply being the average per-
> son. If you want to get ahead, you must affiliate yourself with some
> form of political persuasion.[24]

These affiliations were neither long-term nor clear-cut, however, as many
journalists took "sides" as those sides emerged, or, more precisely, as the
journalists helped those sides emerge. After all, opposition and police
emerged as two "sides" to a considerable degree through journalistic
observation, through being seen and talked about as bounded groups
from the outside. Just like during the 2009 Kayunga riots, where Ganda
ethnicity was an attribute ascribed to the rioters rather than one the riot-
ers experienced, there are good reasons to believe that the groupness of
government and opposition forces is at least as much a matter of outside
attribution as of internal experience.

Political entrepreneurs, who actively constructed what emerged as
political realities, would accord rather little credibility to these construc-
tions themselves. Even when asked about his own youth brigade, Sam, the
above-mentioned political entrepreneur, said dryly: "We use these youths.
You know, we want power, we want to get legislative seats." Many political
entrepreneurs had worked for both the opposition and the NRM; some

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22   Interview with Dixon and Ron, 17 October 2012, Makerere, Kampala.
23   Conversation with Gerald, 4 October 2012, Kampala.
24   Interview with John Njoroge, 22 October 2012, Kampala.

had switched sides multiple times during their career and some were working for both simultaneously. Although senior politicians shifted political sides as well – ex-PM Amama Mbabazi, who ran for president against Museveni in 2016, is a noteworthy case in point – such dynamics were magnified amongst a large population of young urban graduates who aspired to a successful career. As most opportunities for professional and economic advancement depended on connections, and since the important nodal points were situated within the NRM government, which is close to synonymous with the state, many youth were almost inevitably drawn to these political networks and the enormous sums of money that circulated through them.[25] Adam, a former youth mobiliser and protester for the Black Monday Movement in Kampala, for instance, had first registered with the NRM in 2006. "I realised that I cannot get anything if I am not with [the] NRM," he said, and eventually worked his way up to becoming the NRM Youth League chairman in Kampala's Makindye District. He left the NRM in 2011, disappointed in its system of ubiquitous nepotism in which he, as a fatherless young man with no family ties, was unable to advance. He recalled,

> People were wondering: *Why are you running from where money is? And where are you going to go?* And I was disturbed, really, [because] I never trusted in any opposition party.

He then coordinated the Uganda Youth Platform, an opposition movement by General Sejusa, the former coordinator of the intelligence services under Museveni.

Cross-cutting political boundaries was so entrenched that political entrepreneurs could coordinate and connive across the lines they would draw. Dixon, for instance, a police spy at Kisekka Market working for the inspector general of police, usually sought to prevent upheavals by channelling money to opposition groups who would otherwise organise riots.[26] But when "things go sour at the end of the month," he also collaborated with them:

> I'm broke, so I organize my gang […]. They tell him [the inspector general of police] all sorts of lies. That maybe the opposition today approached us; they're saying tomorrow we should go for this demonstration. So, *chief* will call me and say, "Dixon, you have to

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25   According to Andrew Mwenda (2011), the NRM spent an equivalent of USD 350 million on the 2011 election campaign, which would amount to a per capita spending of approximately USD 10, dwarfing Barack Obama's former record spending of USD 2.50 per American citizen in 2008.

26   Interview with Dixon and Ron, 17 October 2012, Makerere, Kampala.

> go to Kisekka and, you know, handle this situation." And eventu-
> ally he will give me some small money, I will also get my commis-
> sion, I go and *(laughing)* meet my gangstas and give them some-
> thing and we *survive*. Yeah, this is *(pauses)*, basically, this is how our
> government has survived. For all these years![27]

In sum, uncertainty and ambiguity constituted a "productive resource"
for political entrepreneurs (Cooper and Pratten 2015: 3), even vis-à-vis
their bosses, as it allowed them to invent schemes and create realities,
which they hoped would gather momentum. Such momentum depended
on how different forces would react to a specific "seed" – for example,
an event of public uproar – and political entrepreneurs prided them-
selves on knowing that very well. "I know *youth* politics, hé?" Ron said,
having worked for both the opposition and the government:

> I know violence, how it comes up, hé? I know how opposition
> operates, and I know how government operates, *properly*! […] In
> this nation I know.

Such knowledge was relative to a surrounding that political entrepre-
neurs tended to picture as comparatively naïve. Gerald, less self-confi-
dent than Ron, said,

> There are some things I understand. But I want to tell you that the
> youth who follow me, know absolutely *little* about *so* many things.
> About *so* many things. *So,* this person, if I decide to put something
> in him [an idea or a political affiliation], me, myself, I can.

In a context of manipulable surroundings, then, the scope of schemes
depended on how well connected a political entrepreneur was.[28] Those
able to draw from a broad range of connections could induce the most
wide-ranging crystallisation processes, while others had to pitch their
ideas to better-placed peers to benefit from their connections. For in-
stance, during the interview with Dixon, the police spy, his phones rang
and vibrated incessantly. "You see my phones here?" he asked at some
point. "I receive sooo many calls every day, these gangsters, whoever
calling me […,] [I receive] soooo many ideas *every day*!" Asked to specify
the kind of ideas, Dixon answered, "Blackmail" – threatening someone's
power by exposing subversive information. While the content of the
information itself was comparatively negligible and oftentimes fabricated,

27  For a similar point on urban patronage politics in Kampala, see Goodfellow
    and Titeca (2012).
28  On "connectionwork" in Kampala's music industry, see Schneidermann (2014).

the threat consisted of the expected effect – what would happen if the information gathered momentum.

The NRM state was in a strikingly similar position: blackmailed on charges of corruption, which is common knowledge across the country, the subversive element was not the information that corruption existed but that frustrations about it gathered political momentum in large-scale protest. The question preoccupying Dixon was how long the government could pay the ransom:

> The moment the government runs out of money, we get [it gets] *scared*, trust me: *(whispering suspiciously)* "Now, these people, criticising on the street, what shall we give them?" If there is no money?

Indeed, it is in this context that the state has increasingly counted on police to handle the issue.

## Policing the Metastable City

Uganda's police had long remained in the shadows of Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA). While the army embodied the Ugandan liberation after the Bush War from 1981 to 1986, the police, adopted from the former Obote regime, were poorly equipped, notoriously underfunded, and unheeded in public. The fact that it is now a highly visible, well-equipped, and equally prominent and controversial institution in Ugandan politics that no longer requires military assistance in anti-riot operations has a lot to do with the current inspector general of police (IGP), Kale Kayihura. Kayihura had joined Museveni in the Bush War in 1982 after completing his LLM at the London School of Economics, and was then appointed to lead sensitive operations in Congo and to conduct internal investigations. Kayihura became IGP in 2005, and the police's manpower has increased enormously since then, from 8,000 in 2001 to an estimated 60,000 today (Kagoro 2014: 120). From 2004 to 2014, the police budget grew from UGX 75 billion to 303 billion (i.e. from USD 22 million to 90 million),[29] the number of vehicles has mushroomed,[30] and for the 2016 elections period alone, police secured UGX 212 billion (USD 63 million)

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29   See Ministry of Internal Affairs, *Ministerial Policy Statement* FY 2013/2014. Presented to parliament for debate of estimates of revenue and expenditure by James Baba, minister of State for Internal Affairs, on 30 June 2013; 83–134.

30   The number of armored personnel carriers (APCs) has grown from 0 to 30; patrol pickups (trucks) from 125 to 591; motorcycles from 0 to 3,556; and saloon cars from 41 to 232. See *Uganda Police Force Fleet Statistics* FY 2003/2004–2013/14.

for mobilising, recruiting, training, and equipment purchases.[31] Recently, the police established a new anti-riot division, the so-called Field Force Unit (see Baker 2015: 381–382), and in 2013 President Museveni signed the Public Order Management Bill, which gives police discretionary authority to break up gatherings of as few as three people in a public arena who are deliberating political issues (Kagoro 2014: 114–115).

Despite these legal-institutional instruments, the police tend to operate not as a bounded institution but an open-ended network, defying distinctions as to who is in the police and who is not. Street kids indicate traffic offenders to policemen to later pocket a fraction of the bribe ("*chai*"). Paramilitary youth brigades join police in ad-hoc anti-riot operations on the basis of personal and financial arrangements whose specifics remain opaque to most of those joining forces.[32] At police stations, informal middlemen, so-called *kayungerizi,* liaise constantly between police officers, suspects, and complainants in nebulous shuttle mediations about allegations, bribes, and brokerages. Akin to Kisekka Market, such jockeying involves a multiplicity of connections, phone calls to people of potential influence, some of them fake, some of them real, most of them transgressing institutional boundaries. Police actively engender such entanglements, and have amassed a plethora of informants, to the point where Kampala's urbanites half-jokingly say that "if four people meet, you can be sure that one is a spy."[33] Just like during the Ugandan Bush War, when civilians were military-trained under "the democratisation of the gun" discourse to later participate in the removal of the Obote regime (Mudoola 1991: 239; Museveni 2000: 80), and akin to the post-war nationwide *mchaka-mchaka* politico-military trainings of civilians that interlaced Ugandan society with a marked military ethos (Kagoro 2015a: 183), current "crime preventer" trainings are turning millions of Ugandan citizens into police partners, including for political mobilisation purposes on behalf of the ruling party.[34]

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31  Kayihura also negotiated that police may retain all non-tax revenues such as traffic fines rather than remitting them to the Uganda Revenue Authority (URA) (see Kagoro 2014: 120).

32  Interview with journalist Angelo Izama, 18 October 2012, Kisementi, Kampala.

33  E.g. informal conversation with Adam at Kisekka Market, Kampala, 5 October 2012.

34  For more on crime preventers, see Moses Khiza, "Here is the absurdity of crime preventers." In: *The Observer*, Kampala, 28 August 2015, online: <www.observer.ug/viewpoint/39546-here-is-the-absurdity-of-crime-preventers> (3 June 2016). See also "Crime preventers demand payment for Museveni Kololo rally, anti-Mbabazi demo." In: *The Observer*, Kampala, 6 November 2015, online:

One of the police's greatest assets in the spy apparatus are *boda-boda* motorcycle taxi drivers. Estimated at 200,000 and continuously growing in number,[35] they are critical for Kampala's traffic infrastructure and were long thought of as "raw material for the opposition."[36] They now constitute a main source of intelligence information for police, especially, in the IGP's words, "to fight the opposition rioters who only want to destabilise the city."[37] The *boda-boda* drivers' political affiliation shifted notably after the Kayunga riots, in which they featured prominently as protesters and mobile linkages between riot settings. Soon after the riots, IGP Kale Kayihura installed and co-opted the Boda-Boda 2010 Association, organised the motorcycle trade with a company in India that supplies motorcycles at a cheap price, and became the middleman between the *boda-boda* drivers and President Museveni. In 2010 Kampala's *boda-boda* leadership, headed by Abdallah Kitaka, was flown on the presidential jet to Arua, in northwestern Uganda, to meet Museveni, who later handed out more than 500 motorcycles for free and thousands more under favourable repayment plans. Today, innumerable *boda-boda* riders work closely with police, sometimes in arrests of suspected traffic offenders, but mostly in the field of intelligence. Hundreds have undergone crime prevention trainings, including stripping and shooting AK47 guns, martial arts, and ideology classes. Boda-Boda 2010 Association offices are often painted yellow, the color of the ruling party, and feature pictures of President Museveni, IGP Kale Kayihura, and the police's former director of operations, Andrew Felix Kaweesi.[38] Police are always invited to oversee elections of *boda-boda* leaders.

Given these overall developments, the crystallisation of police may easily be misunderstood as an institutionalisation towards greater stability, when in fact police, too, are inherently metastable – representing a fluid terrain whose inside and outside are constantly negotiated and blurred, where positions and alliances can shift overnight and turn into rivalries, contingent on myriad informal relations whose specifics remain opaque, and where money and spies, rather than securing control, am-

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&lt;www.observer.ug/news-headlines/40873-crime-preventers-demand-payment-for-museveni-kololo-rally-anti-mbabazi-demo&gt; (3 June 2016).

35  These figures were revealed during a meeting between the RPC Kawempe and all Kampala city division *boda-boda* chairmen held at Makerere, Kikoni on 26 March 2015.

36  Interview with a senior police officer at the rank of assistant inspector general of police (AIGP) and with a regional police commander, both in Kampala, on 18 March 2015 and on 26 March 2015, respectively.

37  Conversation with the IGP Kale Kayihura, 18 April 2015, Kololo, Kampala.

38  Kaweesi is now the director of Human Resource Development.

plify the agitation. For instance, senior officers recalled an incident where the director of the Kampala Metropolitan Police went to meet with the National Forum of Crime Preventers, expecting to be received with due honour, when the crime preventers told him squarely,

> It is a good thing you have come, you did a good thing, because all those that did not come here to see us did not succeed, they were stripped of their jobs. Without us you can't work in this city and we can cause your sacking.[39]

As another senior officer intimated with respect to *boda-boda* riders,

> In 2011 after the presidential elections […,] I mobilised over 20,000 *boda-boda* riders, gave them fuel [worth] 20,000 [shillings] each so that they can ride ahead of Mzee Museveni's convoy to Kololo for the swearing-in ceremony. This of course would make it seem that the youth have been overwhelmingly and with enthusiasm behind the president. It would also make the function more colourful. But the *boda-boda* cannot be trusted 100 per cent; they are slippery characters. After escorting Mzee, they immediately turned their bikes to go and also pick [up] Besigye [the arch-rival of Museveni] from Entebbe Airport [Besigye was returning from Kenya where he had gone for treatment after the police had pepper-sprayed his face during a political rally], saying, "*Oyo tumutusiza kati katu kime omulwadde.*" ["Since we have safely escorted this one let us go and collect the one who is sick."][40]

Added to the "slippery character" of the police's supposed allies, subversion may also come from within the police forces. A substantial minority of police personnel self-reported feeling "hostile to the sitting government," and disunity about the politicisation and militarisation of police exists amongst the highest echelons.[41] Competition over better-paid posts, commonly referred as "wet" deployments, leads to diverse conflicts and rivalries. Influential officials are frequently blackmailed by their peers, and disgruntled Field Force Unit officers have even undermined anti-riot interventions by shooting tear gas canisters when the order had been not to, sometimes at schools or hospitals, to make their superiors lose their position.[42] In that regard, protests not only emerge as an exter-

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39   Interview with a senior police officer on 20 November 2015, Kampala.
40   Interview with a senior police officer at the rank of AIGP, 12 March 2015 at Bukoto, Kampala.
41   Interview with anonymous police officer, 22 March 2014 in Kampala.
42   Interview with the AIGP held on 15 March 2015 in Wakiso.

nal threat, but also trigger uncertainty within the police as to what will crystallise out of their own ranks.

At the same time, while the police's own ranks can pose risks, the opposition can be won over. The IGP himself is known to frequently take rioting youth to his personal home in Muyenga to dissuade them from organising and participating in riots – offering tea and food, handing out money, promising development projects to individual ringleaders, integrating others into the spy apparatus, keeping them tied up in talks when they are supposed to be mobilising, and appealing to their hopes that they can make it within the current metastable order, and that they need to continue trying like everyone else. Ron, a former opposition mobiliser, when asked why he would stay with the IGP instead of mobilising fellow protesters, exclaimed,

> This is the *general* who has called *you*, everything is *there*. He's telling you how he used to do what you're doing. […] Personal experience. [inaudible] That these [opposition] people are not going to help you, they are doing selfish businesses, you're young, you lose your life.

Ron later worked for the IGP himself: "He's a nice person, this guy. He listens to you. If you have personal challenges, you seek something, he gives you money."[43] The IGP's personal budget per quarter for such ad-hoc purposes is now at UGX 3.6 billion (approximately USD 1 million), making him a key player in the urban politics of crystallisation.[44]

Money, however, was only one way of silencing dissent. While police pay journalists who report favourably about their operations,[45] they muzzle others whose reports may threaten the regime (Human Rights Watch 2010b). In the wake of the 2009 Kayunga riots and "in addition to repressing the demonstrations in the street, the state shut down four radio stations" and banned the so-called *ebimeeza* – open radio debates that had been key sites of political deliberation (see Brisset-Foucault 2013a: 241). Numerous newspaper offices and radio stations have been raided and shut down over the years, and various journalists have been arrested, leading to considerable insecurity and precariousness amongst journalists without political protection (see Tripp 2010: 96-101). At the same time, many journalists seek such protection from police. Police headquarters are crowded with journalists who hope to establish good relations with influential officers, to have a number to call in difficult situations, but also to get the latest

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43    Interview with Ron, Kampala, 16 March 2014.
44    Personal conversations with senior officers.
45    Ethnographic observations by Jude Kagoro.

news, a fuel card, or UGX 100,000 for positive coverage. This goes for journalists from both private and state-owned media, as Uganda's media outlets tend to defy the idea of stable political camps. Journalists from the state-owned *New Vision* newspaper, for instance, might be critical of police, while the previously police-raided *Independent* news magazine might be full of praise, due to a diverse range of favours, threats, personal rivalries, and other contingencies.

An important upshot from this discussion on police is that any crystallising entity in a metastable context must maintain responsiveness to change and uncertainty. Just like the Boda-Boda 2010 Association or different media outlets, police were forced to become neither too stable, bounded, or paralysed in an ever-shifting environment, nor too unstable, fluid, or indistinguishable from that environment. While ensuring visibility as a distinct institution, police also connived with *boda-boda* drivers, some of whom had been involved in anti-government protests, some of whom still were, and some of whom sympathised with the protests, but would argue that "the difference between the government and the opposition is that the opposition doesn't have power. That's all."[46]

## Conclusion

Thinking through these dynamics of protest and policing in Kampala in terms of stable political camps, where a bounded opposition stands against a bounded government or state apparatus, ignores both the relations that transgress these boundaries and the shifting political positions between these camps. Though political camps do obviously exist in Kampala, this paper has suggested treating them not as structures, not as *a priori*, permanent, and definitive parameters of agency, but as emerging fields of gravity once a protest, riot, or any other "seed" transforms the metastable milieu into an antipodal political spectrum. This process is akin to what Brubaker (2002) has argued about ethnicity and the formation of ethnic groups. Brubaker, who notably defines ethnicity as a "crystallization of group feeling" (2002: 167), rejects the concept of "ethnic groups" because it presupposes the "groupness," whose genesis the analyst is actually supposed to account for (2002: 176). Since ethnicity is contextually fluctuating, waxing and waning over time, and oftentimes a corollary of conflict rather than the underlying cause of it, it should be thought of as a project or an event rather than a collective entity: schemed by political entrepreneurs, solidified through external

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46    Interview with Lawrence, *boda-boda* driver, 22 February 2014, Kololo, Kampala.

representation by media, and self-perpetuating as it crystallises (Brubaker 2002: 168).

In this paper, we applied a similar idea to opposition and government forces in Kampala, outlining how political entrepreneurs construe situations through which opposition and government forces emerge as bounded entities that people gravitate towards. Since such gravitation processes are essential for party politics to work, the incentives to incite them are by no means restricted to the Ugandan opposition. The NRM, too, capitalises profoundly on events that polarise and make the opposition visible as a threat to the regime – especially when these events are violent. Indeed, the NRM has long benefitted from security threats to expand its military apparatus and present itself as the only alternative to violence and mayhem (Baker 2015; Branch and Mampilly 2015). As Goodfellow (2014) has shown in a variety of cases, NRM politicians have in recent years strategically stirred up legislative debates whose main effects were political unrest and state crackdown. Rather than trying to implement the debated laws – which appeared to be a secondary concern at best – the NRM used the violence they provoked as a motive to criminalise the opposition, demonstrate the regime's dominance, and justify further "legal maneuvers" that restricted political space and "did little to ease underlying tensions" (Goodfellow 2014: 2).[47]

Designating the Ugandan state as "politically stable" or "politically unstable" becomes problematic in this context, not only because both are simultaneously true (cf. Tripp 2010). Rather, it is problematic because such designations tend to absorb the very processes that they refer to, the whole gamut of politicking that goes into crafting the "stable" or the "unstable" state, the actual making of politics as they appear. To account for these processes, Simondon's framework provides a rich set of instruments that can be applied to matters far beyond the question of urban politics in Kampala. One is Simondon's idea of the pre-individual, metastable realm. Put simply, one could think of the metastable realm as a truly empirical world that is inconceivable because it is not yet conceptualised, not yet divided into distinct phenomena that one could describe, assess, and evaluate. Additionally, this idea implies that the emergence of any conceivable reality from the metastable realm is contingent on the different interests of those who partake in defining its contours, and thus inevitably controversial, as we elaborated in the "politics of crystallisation" section. Related to that, Simondon's framework hints at

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47   In a context of allegedly ubiquitous security threats, such a political strategy is clearly of global concern.

the need for a self-reflexive understanding of how our analytical con-cepts also work as agents of crystallisation (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Combes 2013; Lakoff and Johnson 2003). A concept like "police," as we have shown in the final section, bundles a diversity of oftentimes incongruous elements into something homogeneous and perceptible, for better or for worse, and scholars face the complex challenge of finding methods and languages that account for what gets lost in that process. AbdouMaliq Simone's work on urbanity remains noteworthy in this regard, as he refrains from fixing and determining what he describes, and instead highlights and performs interdependences and elusiveness. As Simone said in a recent interview, "I guess what has always interested me about urban life is that aspect which it refuses to be folded into" (Philipps 2015: 58).

The crystallisation approach, finally, aside from lending itself to in-vestigating the metastable city as experienced by its residents (Simone 2014: 4), or to scrutinising protest movements (Philipps 2016), encour-ages analysts to reconstruct the crystallisation of realities about African politics that emerge in a rather top-down fashion. Indices used in global governance, such as the Fragile States Index,[48] are a crucial case in point (see Merry, Davis, and Kingsbury 2015). Widely accepted and used as objective measurements, indices construe "easily digestible" realities (The Fund for Peace 2016) from exceedingly more complex national contexts, which these indices hierarchise according to standards mostly set in the Global North – with marked effects on governance (Cooley and Snyder 2015; Merry 2011; see also Jerven 2013, 2015). A Simondonian "politics of crystallisation" approach would problematise, but also retrace how such indices work. As regards the Fragile States Index, such an approach would, for instance, question the idea of political (in)stability as the aggregate sum of standardised indicators and, with that, the index's ability to perform an "early warning" function on that basis (The Fund for Peace 2016). The so-called "Arab Spring" has amply manifested how contentious politics can crystallise unpredictably, in unlikely settings and in unforeseeable ways, and how they can destabilise states across and beyond the MENA region, which the Fragile States Index and other "expert institutions" had ranked as comparatively

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48   The Fragile States Index, which until 2014 used to be called the Failed States Index, has been published annually since 2005 by the American think tank The Fund for Peace and the journal *Foreign Policy*. It is based on 12 social, economic, and political indicators, each with an average of 14 sub-indicators. Criticisms of the index abound. See, e.g., Beehner and Young (2012); Evers (2014); Leigh (2012).

stable at the time (The Fund for Peace 2011; see also Philipps 2016). Nevertheless, as indicators provide "a transition from ambiguity to certainty" (Merry 2011: S88), the crystallisation framework is well equipped to also retrace and retrieve the diverse processes and relations that indicators absorb, and to explore the functions of indices at the nexus of global politics and knowledge production. As such, Simondon's theoretical apparatus provides valuable tools for both classic empirical analyses and critical reflections on African politics as an object of knowledge.

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## Die metastabile Stadt und die Politik der Kristallisierung: Protest und Polizei in Kampala

**Zusammenfassung:** Wenn in der Innenstadt Kampalas Unruhen ausbrechen, entstehen in einem dynamischen Prozess geschlossene politische Lager, und aus einer Vielzahl unterschiedlicher Anliegen werden vergleichsweise festumrissene politische Forderungen. Die Autoren des vorliegenden Beitrags zeichnen diesen Wandel nach und deuten das politische Geschehen in Kampala als Politik der Kristallisierung: als Versuch, aus äußerst fluiden Bewegungen feste Strukturen zu machen. Ihre Analyse basiert auf ethnographischer Feldforschung und Interviews mit Aktivisten der Opposition und Angehörigen der Polizei. So sehr beide dieser Formationen versuchen, Menschen auf ihre Seite zu ziehen, so wenig sind sie im städtischen Alltag voneinander abgegrenzt; Individuen bewegen sich mitunter auf beiden Seiten der politischen Grenzlinien und suchen die Kooperation. Das nationale Regime und die Opposition stehen sich nicht als permanente stabile Strukturen gegenüber, sondern als Gravitationsfelder, deren Entstehen angeheizt und unterdrückt, finanziert und kontrolliert wird. In Bezugnahme auf Gilbert Simondons Theorie der Individuation und AbdouMaliq Simones Arbeiten zu Urbanität versuchen die Autoren, städtischen Widerstand und staatliche Kontrolle dynamisch zu erfassen und auf diese Art und Weise neue Interpretationen afrikanischer Politik anzuregen.

**Schlagwörter:** Uganda, Kampala, Politischer Protest, Macht und Herrschaft, Polizei, Gilbert Simondon