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Politics of the Urban Poor: Aesthetics, Ethics, Volatility, Precarity

Wenner-Gren Symposium Supplement 11

Leslie C. Aiello

Politics of the Urban Poor is the 148th symposium in the Wenner-Gren symposium series and the eleventh symposium to be published as an open-access supplementary issue of the Foundation’s journal, Current Anthropology. The symposium was organized by Veena Das (Johns Hopkins University) and Shalini Randeria (Institute for Human Sciences, Vienna, Austria, and Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, Switzerland) and held September 20-26, 2013, at Hotel Villa Luppis, Rivarotta di Pasiano, Pordenone, Italy (fig. 1).

The main theme of the symposium was that the lives of urban poor, and particularly their various forms of political involvement and activism, are shaped by a myriad of factors that go beyond basic material scarcity. There are 17 contributions in this collection, including a substantive introduction by the symposium organizers, Das and Randeria (2015). These contributions cover a wide geographic range from South Asia, to Africa, to the Middle East, and to Latin America, and they demonstrate clearly that there is no single culture of poverty resulting in uniformity of life and expression. Although it is clear that poverty may adversely affect the capacity and nature of individuals and of collective action, the purpose of this collection is to examine and interrogate the varied accounts of politics in the daily lives of the urban poor living under a wide range of conditions around the world and tease out the factors that underlie the observed heterogeneity.

Four major questions form the basis for the examination of the relationships between urban transformations, poverty, and various forms of democratic politics. The first is the nature of the relationship between government and politics in relation to basic amenities such as water, sanitation, electricity, and housing. The second is the nature of solidarity and antagonism within poor communities in the context of locality, kinship, and work. The third is the effect of violence and specifically how urban decay and institutional corrosion either negate politics or result in collective action that becomes an end in itself (e.g., protests, gang violence). And the fourth is a focus on communication and expression and specifically on whether and how the varied regional histories, intellectual traditions, and geographies result in differences in the basic conceptualization of the issues facing the urban poor.

Poverty is of fundamental importance in the world today. Although this CA supplementary issue provides a unique contemporary collection of anthropological research focusing on both poverty and politics in the urban environment, many of the threads addressed here have a long genealogy in the field. For example, a 1964 Wenner-Gren symposium titled “Urban Anthropology: Cross-Cultural Studies of Urbanization” (Southall 1973) defined the then-young field of urban anthropology and recognized not only the heterogeneous nature of the urban poor but also what constitutes urbanity. Likewise, a 1978 symposium titled “Social Inequality: Comparative and Developmental Approaches” (Berreman 1981) addressed broad issues of social inequality and how systems of institutional inequality are experienced and responded to by those who are impacted. Similar to the current collection, a main theme that emerged from this earlier work is that the degree of variation in response depended on specific conditions and histories.

We are always looking for new ideas from all areas of anthropology for future Foundation-sponsored and Foundation-organized symposia and eventual CA publication. Please contact us with your ideas and a proposal. Information about the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the symposium program, application procedures and deadlines, and what constitutes a good symposium topic can be found on the Foundation’s website (http://wennergren.org/programs/international-symposia).

References Cited


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Figure 1. Participants in the symposium “Politics of the Urban Poor.” Ground, from the left: Javier Auyero (kneeling), Carlos Forment, Melani Cammett, Jonathan Spencer. Seated: Shalini Randeria, Leslie Aiello, Veena Das. Standing: James Williams, Teresa Caldeira, Harri Englund, Hayder Al-Mohammad, Asef Bayat, Sylvain Perdigon, Valeria Procupez, Fiona Ross, AbdouMaliq Simone, Gerardo Leibner, Harini Amarasuriya, Filip De Boeck. A color version of this figure is available online.
Politics of the Urban Poor: Aesthetics, Ethics, Volatility, Precarity

An Introduction to Supplement 11

by Veena Das and Shalini Randeria

Based on longitudinal ethnographic work, the authors of this special issue on the politics of the urban poor examine how regional events as well as scholarly traditions in these places have influenced the way the categories of the urban poor and of politics have emerged in both scholarly and public discourse. As the discussions that follow make clear, the relation between urban processes and city forms is a volatile one, and this volatility in turn has a decisive effect on how the poor emerge as political actors. Further, liberal forms of citizenship are but one form among others that become materialized through the claims that the poor make on the state. More importantly, the essays show that the socialities that undergird the lives of the poor are constantly being shaped by the experiences of precarity that go beyond material scarcity.

At the outset we emphasize that there are not only different histories of political and social formations in the regions we have focused on but also that regional histories of social theory assign the construct of the urban poor in different ways. For example, the social-movement literature (e.g., Tilly 2004) is unable to address what Asef Bayat (2015) in his contribution here calls the quiet everyday “social non-movements,” or “the collective action of noncollective actors” that often characterize the politics of the poor in situations of social upheaval as in ordinary times. In (neo)institutionalist arguments that continue to focus primarily on state structures, attention to the poor has largely focused on understanding the historical emergence and current functioning of measures to ameliorate poverty in western Europe and North America (state social support, unemployment benefits, or insurance schemes). Action-theoretical approaches ranging from rational choice to symbolic interactionism tend to disregard the larger institutional context so that the poor remain a generalized category with the social location of actors and their action being bracketed in favor of universal pronouncements.

In their monumental work translated into English as The Weight of the World (La misère du monde in French), Bourdieu (1999) and his collaborators capture the wretchedness of lives on the margins of French society through biographical interviews that situate their subjects in their specific social context. Yet the argument of the authors is that the misery (misère) they document is neither to be associated with a particular (biographical) time in the lives of these individuals nor with the (social) space they inhabit. Further, there is no identifiable social group of “the poor” that could be defined using any universal criteria of material deprivation.

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Making audible the plight of those “sprawled underfoot” of the “triumphal procession” of the dominant (to use Benjamin’s phrase), Bourdieu (2000:241) suggests that losing the symbolic struggle for recognition may be the worst form of dispossession, and privation for material hardship, he argues, is inextricably entangled with the injustice of being denied social-symbolic value. As Bourdieu’s work emphasizes, there is no Archimedean point from which the diverse, subtle, and often imperceptible forms of social marginalization and discrimination, stigmatization and exclusion, can be reduced to measurable categories of absolute or relative poverty or made commensurable with Galbraith’s (1979) famous distinction between so-called case poverty, which afflicts a minority in affluent societies, and “mass poverty” in the rest of the world.

The literature on the urban poor has been intimately connected with discussions and interventions in public policy that generated such internal divisions as those between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor or between the proletariat seen as the engine of history and the rest (e.g., lumpenproletariat), who were regarded as unable to engage in politics at all (Rancière 2004). Concepts such as social capital moved from academic theorizing to the policy world in the context of framing of policies to help the poor move out of what was called the “poverty trap” (Collier 2002). One of the consequences of this way of seeing the poor is that while agency is given to some kinds of poor, others are seen in policy discourses as populations to be managed through both policing and paternalistic interventions by the state. In one influential tradition of conceptualizing the poor, the very emergence of the poor as a distinct social category of those who are neither fully included nor fully excluded from society is seen to be a product of the relief provided them by others (Simmel 1965 [1906/1908]).

In Simmel’s view the poor are constituted as a sociological category by their being at the receiving end of ameliorative assistance, which binds them to and within society through a particular form of interaction or reciprocation (Wechselwirkung). For Simmel, then, poverty is a social relationship and not merely the lack of material means, a matter of the social relationships engendered by want. It is this understanding of the poor and of poverty that leads Simmel to conclude that despite similarities of individual fate, the poor cannot but fail to act collectively; not only do cultural differences in ways of life make reciprocal identification difficult among them, they also come to play their particular social role as the poor only when and to the extent that others react to their condition through the apparatus of welfare measures. As long as societal assistance is not provided, we are faced with personal fate but not poverty pace Simmel.

Although theoretical interventions such as subaltern studies did much to reclaim collective agency on behalf of those defined as subordinate, there was a concentration on the extraordinary, or on moments of rebellion (Das 1989). As far as everyday life was concerned, there seems to be an implicit agreement in the literature with Hannah Arendt’s (1965) position that the poor are not capable of politics; they are so caught up in ensuring basic survival that they cannot exercise the freedom that Arendt sees as a necessary condition for collective action or deliberation that defines (for her) the domain of politics. From this perspective the problems relating to the poor are seen as confined to problems of administration (see Das and Walton 2015). Even at certain specific moments such as elections, when it is apparent that the electoral participation of the poor exceeds that of the rich (as in India), the theorization emphasizes the projection of other sensibilities (e.g., that of the religious or of the sacred) to the poor to explain their enthusiasm for, say, electoral politics (see Banerjee 2007). These positions assume that the poor do not have the conceptual means of understanding what a vote might mean for determining their political futures.

We have no wish to romanticize the poor or to underestimate the ways in which poverty might corrode the capacity for collective or individual action, but it seems to us that an understanding of poverty must see it in relation to the tight alignments with other conditions of life, such as the possibility of democratic participation, the erosion of infrastructure, the denial of citizenship as in the case of refugees, the effect of race and policies of incarceration, or the way in which livelihoods might become embroiled in the drug trade or addiction or are willfully destroyed in the name of either development or the functioning of the free market. In each of these constellations we can discern the different ways in which poverty is experienced and how far the potential for political action (seen as the effort to bring about a different kind of everyday) is realized.

In the rest of this introduction we give a brief account of the major issues in the five sections into which the papers are divided. We examine the relation between the city form and urban processes and also the waxing and waning of politics in relation to volatile and mercurial changes brought about by events on global and national scales. Simultaneously we want to pay close attention to the way in which politics, ethics, and aesthetics make up the texture of the everyday. The existential stakes in thinking about the poor, we contend, are not about (or only about) the distant poor and the obligations to them as in classic moral theory or about exercising choice (e.g., Who is the most worthy recipient of aid?). Instead, we are summoned to give our full attention to the relation between expression and action, to track when and how words are deployed, and to follow the embodiment of discourses through which the struggle with insecurity and precarity is engaged in a given form of life. There are no overarching superconcepts that will resolve the differences in conception and sensibilities that these papers bring out. Instead, we hope that the overlapping concerns expressed in these essays will show the different paths that we hope will remain open as one tries to register the multiplicity of life forms and track the paths that the poor take to make their worlds inhabitable in hope and in disappointment or despair.
The Urban Process: Volatility, Improvisation, and Seizing the Moment

The three papers in this section are set in the context of the precarity of the life of the poor, yet they all argue that there is no straightforward way in which we can decipher how relations of power, advantage, and dispossession are stacked against each other. For instance, in the case of Jakarta, AbdouMaliq Simone (2015) argues that the poor are enmeshed in close relations with the nonpoor whether through spatial intimacy or through networks of work and service relations and through the constant search for information that those living in precarious circumstances actively gather about conditions outside their immediate environment. This aspect of the lives of the poor is evident in several other papers (e.g., Amarasuriya and Spencer 2015; Das and Walton 2015; Procupez 2015), all of which point to the heterogeneity of the category of the urban poor and the capability for political action they create through the very conditions of crowding, the mobilization of the poor by the nonpoor as vote banks or for political action, and their own aspirations to create a diversity of publics within which their expressions and actions can be brought together and articulated (see also Weinstein 2014). This is a theme we will see repeated in many of the papers, including those in the section on cultural production.

Much social theory assumes a fundamental break between everyday life (a time of passivity) and times of heightened intensities (as during street protests and revolutions). However, the poor are not passive spectators in everyday life, as all the papers argue; in fact, they have to struggle within the given economic and political structures to ensure that they have access to housing, water, work, and medical assistance; they manage to craft some arrangements, however fragile, within the legal and administrative structures that are at hand. Bayat’s (2015) paper, set in the context of the Arab Spring in Egypt, argues that it was the slow encroachment into the ordinary by the state that undid these fragile arrangements. The changing milieu of the revolutionary moment when activist groups actively mobilized the poor helped translate their frustrations into collective protest. It is thus that along with the “big revolution” in Egypt, there were also many “minirevolutions,” or protests in which local issues pertaining to housing or work were joined to the larger national issues, such as the demand for democracy. As in the case of the French revolution, where historians asked whether it was a single revolution or many revolutions, in the case of Egyptian and Tunisian mass protests, too, we could ask how aspirations of different sections of people were articulated through joining more local themes with national ones. However, Bayat does not think that such processes “doomed” the revolution; instead, he is interested in the preconditions through which solidarities across classes could be forged (cf. Leibner 2015). The city form is implicated in the events described by Bayat in that the silent encroachments in the everyday that he talks about are also about rights to the city. The issues in the end cannot be simply posed as those of the success or failure of the revolutionary events in Egypt—they also invite us to understand the conditions of possibility as well as the limits of political action in this changing milieu.

The paper by James Williams (2015) takes us into the world of refugee and migrant youth in the city of Cape Town. Like the other two papers here, Williams, too, is attentive to the volatility of the city, the temporal rhythms in which there are wild oscillations between the opening and closing of opportunities. He shows us how improvisations by migrant youth in Cape Town work till they do and then they dissolve, as did the domestic and work arrangements network of the youth that he followed.

The vulnerability of the migrant youth with whom Williams worked stems less from abject poverty and more from the tenseness in the cityscape in which these migrants have achieved relative success in the underground economies of counterfeit goods, drugs, and varied service provisions. Thus, we are not positing the city as an actor independent of the historical context. In fact, Williams delineates the complex politics of postapartheid South Africa that led to the building of a slow resentment among local black communities against foreign nationals, who were seen to siphon off precious resources from the South African poor, whereas the elites saw the migrants as contributing to “crime” in the cities. The terrible riots against immigrants in South African cities in 2008 show the limits of a politics of sympathy.

It is very interesting to compare Williams with Perdigon (2015). In the case of Perdigon’s field site, we see that ties of kinship provide a framework in which hardship can be addressed in the refugee camps in Lebanon, whereas the migrant youth in Cape Town evince very different life trajectories in which their survival depends on improvisation within new networks of relations among peers because no continuity with families and ties of kinship can be assumed. We get a very different picture of the coupling and decoupling of vulnerability and poverty in the three cases discussed in this section, reminding us once again that the city is not the neutral site on which politics are played out. The youth whose tactics of survival, as well as the wild movements between wealth and scarcity, lead them to embody different affects of defiance, fear, and anger show us how the city is itself an actor.

There are three important issues that we wish to flag as points for elaboration and/or contestation in the other sections. First, poverty and vulnerability are differently conjoined in different social and economic milieus, which opens possibilities but also sets limits to the kind of politics that the urban poor might engage in. Second, the waxing and waning, the different intensities with which politics are engaged, brings out the role of milieu and its volatility not as the stable context but as constituted by a contingent coming together of different cascading scales at various points in time in the lives of the urban poor. Third, seen from the perspective that they themselves provide on their lives, the urban poor are not a closed category.
defined from above, say through the administrative imperatives of providing welfare pace Simmel, but are enmeshed within networks that include the nonpoor, who help them marshal information and resources, provide contacts, and mobilize themselves for action. In what direction these networks will be propelled depends on the character of space and time—the densities and rhythms that characterize city life—so that Jakarta, Cairo, and Cape Town are not neutral sites on which action happens but are themselves agents or participants in the political life of the poor.

Building, Dwelling, and the Politics of Governmentality

Who can make her dwelling in the city? The question is both political and existential. In his famous essay on building, dwelling, and thinking, Heidegger posits an intimate relation between building and dwelling, arguing that even buildings that are not dwelling places are in the domain of our dwelling. Our aim here is not to get into a metaphysical discussion but to take the insight that the domain of our dwelling includes the various activities through which we make a place for ourselves in a particular world. Seen from this perspective, we see struggles over housing and security of tenure as crucial activities through which the urban poor establish their rights to dwell through a building of material sites, relations, and networks through which they can find a secure habitation in the city. Here, too, networks with the nonpoor are very important, but unlike the case of Mumbai, where it is the advocacy of activists with global connections that is seen as crucial to help slum dwellers stay put (Appadurai 2001; Weinstein 2014) against a global consortium of developers, in the cases described here it is local leaders who use party politics, law courts, or bureaucratic connections to forge strategies to counter evictions or to establish rights over housing.

Perhaps the notion of rights itself invites further reflection in the light of the papers in this section. While much debate in political theory centers on discussions of formal versus substantive rights, what emerges from these papers is the notion of incremental ways in which rights and entitlements are established. The poor see this kind of action through which they secure documents, file petitions in courts, and cultivate the resources opened up by the spatial density of the city (as in Jakarta) as well as electoral politics as action they can undertake in the light of the ambiguous and fragmented landscape of housing laws, court decisions, and administrative orders. Though a specter of uncertainty always hangs over how secure the rights they can establish are, these strategies fit into the overall experiences of temporality with which they live.

The comparison between the two low-income localities that Veena Das and Michael Walton (2015) offer shows that like the city, the slum, too, is a dynamic entity. The internal heterogeneity of the low-income localities in terms of control over assets or access to political connections translates into different outcomes. Thus, the taut and tense affiliations and lines of conflict within each locality show an intense engagement with democratic politics that goes beyond the activity of voting on election day. As Das and Walton conclude, the interesting issue is not whether democracy serves the poor well but whether the engagement of the poor in the political processes, even if driven by immediate needs, nevertheless provides the opportunity for the democratic process to become more deeply enmeshed into the social than would be the case if the poor had merely remained closeted as clients within a politics of patronage.

The category of need emerges again in Valeria Procupez’s (2015) contribution on the housing crisis in Buenos Aires, where she shows the tension between state efforts to treat needs as discrete (e.g., for housing, for food, for medical emergencies), taking the individual as the locus for whom aid is targeted, and the emergence of collective action through the mediation of NGOs or housing societies confronts the state with a different imagination of need—that of addressing the poor as a collective entity. It is important to underscore that the housing cooperative whose work Procupez describes grows organically through the efforts of the squatters. There are other cases in which the role of the NGOs, even when they are catalysts in the mobilization of the poor, remains ambivalent, for they not only take over some functions of the state (e.g., counting and identification of those forcibly displaced) but are also enmeshed in practices of governmentality (Cammett 2015; Chatterji 2005; Chatterji and Mehta 2007). The involvement of NGOs is also often at the behest of international donor agencies financing urban restructuring programs, which turn both the NGOs and international organizations such as the World Bank into addresses of protests by the poor (Randeria and Grunder 2011). Writing on postwar Sri Lanka, Harini Amarasuriya and Jonathan Spencer (2015) capture the temporal properties of a particular moment in the history of the city when speculative capital and military force combined in an attempt to bypass the well-worn channels of urban politics (as also shown by Bayat [2015] for Egypt). The milieu is also marked by Buddhist nationalist rhetoric and by wild rumors as the targets of hostility shift from the “Tamil terrorists” to Muslims. It is within this milieu that postwar reconstruction of Colombo takes on the form of demolition of slums and relocation of slum dwellers to more peripheral areas. The new beautification drive is mapped on the ethnic and sectarian map of the city and its suburbs so that areas marked for redevelopment involve shifting of Muslim populations. Ethnic and sectarian tensions are thus constantly in danger of spilling into attacks on mosques and churches. The most interesting feature in the urban politics in Sri Lanka is the emergence of the military as a major actor in real estate development that gives urban politics a distinctive form. The relative novelty of the involvement of the army in the proj-
The collapse of state provisions for welfare in the long civil war (1975–1990) in Lebanon led to the emergence of sectarian organizations taking on the role of providing benefits and services that might not otherwise be available to those in need. Thus, sectarian organizations emerge from the politically volatile religious divisions, but they also contribute to the hardening of boundaries between religions by making service provision a reward for loyalty rather than a right stemming from citizenship. Melani Cammett’s (2015) work also raises important comparative questions, such as to why the politics of the poor seems to have taken housing as a need that can be made the subject of political and legal action to a far greater extent than health. Although there are examples of the political agitations around demand for anti-retroviral drugs in Latin America and South Africa (Nguyen 2007) and there is a history of AIDS activism, much of the politics around health has taken place at the level of those who act in the place of the state, such as the sectarian organizations Cammett describes or various international NGOs dealing with specific health conditions. Movements such as patient rights movements have been organized much more around particular biological conditions rather than around the poor as consumers of health provisions. The intense politicization of the issue of tenure security and the relative neglect of health as a political issue is an important subject for future research.

This is perhaps a good point at which we can ask how centering the notion of need (including which needs) as the basis for political action helps us conceptualize the institutions of the state and of citizenship in relation to the entitlements of the vulnerable city populations that overlap with the poor but not as a stable category of urban life. It is notable that the state holds a crucial place in the papers in this section—even Cammett’s (2015) use of the category of “non-state” actors alerts us to the imaginary of the state as responsible for addressing urban vulnerability and insecurity. In earlier work, Das and Poole (2004) had argued that the state is not so much absent on the margins, as many suppose, but is rather redone in a different modality. Randeria, too, has drawn attention to what she called the cunning of the state in shifting accountability to the World Bank for policy making and to the NGOs for the implementation of massive evictions within an urban infrastructure project in Bombay that led to a spate of petitions to the Inspection Panel of the World Bank by those displaced rather than the use of courts for adjudicating their rights (Randeria and Grunder 2011). What emerges from this section is the porosity of the boundaries between state and nonstate, or formal and informal, or public and private. Moreover, governance and politics are also not two distinct domains but are deeply made up by the relation they bear to each other. The lines between international and domestic law, law and policy, soft law and credit conditionalities get increasingly blurred in the way that governance works on the ground. This makes it very difficult for the poor to hold the state accountable or to know when and whether to address their protest to the regional or central government, to the local municipal authorities raising private finance in an entrepreneurial mode, to the city administration or to courts or special tribunals, to the parastatals implementing urban restructuring projects or the international donors financing these, or to “private” actors such as NGOs in charge of housing surveys and identification documents or builders, about who should provide alternative housing.

Should we then speak of the state in the singular at all (Hansen 2005; Spencer 2007)? The relation between multiplicity and singularity is not a straightforward one (Hacking 1972; Humphrey 2008); for instance, we see different shades of red but do not hesitate to assign the same name to them. Thus, what matters here is to think of the manner in which the network of actions and effects is materialized with reference to the notions of need, claim, urgency, patiency, waiting, defiance, supplication, and various other dendrite-like tentacles that reach into social life and allow the concept of the state to be extended.

Politics of Relatedness: Ethics and Aesthetics

Claims over the state emerged as a major theme of politics of the urban poor in the previous section. In this section the problematic shifts to forms of life that are being made or remade within a space of devastation (see also Han and Das 2015), when the state has itself been dismantled or is deeply implicated in the destruction of life through its structural violence. Indeed, as Sylvain Perdigon (2015) puts it, another world or another way of being in which politics, poverty, and sovereignty are differently aligned without the scaffolding concepts of citizenship and claims over the state is already present in many parts of the world. Is it possible to imagine what politics might be in such worlds? First of all, we note that this is not so much a scenario of society contra state (Clastres 1997) or of stateless societies (Das et al. 2014; Evans-Pritchard 1940) but of enclaves of exclusion and destruction brought about by the actions of the state and of new forms of warfare. Thus, refugees in Tyre in Perdigon’s paper, who protest that it is “otherwise” for them, are not enacting freedom from the state but showing what it is to be bound within the tight legal structures of refugee encampment. Hayder Al-Mohamad’s (2015) privileging of everyday life as in itself a form of moral being-together comes in the wake of the complete destruction of Basra in Iraq. Fiona Ross’s (2015) paper on the way a genealogy of raw life can be constructed from within the lifeworld of the poor in post-apartheid South Africa is offered as a critique of state practices from the perspective of inhabitants outside its norma-
tive order. And Carlos Forment’s (2015) account of the incredibly complex transactions within one of the largest “informal” markets in Argentina shows a form of plebeian politics that seeks to deal with vulnerability not through any standing languages of civil or economic rights but through a different kind of market ethics. In all these cases, the discussion of ethics and aesthetics does not stand in opposition to politics but might be seen as a way of expressing a different kind of politics than that which takes the presence of the state for granted.\footnote{The idea of aesthetics we evoke here is about the style of doing things and its relation to ethics as developed in Das (2012), Han (2012, 2014), and Lambek (2010).}

Perdigon (2015) reads the delicate aesthetics of refugee life in Palestinian refugees’ reticence in talking about poverty even though the precariousness of lives in the camps is evident. Yet, his respondents also maintain that in enduring the terrible conditions of refugee life, they are performing the religious duty of providing witness to the political oppression to which they are subject. Thus Perdigon perceptively remarks that talking about a sick body or a child who has lost interest in education in the camps is also a way of talking about politics, about the long history of Palestinian suffering that is a direct consequence of political actions by an occupying state.

Al-Mohammad (2015) asks for an analysis that would look at the multiple imbrications of violence, struggles, poverty, and care in the everyday in the light of the multiple collapses in Iraq following sanctions and occupation. None of these can be rendered intelligible if taken one by one as if these were discrete experiences. Like Perdigon, Al-Mohammad, too, speaks of an ethics of being-together that is quite different from the dominant paradigms of self-cultivation or obligation. Calling it an ethics of the “rough ground” (after Wittgenstein), Al-Mohammad shows that the multiple imbrications produce a dynamic understanding of life whose horizon is neither determined by nor limited to the established categories of kinship, tribalism, Islam, or sectarianism. If what we think of as the normal paths to political engagement are closed here, an ethics of the rough ground seems to open up the paths to criticism, such as that voiced against the occupying forces and against Iraqis themselves for what are seen as complicities with the practices of the Ba’athist regime, going back even farther for some, asking, after all, who killed Imam Husain? How our modern understandings of what constitutes politics might become responsible to these multiple forms of critique from those who have been excluded forcibly because of the darker side of the global politics of war and occupation is the challenge that Perdigon and Al-Mohammad pose, turning the mirror back to modernity.

It is not the violence of war but of the slow knife of erosion of the everyday of which Ross (2015) speaks, tracing the complex relation between “raw life” as it emerges from within the life forms of people from the largely Afrikaans-speaking community in Cape Town. “Raw life” implies rough, crude, indecent, vulgar, and other such synonyms as against decent, respectable, and living in accordance with social norms. Yet it is within this rawness of life that she shows how communities or households came into being organically, precariously perched around care of children left orphaned by the high AIDS mortality before antiretroviral drugs were available or around care of the dying. Rawness and decency then are shown here to be two forms of life and not simply the sovereign power’s distinction between qualified life and bare life as in Agamben (1998). In all these cases we see an ethics of care that in its determined commitment to sustain life shows paths other than that of liberal citizenship through which life comes to be sustained.

Forment’s (2015) paper offers important insights into how the working poor in a district in the vicinity of Buenos Aires, pauperized by the economic reforms of the mid-1990s, re-invented a form of plebeian citizenship through the creation of a mass market for the poor. La Salada, although characterized by the European Union as a market in counterfeit goods that was steeped in illegality, evolved an everyday ethics of being-together through which dispossessed workers could recreate a form of life in which they could claim rights without having to take the position of victims of slave labor. This right “to have rights” bypasses the mediation of NGOs or human rights organizations and evolves a different modality of transacting work and payments. There is a fascinating discussion here of how practices of governance changed as legal and fiscal measures were redesigned to convert the Salada residents into willing “tax payers.” We realize that plebeian energies are often viewed with suspicion as they are hard to contain and are often considered suspect (Thompson 1974), but both Bayat (2015) and Forment in different ways show how the role of plebeian energies might be crucial for rethinking urban politics.

Together, the papers in this section open up different paths for thinking of the urban poor and rethinking what constitutes politics outside the frame of the liberal and neoliberal notions of citizenship and of sovereign individuals. In all these cases the relation with the state might be characterized as a moving, shifting, unstable relationship (a point made by all the authors in one way or another). In some cases the everyday life honed out of the conditions in which poverty and violence are imbricated depends on an ethics and aesthetics carved through improvisations and innovations on the given categories of kinship or community. In other cases there is an attempt to remake the networks of relations that include the transactions with street-level bureaucrats or other brokers and instruments of the state. In all these cases there is a critique generated from within these life forms of the possibilities and limits of formal politics that deserves utmost attention as itself a form of politics in order to recognize the work that the poor do in the affirmation of life.
Aspiration, Cultural Production, and the Claims over the City

Much of the work on cultural production has been influenced by Bourdieu’s (1993) compelling analysis of the autonomization of the field of artistic and intellectual production. Indeed, Bourdieu’s analysis of the emergence of art as an independent domain of social life reflected in the distinguishable category of professional artists and intellectuals, emergence of art markets, and the democratization of the viewing public through such spaces as museums has been attentive to the separation of art from religion and from its feudal underpinnings. The two remarkable papers in this section ask a different kind of question: might we think of a different direction in which social theory might go if the artistic and media productions by those who are poor or are otherwise marginalized is moved to the center of our attention? It is true that in recent years the spaces (physical and social) that the poor inhabit have become subjects of popular cinema (e.g., Slumdog Millionaire) or television series (The Wire) that have received critical scholarly attention (Bardhan 2011; Jameson 2010; Marrati and Shuster 2012; Potter and Marshall 2009), especially with regard to the specificity of local politics in a serial such as The Wire. One might ask whether this change in public mood might be read in part as the result of a greater assertion of new cultural forms that have grown out of the lives of the poor, for better or for worse.

The two papers in this section take up the issue of cultural production and problematize the category of the poor in different ways. Peter Brown’s (2005) work on the place of the poor in the aesthetic of society suggests that the concern with “the poor” as a bounded category emerges in early modernity in Europe as a result of changes in the conception of charity. The ancient and medieval conceptions of charity, argues Brown, defined the poor as fellow citizens, members of the city. The transformation in early modernity was not to incorporate the poor within one’s sociality—they were seen as eminently forgettable—but to solve a social problem that the poor posed not as fellow citizens but as marked purely by the fact that they were recipients of charity. In other words the aesthetic of society excluded the poor, which necessitated the injunction to “remember the poor,” pronounced by religious figures who had themselves lost their prominence.

In present day Zambia, the ubiquity of antipoverty programs and the presence of international development NGOs that dominate public discourse on poverty means that the “poor” as a category are constantly made present—there is no need to remind anyone of their presence. As Harri Englund (2015) says, most Zambians have come to think of a majority of their fellow citizens as the poor, as those who are in need of aid or charity in some form. Within this dense discourse, the intervention of Gogo Breeze, a prominent radio personality, manages to insert a different aesthetic altogether. Gogo Breeze’s radio program converts the stories of misery into comedy, but the parodies are softened, for he also creates a persona for himself as the grandfather who can chide the grandchild/listener. Thus, he does not allow the listeners to approach him as if they were asking for charity from the state or the NGOs but rather as an elder kinsman who can advise them, making mass mediated kinship do the work of dissolving the overdetermined category of “the poor.” Through a close analysis of a dispute between casual laborers and a Chinese-owned cotton company and Gogo Breeze’s intervention, Englund shows that ironically, an aesthetic of “forgetting the poor” is produced, converting them into kinsmen with all the implications of solidarity, conflict, hierarchy, and the complex affective connotations of being junior kinsmen.

There are interesting resonances between Englund (2015) and Perdigon (2015) in that in both contexts there is an aesthetic of refusing the position of recipients of charity or welfare based on liberal notions of sympathy and charity. However, the differences are also important, for in the case of Zambia, it is the public domain in which the contests are staged, whereas in the case of Tyre, the delicate negotiations through which poverty remains unspoken (but not unacknowledged) take place between kin and neighbors. This contrast might lead us to ask how cultural productions of the sort described in this section might be helpful to think further on the separation and linkages between different kinds of publics within which the problematic of “the poor” is crystallized or dissolved.

Teresa Caldeira’s (2015) paper shows the complexity of spatial transformations in the organization of the city of São Paulo, where (as in many other places) peripheries have played a central role in the development of the city and yet residents of these peripheries are often fenced off from the more affluent parts of the city. Caldeira suggests that important changes in living conditions in the peripheries along with generational shifts led to a new youth culture marked by the production of musical forms such as rap music and popular art forms such as graffiti and píxaçoes. These new cultural forms together with what she calls marginal literature simultaneously embodied the conditions of the peripheral areas and expressed aspirations for rights to circulate and even possess parts of the city that were inaccessible to the youth from the peripheries (Carvalho 2013; Sá 2014). Are these primarily transgressive practices to be rendered as

2. Compare Clara Han’s (2012) subtle discussion of how the official characterization of one as poor in Santiago and eligible to receive aid also makes one a subject of surveillance and compels one to perform one’s poverty. In contrast, the neighborly acts of kindness based on what she calls catching “critical moments,” when a family on the edge of a precipice might be supported (similar to the cases described by Al-Mohammad [2015]), must be performed in a manner that the dignity of the other is maintained.
crimes against property, or are they forms of popular protest against established institutions or simply plebeian energies that have no better outlets? Caldeira argues it is all of these, yet she suggests that such artistic forms imply a crisis in the relations between men and women (the art is clearly marked as masculine) as well as between the generations. Unlike Englund’s case, the idiom of kinship appears frayed in this form of cultural production. As we shall see, this theme of broken kinship comes up as an explicit theme in the discussion in the next section as we look at the forms of social violence produced by and in the city.

**Urban Precarity, Forms of Violence, and Fading Hopes**

In this final section we circle back to the issues of volatility, temporality, and vulnerability with which we started our discussion in the first section. The three papers in this section (Auyero 2015; De Boeck 2015; Leibner 2015) offer a hard, even clinical look at the ways that the lives of the urban poor are deformed by the violence, exclusion, and crumbling infrastructure in poor neighborhoods in Kinshasa, Tel Aviv, and Buenos Aires, respectively. How should we understand the experience of limits and the failure to bring projects for better infrastructure or enhanced security in the poor neighborhoods to fruition?

One way to interpret the three papers in this section is to ask what we can learn about the state as a political institution from these fragile attempts, often doomed to failure, but nevertheless undertaken repeatedly by the poor? What understanding of politics might we generate by confronting the stark facts of interpersonal violence, disorders of addiction, or high rates of crime that characterize the slums and other such neighborhoods where the poor reside? The fact that these very factors often lead prominent policy makers or the media to characterize the slums as violent and disorderly poses the challenge, can social scientists use these words and mean otherwise?

Filip De Boeck (2015) provides a sensitive description of the experience of being poor in Kinshasa in terms of daily improvisations and strategies that become necessary to meet the simplest of needs. He thinks of poverty in terms of rhythms of syncopation and suspension (as we described earlier) and of the narrowing of opportunities. Indeed, for the poor, time has of syncopation and suspension (as we described earlier) and of the simplest of needs. He thinks of poverty in terms of rhythms of syncopation and suspension (as we described earlier) and of the narrowing of opportunities. He is not suggesting that this form of life is intrinsic to the city but argues that economically disastrous policies of the Mobutist state led to a crumbling of what infrastructure was available, creating a city that secretes violence with signs of decay dominating the senses.

Here we must pause and ask a comparative question. The crumbling infrastructure, or the lack of access to basic services, which De Boeck (2015) describes, and what he perceptively calls the provisional character of life in Kinshasa, is found in many settings described in this special issue and in other works on the city. Yet there are very interesting differences in the way that inhabitants of slums or unauthorized colonies in Delhi or Colombo seem to use the networks with politicians and bureaucrats, or how they use the law courts that enable them to take some steps in ameliorating their conditions, or at least to keep an immediate crisis in abeyance. The detailed work done by economist Collins et al. (2010) on detailed economic diaries of the poor who live on less than US$2 a day show the complex financial transactions that the poor engage in through extremely calibrated networks of debt, credit, gifts, pooling of incomes, and management of expenditures. Should we then be looking more closely at the tight-knit texture of networks and their absence or at the way in which poverty, violence, market strategies, neoliberal reform, war, crime, and a host of other conditions are nested in each other? Just as to be poor in São Paulo in the 1950s is not the same thing as to be poor in 2014 (Caldeira 2015), so it would seem that an understanding of the milieu as a dynamic entity is essential for understanding how different possibilities of action open up or close within the context of overall want and precarity.

Gerardo Leibner’s (2015) work in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Tel Aviv, where he and his activist colleagues tried to support the struggles for housing, delineates the plateaus, the ascents, and the descents that mark such a movement of forging collective action across class, ethnicity, and gender. Undergirding these movements is also the stable architecture of normal politics. For instance, the history of dispossession of land that belonged to Palestinians means that encroachment over government land, or even privately owned land, under the Israeli state is seen equally as a protest against such dispossession. The Ashkenazi-Mizrahi divide plays out not only as one of social distinctions but also of different evaluations of citizen subjects along lines of ethnicity. Finally, Leibner’s paper—along with Ross’s contribution on the blacks who are living outside the townships in South Africa—addresses the gender dimension of these housing struggles as well. Women, who are organizing for housing as single parents, also have to counter the gender-based interpersonal violence in their lives. There is some fading of hope as the protest movement in HaTikva gets co-opted in the structure of political patronage, but as we see in the fine-grained analysis offered here, it is not that the poor do not protest because they are too constrained by their survival needs; rather, they protest precisely around questions of immediate needs. However, the political architecture ends up in dissipating these moments of rebellion against the injustice of state practices to realign them within politics as usual—the politics of patronage, of political bosses, and xenophobia against African migrants or other even more vulnerable populations (see also Williams 2015).
Javier Auyero (2015) takes up the theme of interpersonal violence, crime, and the ambiguous nature of the state in Argentina in the final paper of this special issue. He argues that not all violence is redemptive (as in Fanon’s [1967] famous analysis) and that chronic low-key violence can corrode the possibilities of life for the urban poor. Pointing to the rising rates of homicide, drug related crime, and persistent fear that stalks people in their everyday lives (cf. Gayer 2014), Auyero feels that forms of localized politics provide an important lens with which to view the functioning of the state as a political entity. First, he argues that the contradictory character of the state comes out in stark relief, as we see that policemen and street-level bureaucrats are actively engaged in the production of the violence through which the drug trade and consumption is organized. Yet they are also the ones who families sometimes trust to even help control and reform the youth who are becoming impossible to manage within the domestic setting (see Das, Ellen, and Leonard 2008 for comparable situations in the case of addiction and interpersonal violence in African American families in Miami). Second, seeds of political protest might, nevertheless, be sown in the community, making room for the emergence of collective action. Yet so strongly does fear act as a mode of social control that it is hard for residents to organize themselves for fear of reprisals from political bosses, local mafia, and the police.

If interethic conflicts and interpersonal violence acted to corrode the solidarity of the poor in the case described by Leibner, in Auyero’s case we realize that it is not poverty in itself but its social correlates of what Das and Kleinman (2001) called the slow knife of everyday structural violence that create the limits to what kind of politics may be possible. We might also note that while political action in the way it is recognized in political theory might not be possible, other paths open up for engaging the other through proximity—a mixture of a new kind of stranger sociality (Al-Mohammad 2015) and neighborly attention (Han 2012) that scholars have written about in similar spaces of everyday devastation. Simultaneously such spaces might enable other kinds of social actors (nonstate actors, as Cammert [2015] calls them in her paper) to become service providers giving some relief against the urgency of having to meet needs and also crystallize new kinds of conflicts, say along sectarian or ethnic divides.

Concluding Thoughts

We have privileged the practices of the urban poor, irrespective of the unstable nature of this category, for an understanding of the city by foregrounding the categories of need, ethics, aesthetics, and relatedness in their lives. We started by asking how we might render the relation between the category of the poor and the city form to understand the participation of the poor in politics as well as its limits. We conclude by giving a brief account of how our understanding of the three terms in question has evolved through the papers presented here and the importance of temporality, varying intensities, and the movement between everyday rhythms and the effervescence of daring, revolutionary fervor, or other moments at which an act of daring might defy the everyday.

It is notable that all our authors are agreed that the category of the poor comes to be defined as a composite category primarily as recipients of assistance (charity or aid) through the eyes of another institution (such as the church or the state). Writing in the field of literary criticism, Jones (2003:766) asks, “Is there a theory of poverty which would help us interpret modes of literary production that have grappled integrally with the ethical, cultural, and linguistic difficulties of defining poverty as a substantive category of social being?” We hope that the papers in this special issue show that part of the difficulty arises from treating the poor as a category separable from other social forms and defined through violence, care, kinship, neighborhood, state, ethnicity, gender, or class. The category of the poor is thus dissolved through the density of relatedness that enmesh the poor in the highly heterogeneous networks, as the contributions to the special issue amply demonstrate.

Just as the urban poor live in many heterogeneous networks, they also live and act in multiple heterogeneous temporalities, individually and together. The analyses reveal how much work goes into crafting or holding on to fragile relationships over time or into simply maintaining the status quo in the face of the ever-present threat of demolitions and forced eviction and defending the ground that has been quietly encroached on (see esp. Ross). De Boeck’s marvelous concept of the “politics of syncopation” portrays how poverty modifies not only the very rhythm of daily life but also of language, truncating the temporality of the day, by constantly generating time- and energy-consuming deviations, and thereby it limits and reduces options on all levels of everyday life. Yet others show that the time of emergency is punctuated with other rhythms, such as that of patience, which we want to argue becomes a way of doing politics, a point we take up a little ahead.

In American social theory, the poor were seen to develop a subculture, a “way of life” (Harrington 1981); Oscar Lewis (1969) in his comparative analysis of Mexican and Puerto Rican communities stated that the “culture of poverty” goes beyond regional, racial, or national distinctions. On the other hand, there are the theses of poverty as noble or purifying as in some strands of Gandhian thinking. The papers here show that we cannot ascribe essences in relation to either divide—there might indeed by a way of containing the erosive effects of material want and recasting it as attraction to frugality (Jackson 2011; Singh 2011) as comes out in the ethnography of Perdigon or a waxing and waning between the insecurity of hunger and the exuberance of temporary access to money (Williams). Much depends on who is doing the representing
or the counting, so that the poor might crystallize as a category in government records and be reassembled through the imbrications of global, national, and local histories of governance and of the order and disorder generated through war, violence, or market reforms.

This is not the place to rehearse various theories of what constitutes politics in any detail. We would like to note, though, the tension between the pragmatists, who think of politics in terms of instrumental rationality and the art of strategizing to see who gets what, and an idealized notion in the genealogy of Nietzsche that the foundational question of politics is what humankind ought to become (Comway 1997). It is very interesting that we find strands of both conceptions in the ethnographies presented here. Certainly the struggles around infrastructural needs that many authors take up are about strategy and about being able to use the tools of citizenship and social movements, but ideas about social justice, sustaining life, and the right to improve one’s habitation are also posed as ethical issues (see Das 2014). Even the refusal of certain subject positions as the poor, who are entitled to charity, or the contests over depiction of one’s neighborhood as one of thieves, or of one’s labor as slave labor, shows that ideas about what it is to achieve one’s humanity outside the discourses of human rights or the apparatus of humanitarian governance are present within the most pragmatic of actions driven by need. Also, if we consider the questions of state and sovereignty as integral to questions in political anthropology (see Spencer 2007), then we see the state here not as a regulatory institutional configuration standing over and above the population it governs but as being made and remade at the margins (Das and Poole 2004).

The category of time again becomes relevant when we consider how time becomes an important resource in the hands of the state (or of nonstate actors who are using the same apparatus of governmentality) to discipline those who make claims on it. Waiting is the mode through which citizens experience the modern state temporally, a point underscored by both Auyero and Procupez in their respective papers, though toward different conclusions. By pointing to bureaucractized time as the privileged exercise of power, Bourdieu had suggested that waiting implied “submission” (2000:8). Auyero (2012:2) has similarly observed in his earlier work that the poor are disciplined into becoming “patients of the state” by being “temporarily neglected, unattended to, or postponed.” The poor are not only made to wait longer (Corbridge 2004:18) but are also granted shorter appointments with officials, if and when they are given one at all. Local middlemen facilitate such contacts to bureaucracy and elected officials but also assist in reducing waiting time. But often citizens are not made to wait because of state cunning, corruption, or inefficiency but because of the unpredictability and complexity created by the coexistence of a plurality of overlapping rules, regulations, and normative frameworks (Randeria 2007a, 2007b). If waiting generates anxiety and despair because of the uncertainty of outcomes and the maze of addressess, it also keeps alive a semblance of hope. It is in the interstices of the duration of postponements and delays that we can discern some of the politics of the poor (Randeria and Grunnder 2011). As Procupez shows, if one moves from the individual to the collective level, a different temporality of “patience” comes to nestle within this temporality of waiting. Often the poor move the courts in an effort to stretch time through the delays this inevitably entails (Randeria and Grunnder 2011). Yet as Al-Mohammad’s ethnography shows, the need to respond immediately or to postpone an action might turn out to be a matter of life and death (a point made by Auyero too), showing how many different kinds of durations the poor and those made vulnerable by a combination of violence and want have to calibrate in order to survive.

The papers assembled here clearly invite us to rethink the way need and want might be seen as political categories and not simply those relevant for administration. As the papers, especially those in the sections “Politics of Relatedness” and “Aspiration, Cultural Production, and the Claims over the City” (but also in other sections) make clear, the forms of expression that knit the political and the ethical are also ways of providing critical commentary on one’s conditions—they might not correspond to a Habermasian notion of discursive public sphere, but they show that such fundamental notions of politics, such as consent to political community, are not to be assumed as given simply because of the precarious conditions in which the poor live and work.

Finally, the discussion of the city form offers fascinating possibilities to consider the shape that politics takes in relation to spatial and temporal configurations. The literature on the anonymity of subjects and stranger sociality in the making of publics in the city is a rich literature (Tonkiss 2005), but it has also led to a division between the anthropology of the city and the anthropology of neighborhoods. The papers show that the poor have established different relationships in different cities, so even such a basic question as who built different parts of the city and under what circumstances yields entirely different microhistories of built space in the same city. It is of course a truism that spaces of social life are social products. Yet it seems important to realize how solid, how concrete, and how objectively different various spaces in the city—be it the street, the boulevard, the walls with graffiti, or the buildings—are. It seems, therefore, interesting that the ethnographies show not only how social life in the neighborhoods we have characterized is tied with the material processes of encroachment, building, disintegration, and rebuilding but also with inscribing signs of different kinds that establish the presence of the vulnerable spaces right on the city. Indeed, in many cities of the global south, the poor cannot be seen as tucked away in the peripheries, for even if they are physically confined, their presence organizes the sensory experience of the city as a place of experience and imagination.

Recent work on the city characterizes it as the “illegal” city (Datta 2012) or the “informal” city (Roy and Sayyd 2004)
even as most authors recognize that the lines between the legal and the illegal or the formal and the informal are extremely blurred. From the perspective of the poor or the residents of the peripheral areas, it is often the case that it is their labor that has built the city. Here, too, the passage of time makes even solid objects such as houses and buildings unstable. For instance, the volatility of real estate speculations in global markets means that some neighborhoods in the city (e.g., Dharavi in Mumbai) have become the subject of intense negotiations as builders try to have valuable land vacated by the slum dwellers. The specificity of Mumbai as a city, its history of activism, and the reach of the Shiv Sena (a Hindu right-wing regional party) cadres into the slums as the fate of different neighborhoods in Colombo show. Still, there are other cities and other neighborhoods in which the illegal city is never fully at home.

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The Urban Poor and Their Ambivalent Exceptionalities

Some Notes from Jakarta

by AbdouMaliq Simone

Rather than being sedentary strata of urban existence, the urban poor move in and out of heterogeneous transformations, becoming a body of critical experimentation in ongoing calibrations of circulation and emplacement. They are sometimes the “wild cards” of urbanization itself, less excluded from rights and livelihood or a reserve surplus of wasted lives than vehicles for both conjoining and disrupting clearly delineated sectors, territories, and policies. Reviewing various dynamics of local economic practice, provisioning systems, and the built environment in Jakarta, in this article I explore the ambiguous presence of the poor in contemporary urban systems of the so-called global south.

The Poor and Plasticity

In his magisterial work The African Poor, John Iliffe (1987) emphasizes that the key dimension about the poor is that they have been with us for so long. Similarly, poverty seems to be an intractable dimension of urban life, a necessary component for the now increasing number of modalities and territories through which urbanization is constituted and operates. Consolidations of productivity would deem necessary unproductive others or at least others whose very sustenance requires inordinate effort with few resources with which to work. Theories of urbanization, driven by the imperatives of capitalist accumulation, with its accompanying spheres of dispossession, are well rehearsed (Bannerjee-Gupta 2010; Harvey 2003, 2008). So the intent here is not to reiterate them but simply to reassert their necessity as a platform for other perhaps more experimental explorations of the instantiation of the poor in urban life.

Urbanization has attained a planetary scale whereby the entirety of the earth is affected by, drawn into, and remade by the need to continuously rearticulate discrete geopolitical, geomorphological, and atmospheric domains into the nexus of resource accumulation and the circulation of exchange value (Brenner 2013). As such, the city is no longer the exemplar or the culmination of urbanization. Rather, it exists in a plural field of multilayered patchworks, a component in an extensive regionalization of both coordinated and disjointed production, inhabitation, and governance. But this pluralization of urban form and process, its extensiveness and intensity (Brenner and Schmid 2011), would seem to depend on inscribing volatility into domains, metabolisms, cultures, and the earth itself. As such, this volatility cannot be exclusively commanded or channelled into a definitive and circumscribed range of effects. It disrupts, dispossesses, and reorganizes according to the logics and actors capable of mobilizing sufficient force and articulation. The dominance of capital is not obviated. But the very processes through which urbanization has attained its reach and diversity would seem to indicate the existence of a manifold virtual domain incapable of exhaustion and from which multiple potentialities for urbanization might be drawn.

The seemingly unequivocal transparency of the urban poor, their trials and tribulations, causal loops, and multiply configured impediments, may be a “mustered clarity.” Without denying the clear hardships experienced by the urban poor, there is something about the visibility of the poor, their very existence, that seems to shout out a sense of clarity. So it may be important to also consider more ambiguous positions, that is, senses where the urban poor “slip through” this clarity and operate in other ways. This is in no way to celebrate the resilience or tactical brilliance of the urban poor—the clever way they manage to eke out an existence in conditions of chronic scarcity and exploitation. There is no romance here. Rather, I consider the intricate intertwining of the poor into the material and social milieu where it is not easy to quickly decide unequivocal relations of power, advantage, or deprivation.

I will take the city where I live, Jakarta, and some of the work I have done with colleagues and institutions over the past years as a site for reflecting on some of the conundrum involved in discerning the urban poor as either a coherent category of urban existence or a specific life trajectory. Certainly the poor congregate in territories in Jakarta that could easily be referred to
as slums or shantytowns and where there are clear histories of exclusion, dispossession, blockage, and incapacity. Yet the “majority” of the central city of Jakarta remains a heterogeneous composite of ways of life, histories of settlement, economic activities, and contestations that engineer complex circulations of resources and opportunities, equilibrate access to experience, information, and authority, and cut across clear-cut designations of social standing. This is the case even as hierarchical social organizations, institutionalized indifference, and economic parasitism pervade.

Minor, sometimes indiscernible differences can register significant effects in terms of how urban residents perceive themselves connected to each other. In work that I did in Jakarta several years ago with the Urban Poor Consortium—a “congress” of community-based associations of the most precarious residents of the city—assumptions that social similarities could be converted into political alliances were quickly deflated. In the district of Penjaringan, several hundred households had established themselves under an elevated toll road, claiming parcels of space but having to purchase materials and “rights” for self-constructed homes. The costs entailed sometimes exceeded those of residents across the contiguous neighborhoods. These latter residents frequently paid exorbitant rents and fees, often in advance, to various brokers and for living conditions not much different from those living under the toll road.

On almost all social indexes, there were no differences between residents living under the toll road and those living in the areas next door. In each context, there was the same mix of formal and informal employment, ethnic composition, and length of residency. Some residents shared the same workplace, schools, cultural association, and religious institutions. However, even if average household expenditures were nearly the same, the trajectories of those expenditures could differ. Those living under the toll road were perceived as making strategic choices to accrue savings in lieu of investing in any long-term security. Those living in contiguous neighborhoods were widely perceived by those living under the toll road, and themselves as well, as forgoing any possibility of savings in order to invest in some kind of security, regularization, and access to the possibility of being registered as formal Jakarta citizens.

Under “normal” conditions, this bifurcation in emphasis served as the basis for elaborating a wide range of complementarities among residents. Trade-offs could be brokerc, exchanges posited, as the two different strands of emphasis could be combined to make possible numerous small-scale economic initiatives. But when those living under the toll road were faced with the immanence of eviction, proffered over a period of almost 2 years, it was nearly impossible to mobilize any moral or political support among other local residents for them. The municipal government at the time even recruited “vigilantes” among the residents not living under the toll road to start fires under the toll road, which were used as excuses by the state to clear out residents under the toll road in order to protect essential infrastructure.

So if there is a core essence to urbanization, it may be a sense of its “plasticity,” to borrow the term from Catherine Malabou (2011). It is the incessant exchangeability of substances where the entanglements of effort, body, stuff, and flow constantly re-duplicate themselves in ways that do not have to be the same or different. Rather, they constantly move on into and through strange syntheses. Neither fluid or static, landscapes and bodies reflect the traces of what has occurred to them, but how these traces “speak,” what influence they have at any given moment cannot follow a strict hierarchy of valuation. Constellations are torn apart and recomposed without relying on some clear sense of what should have taken place or what must take place. There are times when lives get used to the differences they go through, endure through the transformations. But there are also times when subjects and lives are indifferent to these changes, incapable of restoring a sense of continuity, where things are too different to know exactly what endures (Malabou 2012).

Inclusive Economies?

The sensibility of an overall environment is a particularly important field of inquiry related to the often simultaneously stable, volatile, dynamic, and fragile compositions of local economic production. While homogenous basins of impoverishment certainly exist as spatially marginal from the various real economies of urban life, the probable majority of the poor in Jakarta are inserted in highly variegated, heterogeneous interactions with others whose income levels and access to assets and resources cover a wide range of possibilities. To characterize particular districts as poor or not poor is often impossible, particularly given the limitations on available data sets and instruments for measuring aggregate levels of income and consumption.

The difficulty here is that many important economic domains articulate a wide range of logics, practices, means of remuneration, and temporalities. For example, in the district of Jembatan Lima in Jakarta, with its thousands of textile production and finishing units, at least a quarter of the city’s clothing is produced under highly divergent circumstances that loosely connect different forms of capital investment, skills, and labor at different times.

There are periods when the degree of inclusiveness—in other words, the opportunities for large numbers of residents to be involved in some facet of this sector, from the actual production or finishing of textiles, repair of machinery, transport, retailing, or provision of inputs to the production process—is intensified through fortuitous intersections of different factors outside of any specific actor’s control. These range from the practices of workers themselves spreading work around through sharing orders to splitting shift work or organizing themselves into competitively viable production units. They also can entail productive contestations among local political authorities and entrepreneurial groupings that redistribute opportunities and assets. There are times when certain synergies are attained in various interactions of subcontracting, finishing, piecework, and marketing that allow the scores of small outfits involved to forge
insertions into new markets collectively, acting with some autonomy from the patronage and corporate structures to which they otherwise “belong.” In other words, each unit, given the circuits of information exchange or informal sharing of workers and work, can at times exist in “separate worlds,” that is, working for particular paymasters and brokers as well as working for “themselves” on the side.

Such inclusiveness can also be interrupted through the parasitical and speculative actions of moneyed players, usually from the outside, who skew the distribution of production to particular and highly circumscribed groupings. These players attempt to impose specific linkages among a limited set of production units, suppliers, transporters, and marketers, limiting and undercutting the more varied and flexible configurations that otherwise would be continuously negotiated and worked out.

The kinds of densities required in order to promote the widest possible range of possible connections among various facets of particular sectors of economic production may place substantial stress on existing infrastructure, making upgrades of services difficult to implement. The intersection of different initiatives and efforts requires the ability of participants to pay attention to what each other are doing and for there to be a circulation of information and opportunities to deliberate and act on that information. Many policy interventions that attempt to further equitable access, to clean up or straighten out messy mixtures of residence, commerce, and informal politics, have specific spatial implications that can limit the overall inclusiveness of existent urban economic activities.

To separate out the poor from their embeddedness in such variegated and textured economic activities may have political importance in terms of ensuring greater equity among an overall urban population. But it may not necessarily help in terms of understanding the conditions of their very existence within the city. It is easy to argue that this existence is limited, its nature unjust and indicative of the logics of accumulation through dispossession. But it is an existence nevertheless, and an existence that largely takes place in thickly intermeshed interactions with those who are not poor.

Several years ago I was involved in an initiative, at the behest of a “progressive” staff of a municipal district office in Padamangan, a district in North Jakarta that is the site of a large number of small- to medium-scale textile fabricators, to help organize a formal association of fabricating units. The idea behind such an association was to introduce a common set of rules for enhancing safe and secure work environments, coordinating vehicular traffic bringing goods in and out of the district, and forging a consolidated force more capable of winning better deals with wholesalers who purchased finished products and wholesalers who provided material inputs. The local authorities also wanted to enhance the visibility of the district as a textile sector, bringing many operations out of the shadows and fostering collaborations that could make more profitable use of space, tools, and labor.

While the district personnel were politically astute enough to work on this notion through protracted consultations with the various actors involved in the sector as well as with scores of local civic and religious organizations, there was little overall willingness to engage in such a project. Participants in the local textile business would often complain vociferously about the exploitative labor practices of others, about how too many firms operated behind “closed doors,” and about the unproductive practices of fabricators undercutting each other. They complained about the excessive number of trucks trying to come in and out, a situation that delayed orders and deliveries; they all affirmed the need to increase their bargaining power with distributors and markets.

But despite these complaints and the acknowledgments of positive benefits coming from the proposed reorganization, they worried that the potential loss of heterogeneity—in the modalities and sizes of production—would somehow limit their own capacities. For example, they were convinced that they would have to eventually adopt uniform payment systems and cease the current practice of paying workers who did different kinds of jobs in different ways—from regular salaries and remuneration by the piece to flexible hourly wages according to the volume of orders. They were convinced that there were too many external, unseen interests behind the scenes and that the only way to strategically deal with them was to retain very different kinds of production and working situations in Padamangan as a way of “rolling with” this opacity.

Although participants could see and understand the various complementarities and conflicts among their different ways of working, it was difficult for them to assuage their fears that such an organization would limit their capacity to take on different kinds of jobs or put different kinds of jobs, workers, and operations together at a moment’s notice as they were accustomed to doing. Even when they recognized the ways in which they already collaborated extensively with each other, the prospect of putting these collaborations into words as a prescriptive policy scared them off.

Any cursory examination of the majority of districts in central Jakarta reveals the intensive proximity of diverse residential conditions and built environments. This juxtaposition is no guarantee that the eventual prospects of any specific poor household would be inevitably enhanced or their security strengthened. But it does point to the necessity of considering the existence of the urban poor within a broader range of economic and social interrelationships, making general statements about the characteristics, expendability, or precarity of the urban poor of limited value.

Entangled Densities

In the vast central city districts of Jakarta such as Bukit Duri, Johar Bahrul, Menteng Dalam, or Mataram, land politics have largely centered on where vehicles of certain dimensions can go. As in many cities, automobiles came to embody efficacy in the city. Even if a household had the financial means to acquire a car, it did not necessarily mean that they had somewhere they could easily put it. The past exigencies of urban
residence were—and, of course, largely remain—access to affordable places to live, something accomplished through high densities. Densities not only availed relatively cheap accommodation; they facilitated multiple forms of social connectivity, information exchange, and fluid labor markets that created their own versions of mobility and mobilization. The ways in which these densities were materialized did not permit easy access for automobiles, especially if they were to be directly stored within the confines of household space.

In initial spatial layouts designed through government programs or private developments, the usual pattern was to inscribe a few feeder and through-flow roads. Around these roads were built the majority of residential plots circumnavigated by small lanes whose sizes depended on the characteristics of the terrain or the extensiveness of the inevitable subdividing and parceling engineered by local residents themselves. Properties on feeder roads escalated in value as cars became more plentiful, and in many instances, areas that had not been accessible to automobiles were replotted, a process that required significant funds in order to assemble the land. Those with access to such resources would usually, in turn, construct large homes, often in accordance with local regulations specifying that certain proportions of land holdings had to be developed. At the same time, cars do find ways of fitting themselves into inhospitable conditions. In my neighborhood, Tebet Dalam, the small crowded houses that are a few steps up in size and quality from the conventional working-class three-room bungalow, take on a different aura as they squeeze a car into a makeshift frontage. The surrounding lanes barely allow a single car to pass, so herculean maneuvers are always required if more than two cars show up at the same time.

The stereotypical portrayals of automobility as producing less dependence on others—individuals capable of moving around the city according to their own individuated temporality and desires—seem to ring true in Jakarta’s car-accommodating areas. Here, a persistent quiet seems attributable to the fact that residents are either rarely at home or have little need to occupy the street as a space of social viviality or economic necessity. Although professionally, I often meet many people who reside in such situations, I rarely inquire anymore about events or conditions regarding the larger district in which they live because they always seem to know little about what is going on.

But this is not the case in some districts, where seemingly middle-class pavilions front a drivable street, creating the veneer of upward mobility and tranquility. For in the spaces behind these homes, often an entire other world has been implanted over time. In the volume of space between parallel streets, in the back lots of property, long histories of subdivision, subtenancy, and long- and short-term leasing have created highly dense “interiors” seemingly rendered invisible by the veneer of middle-class frontage. While conditions of density can be overwhelming, as intense crowding takes its toll on available infrastructure, residents of the interior often have far more extensive networks into the larger city than do the middle-class residents.

Highly intricate circuits of information exchange are forged that enable residents of greater means to circumvent their otherwise claustrophobic reliance on bureaucratic and patronage networks, based largely on where they work. As they are usually trying to complement their official salaries with income derived from various entrepreneurial initiatives that are usually provisional, experimental, and that do not consume large amounts of disposable income, these circuits become valuable “windows” on the larger city as residents of the “interior” are often folded into them as labor.

Cooking, chatting, grooming, cleaning, repairing, gossiping, and gaming all take place as part of the domestic and convivial neighborhood life. But residents primarily use crowdedness to experience another kind of mobility. They have a sense of enlarging their reach and access into events and territories that having cars would not really expedite. For they mostly talk about what is going on elsewhere; what others are up to who are not visibly present. Sometimes this interest in exteriority is concretized through specific projects—travels to markets or to distant work sites, collective investment in a trading place outside the district, taking over a food-selling operation near the parking lot of a new shopping mall, appropriating abandoned space for storage, inserting small trades in the fringes along busy thoroughfares, or running protection services.

Whatever form this interest takes, it becomes a possibility for residents of a district to be in a larger world together in ways that do not assume a past solidity of affiliations, a specific destination, or an ultimate collective formation to come. As such, what many Jakarta residents have come to misconstrue as poor neighborhoods generate an economic dynamism that enables those with a comfortable middle status yet increasing nervous dispositions to stay put and thus help ward us the incursions of big developers—for now.

Once one gets past the commonsense assumption that the poor are always more vulnerable, the spatial politics of the traditional residential districts of Jakarta dramatize a series of complexities and trade-offs. Contiguous districts of relative wealth and impoverishment offer each other specific affordances—each covers, hedges, protects, and sustains the other in ways that are not clearly just or without manipulation. The penetration of cars for the time being generates money that enables the areas where cars can not go to keep the really big and debilitating money at bay. These are twists and turns not easily available to concrete.

Marshaling the Poor for Urban Development

The ambiguities, exceptionalities, and intermeshings of the urban poor with intricate circuits of economic production and social affiliation are tempered by the ways in which they are positioned in shifting governmental policies and regulatory regimes. The purported clarity of how urban poverty is produced and what needs to be done about it are posited with increasing adamanty.

While housing shortages prevail in Jakarta as in many other major metropolitan areas, the exigencies associated with climate
change, infrastructure adaptation, and the promotion of greater social equity are cited with greater frequency as compelling rationales for "finally" doing something about urban poverty. In Jakarta, the engineering projects to mitigate flooding will force the removal of nearly 400,000 residents living illegally along the Ciliwung River. The multiple problems faced by the national and municipal state in acquiring land complicates the resettlement issue, and the unavailability of land is normatively attributed to an excessive volume of urban land having ambiguous status. The problems of flooding have been greatly exacerbated by overdevelopment, where megacomplexes are not articulated to the municipal water system and instead dig enormous ground wells that accelerate rates of subsidence estimated at various locations in Jakarta to be between 185 and 260 mm per year. That parasitics such as railway corporations and military complexes retain enormous amounts of centrally located undeveloped land as devices to hide budgetary deficits and speculation are rarely calculated in as factors to land shortage.

Acting in the name of more equitable and comprehensive provisioning systems for the poor launches a wide range of ramifying effects. Take the issue of low-cost housing, perumahan rakyat. As states have largely signed on to a host of international concords proclaiming shelter as a human right, states have largely withdrawn from any direct responsibility for subsidizing the costs of constructing and maintaining low-cost housing (Durand, Lasserve, and Selod 2009; Hoek-Smith 2008). Like many countries, selling mortgage-backed securities on capital markets has become the dominant source of housing finance. While it is true that even when states continue to allocate subsidies in some form for low-cost housing that its volume is woefully inadequate in relationship to need, the assumption is that aggregating the not insignificant savings of many lower-income (if not absolutely poor) households can provide the long-term capitalization of sustainable housing programs. The assumption is that such a strategy enables banks to lend at affordable interest rates over long time periods (Kusno 2012; Reerink 2011).

But in order for securitization to work, land has to be imbued with unequivocal status, its ownership clearly determined and registered. It is estimated that up to 70% of land in Jakarta remains uncertified, with most parcels falling within a nebulous region of being legally but not legitimately occupied. Land was transacted largely at a local level and through localized processes of registration with district authorities, a process from which arose a highly diverse mixture of lease rights, shared ownership, and land trusts (Mercy Corps and URDI 2008). Responsibility for land certification—as opposed to the actual multiple modalities of "informal" land transactions—belongs to the Badan Pertanaman Nasunal (National Land Agency).

The advantages of land regularization have been widely touted for a long time in terms of the ways in which property can become a fungible asset for lower-income households and institute greater security of tenure. But many Jakarta residents cannot afford the plethora of fees that surround the actual certification costs. These costs include investigations of any competing claims and payment of past taxes to local district councils. They often cannot deal with the social implications of definitive assignation of ownership in tenure situations where multiple actors have long worked out complementary responsibilities in regard to land use. Certification is not just a matter of bureaucratic efficiency. The National Land Agency has initiated a program that sends mobile offices across the city to accelerate the certification process. For many residents, certification entails complex readjustments of already intricate social and economic relationships—readjustments for which they are either ill prepared or are reasonably afraid will eventually push them out of the city.

In 2011 the government established the Liquidity Facility for Housing Finance program with an initial $268 million in investments—a facility that encourages both the consolidation of land needed to build low-cost housing at scale and the incentive for developers to provide low-cost housing and to precipitate the financial packaging necessary for households to take on affordable mortgages. Again this approach not only requires land certification but proof of creditworthiness, and credit is accorded only to those who can offer proof of full-time formal employment (Kusno 2012).

As such, this facility, purportedly undertaken in order to enlarge opportunities for long-term residence for low-income households in the city, potentially bifurcates neighborhoods where a thick intermeshing between formal and informal work has existed for decades. These are areas where residents may have formal work only for certain periods of the year, or where, more significantly, levels of stable income register no significant difference between those employed in formally registered production and service units or those working either in unregistered firms or, as is more often the case, working for shifting networks among formal and informal firms. For example, many Jakarta workers may be affiliated with formal firms but not be employed by them directly. Instead, they either work in what turn out to be more lucrative jobs in subcontracting positions or in plying the relationships between different kinds of firms. A person may work as a mechanic in a formerly registered motorcycle parts and repair shop part time but spend more time servicing company pools that use a large number of motorbikes for their work, a service that is shared among a number of different formal shops but for which there is no formal contract with the company.

This does not mean that there are no differences between formal and informal work or that they always complement each other or that there are not vast instances where informal work is simply a means of avoiding payment of minimum wages or taxes. Formal work, even if its direct remuneration does not always exceed informal wages, conventionally comes with benefits and guarantees not available to informal work. Rather, the point is to emphasize that most districts in central Jakarta have elaborated complicated interdependencies, market sharing, and mixed labor uses whose efficacies would substantially diminish and thus negatively affect the overall urban...
economy if formal land certification and creditworthiness of individual heads of households were the only devices available for accessing large-scale government programs of housing finance. Tools of administration are of course necessary in order to curtail misuses of informal mechanisms. In the absence of clear ownership and use provisions, much land can be tied up in protracted legal struggles, usually among family members, about inheritance rights, which many Indonesians prefer to remain ambiguous, as the specification of these rights is closely tied to the immanence of death. But any land regulation and adjustment system must make provisions for the long-established historical efficacies in how land is actually used.

The Powers to Usurp

In addition to housing issues, invocations of the need to do something about the urban poor frequently stand in for a host of other urban problems. At the moment Jakarta is seen as “just getting by,” largely on the swelling numbers of the “barely middle class” (van Leeuwen 2011; World Economic Forum 2011). The combined urban region of Bogor, Depok, Jakarta, Tangerang, Bekasi, and Cianjur has approximately 29 million inhabitants, making it one of the world’s largest urban regions. In the absence of any effective regional planning and administrative mechanisms linking the municipalities contiguous to Jakarta, these municipalities complain that the problems of low-income residents are being “exported” to them, thus limiting their own capacities for rational development. This is despite the fact that they now host a new generation of export-led and domestic manufacturing.

Among Indonesian cities, Daerah Khusus Ibukota (DKI) Jakarta commands the lion’s share of national revenue sharing through fiscal transfers based on an apportionment of national income taxes and revenues derived from oil and gas, forestry, fisheries, and mining. In part, this skew has enabled minimum wages to double in the city during the last 8 years. But these wages still do not exceed on average 1.29 million rupiahs per month, roughly US$130. This figure does not include 30% of the population that depends exclusively on some form of informal work (Mulyana 2012). The crowdedness of informal sector work oscillates according to macroeconomic dynamics. For example, the informal economy expanded substantially during the national economic crisis of 1997 and the global downturn of 2008, when demand for manufactured goods contracted, resulting in widespread job loss to subcontracted, casual, and temporary work (Bunnell and Miller 2011).

When the extensiveness of such transformations in the labor market were fully realized several years after the initial crisis—and after the rocky transition period following the end of the New Order regime in 1998—the national government instituted the Program Pemberdayan Masyarakat Kelurahan in 2001 as a revolving loan fund for microenterprise creation, which in the subsequent 6 years had 413,03 beneficiaries (Mulyana 2012). This program was complemented by the Jaminin Sosial dlam Hubungan Kerja di Luar Jam Kerja, which provided 24-hour insurance coverage for injured workers. This program was initiated because of the relaxed enforcement of both in-house work and transportation regulations, regulations viewed as an impediment to the absorption of larger complements of labor.

As much informal work requires some kind of space in which to operate, and where access to such space is sometime foreclosed by inadequate available capital, licenses, and connections, so-called public space may be appropriated as the site from which informal work is launched or managed. Additionally, where informal work centers on hawking, repair, carting, unlicensed transport, or food preparation, profitability is maximized by the proximity of these activities to major markets and transportation hubs. As the competition for customers can be fierce, various shortcuts are taken in order to assure the most advantageous visibility, access to needed inputs, and easy waste disposal. The volume of encroachments on public space not only increases but so do tensions between transport operators looking for places to pick up passengers or park, food hawkers, ojek motorcycle taxis, pedestrians, and so forth. The sorting out of spatial allocation and the policing of functional enclosures becomes the purview of “unofficial authorities,” known in Indonesia as preman. These “authorities” have also largely gained this position through usurpation and through collusion with public authorities who simply do not want to enter the fray of such complexities and are content to collect a variety of “rents” derivable from the officially illegal status of all of the activities involved (Harjoko, Dikun, and Adianto 2012).

Thus there is a long history in Jakarta of the poor’s effort to sustain themselves in the interstices of intersecting vectors of control and possibility. Because they are often officially considered illegitimate yet mostly tolerated without prospects for substantial citizenship rights, they are subject to the structuring and policing mechanisms of increasingly sophisticated extraparliamentary mafia-like “agencies.” These extract rents from the many different activities engaged in by the poor. They curtail efforts at assembling more proficient, mass-based consolidations of particular economic sectors or various forms of widespread political mobilization. Increasingly, these associations operate under the auspices of promoting religious virtue as an additional means of extorting money from a wide range of illicit activities that are allowed to exist as long as they pay up (Wilson 2011).

At the same time, associations of preman operate as facilitators of various transversal economic and social connections. They exert power not simply because of their ability to deploy violence and to act arbitrarily but also because they spend an inordinate amount of effort understanding the details of how each economic sector operates; they reach out to almost everyone with a genuine sense of generosity in terms of understanding the dilemmas and ins and outs of how individuals actually conduct their activities and livelihoods. This capacity has often been parlayed into efforts to defend districts, markets, and transportation hubs from the incursions of “big players.”
erty speculators have often been deterred from effacing specific neighborhoods because they do not know exactly what the implications of their "development" might be. This is because premen have been known to act with daring and impunity in staging (and exaggerating) their capacities to disrupt development plans.

Just as "eviction," "incursion," "rehabilitation," and "renewal" are the terms with which urban betterment is often posited, usurpation in its various ambiguous forms is marshaled as an approach to create spaces of operation for low-income residents. Associations of premen and their mafia tactics are of course parasitical and exploitative. They divide up turf and opportunities. But these delineations, these enforcements of particular enclosures, are never definitive and never prohibit—and in some instances implicitly suggest—"lines of flight" across designated territories. Once rackets, economies, and authority relations appear settled, once networks of tributes and rents have been elaborated, then these become staging areas for some residents to elaborate collaborations across them, under the radar, working out the wide range of problems that ensue when any unofficial organization seeks to sustain its hegemony over a particular domain.

In our discussions with participants in many of these associations of premen, they know full well all of the things that are going on behind their back. They even come to depend on many of them because they explore a wider range of potential relationalities among places and activities than their concentrations on maintaining control over particular turf or sectors allow time for. Thus, even when key, supposedly powerful, unofficial authority figures in particular neighborhoods act in collusion with big politicians, developers, and military entrepreneurs, they often know full well that they can only pretend to "deliver" a district in its "entirety" to a particular agenda.

The Politics of Provisions

Law 40/2004 requires the Indonesian government to provide the poor with free health care and social security. Additionally, the Beasiswa untuk Siswa Miskin provides tuition support for low-income children. There are a range of unconditional cash transfer programs offered during periods of economic crisis, particularly during spikes in fuel costs, as well as cash transfer programs conditional on households maintaining their children with adequate nutrition and schooling. But during the last decade there have been continuous renovations of sectoral programs in health, social security, school subsidies, job creation, and housing. Although the professed impetus for such renovations is the determination to "get things right" and to attain more dynamic synergies among programs, it also means that the integration of these domains, largely viewed as necessary in order to reduce poverty, is constantly tenuous and subject to institutional fractures and delivery gaps (Tambunan 2004). The circuits of poverty's reinforcement—for example, poor health makes it difficult to work, which results in lost income compensated by child labor, which means limited education and access to jobs and living conditions with significant health risks—require structural changes in the allocation of resources and a grasp of how resources are actually put to work in specific contexts.

The Indonesian government spends 6% of total government expenditures on poverty alleviation and 0.6% of its overall GDP (World Bank 2012). It concedes its inability to really grasp the trajectories of resource use, as well as certain responsibilities for macrostructural change, through the widely touted Program Nasional Pemberdayaan Masyarakat (PNPM; National Country Empowerment Program). In this program, small capital development grants, usually of about US$30,000, are allocated to each kecamatan (administrative district, which in Jakarta totals roughly 8,000 inhabitants). Democratically constituted committees use the allocations to repair local infrastructure, such as roads, sewage drains, and markets. A primary objective is to use this program as a means to enhance the capacity of local residents to participate in the administration of community affairs.

The absence of such participation was seen as a major impediment to one of the world's largest urban infrastructure renovation programs, the Kampung Improvement Program (KIP), led by the World Bank, which ran for 25 years, upgrading local infrastructure and benefitting some 3.3 million people. While KIP enhanced the basic functionality of precarious districts, it did not have sufficient funds, political determination, or community engagement to significantly adjust and consolidate land holdings in order to make significant improvements in actual shelter. It could "make over" deteriorating situations, but it could not engage the multiplicity of ways in which land was organized so as to mobilize interventions at scale and with sufficient authority to restructure districts (Silver 2008). Today most households across the city extend and reshape the residential structures they have access to in order to accommodate growing families or, more usually, to rent out for extra income. But the subsequent material and population densities and demands on aging or barely functional infrastructure suggest many immanent tipping points. Significant readjustments of land—that critical and volatile element of urban life—require substantial concords between the state and local populations that go beyond certification, compiling a comprehensive cadaster, or regularizing private property rights.

Without such concords, government-cultivated empowerment programs, such as the PNPM, rely too heavily on either cultivating mafia-type networks that deploy provisioning as a form of patronage, consolidating party machines that attempt to develop some delivery capacity at a local level but primarily act as a mechanism with which to link to big party figures at the top, or a more populist mobilizing of the poor through a generalized push for redistribution strategies (Rosser and Wilson 2012). While the latter gestures toward the structural shifts necessary to at least mitigate poverty, they are frequently proffered without an informed sense of how any such redistribution would actually be put to work.

What further complicates provisioning programs is that there is significant mobility in and out of poverty at approximately
equal rates. These transitions do not seem to be related to occupational transitions but more to educational attainment and the scope of work, particularly access to full-time work regardless of its degree of formality.

Although no empirical studies have been conducted in Jakarta on the relationships among sociability, network extensiveness, and the heterogeneity of social interactions as they relate to income levels and precarity, it is safe to assume that the outcomes of such a study would parallel those done in São Paulo. There, access to structured work and schooling as well as to institutional participation of various kinds constructs social networks much less dependent on family ties and local connections. This heterogeneity is directly related to differentials in income among the poor and the degree of their vulnerability to everyday crises (Marques 2012).

Access to full-time work regardless of its formality is important because only 3% of workers in Jakarta transition into formal work, whereas the reverse transition is higher at 5% (World Bank 2012). Informal work often comes without guarantees, security, safety, and usually offers only low wages. Informal work, particularly for those who have to run very small businesses, is usually exhausting, and the managers of these businesses often wish that they could find regular wage work even if their earnings would be lower (Duflo 2012). But informal work also can be folded into many different forms of compensation and asset creation that prove more adaptable to local conditions over the long run. For example, a friend of mine, Abaye, “runs” a small local market, selling mostly fresh produce, that stays open 24 hours a day, something that is unusual in Jakarta. He took control of the market through informal means, clearing out the existing mafia that controlled it, formally registering it not as a market but as a small enterprise, funding a police post nearby to provide the appearance of “official security,” and then undercutting the prices of produce at other markets. Abaye has no official status, but everyone acknowledges that the market “belongs” to him.

While the usual extraction of proceeds takes place under the auspices of covering “management and cleaning fees,” Abaye has also over time used the accumulated money to purchase houses in the area surrounding the market and resell them at fair prices, with low-cost interest rates, to the market workers who can afford them. He also provides low-cost, rehabilitated rental accommodation for market workers who had been living in shacks along the creeks near the market. Instead of using funds to improve the market infrastructure, which mostly looks like a mess, the funds have been invested in developing a trade in second-hand goods in an area contiguous to the market that specializes in printing and attracts a large number of customers from across the country. Workers in the market have become “shareholders” in this second business as an additional economic protection against seasonal fluctuations in produce market sales. While these efforts here are replete with ambiguities and contradictions, informal work does sometimes activate security-enhancing potentials that could exist in formal work but that largely do not, even if formal workers may enjoy greater individual autonomy over the disposition of their earnings.

Conclusion

The questions of the urban poor are largely questions about what it means for residents to "make it" in the city. How do residents negotiate the aspiration to be just as good as any other urban resident of the world yet, at the same time, remain close to the toolboxes of practices, sensibilities, and tactics that enabled them to keep adjusting to the changing realities of the city? If residents had once made significant accomplishments in building districts that worked for them, then what now? How are ongoing practices of autoconstruction and auto-management related to the professed determination of municipal institutions to reassert control over basic planning and delivery of services? What has to be considered in order for these accomplishments not to exist as mere relics or shadows of themselves but to constitute a source of influence on subsequent events? What kind of institutional assumptions are prevalent about who residents are and what they can reasonably or legitimately do? How can urban policy more effectively engage the various initiatives undertaken by residents to claim space and opportunity, but more importantly, be articulated to the specific ways that land, shelter, and economic activity have been provided and managed by various constellations of effort?

Given the constraints on what residents can do to secure a place for themselves in the city and aspire to particular ways of living within it, what are they now willing to risk, what do they see as possible, and what are the terms that they are willing to adhere to in terms of actualizing these possibilities?

Policy making and projects of development and the resourcefulness of resident livelihood formation have largely been elaborated as parallel, untranslatable worlds. It is self-evident that neither is sufficient without the other, although the terms of articulation are seldom apparent or consistent. The articulations and divides are full of complexities and deceptions: histories of apparent resourcefulness have often raised more problems than they have addressed (infusing cities with untenable degrees of complexity and dispersal). What often look like substantial assets of social capital, democratic practice, and social collaboration can be highly murky maneuvers of opportunism and trickery. Policy making is not always a reflection of capture to elite interests or an instrument of capital reformation. The categories used to describe processes, actions, and decisions on the part of different social and institutional actors are usually too stark and deliberate, not reflective of the complicities, exchanges, and imitations that constantly take place among actors and sectors that seem essentially different.

Thus, the challenge is to produce an account of urban contemporary city life that demonstrates the intricate interlinkages among how residents are housed, how land is used, how work and income are created, where people can circulate and congregate, how residents can access critical knowledge and use the
city as a resource for knowledge, and how residents can effectively register their ideas, needs, and aspirations and participate in the critical processes that determine their livelihoods and rights.

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Poor Men with Money
On the Politics of Not Studying the Poorest of the Poor
in Urban South Africa

by James Williams

Poverty and violence crisscross ethnographies of the African city. This is especially pronounced in anthropological research from South Africa, where considerable efforts are made to describe and document poverty and violence across segregated cityscapes. Correlations between poverty and vulnerability are often asserted in the literature: the “poorest of the poor” are presented repeatedly as the persons most susceptible to violence and harm. In this paper I aim to complicate how poverty and vulnerability are conventionally linked. Drawing from fieldwork on young African migrants’ informal work in Cape Town, I show how hazardous slight gains in prosperity can prove. Once the migrants’ entrepreneurial ventures took off, the youths were recast quickly as persons of suspicion and acceptable targeting. I present an episode in counterpoint of other migrants losing their property and means of livelihood. Countering expectations, these migrants’ descent into poverty’s inconspicuousness protected them during an outbreak of anti-immigrant violence. The ethnography shows poverty and vulnerability to be closely connected facets of urban life but more dynamically than assumed and not associable in predictable ways. I argue that anthropology’s disproportionately narrow focus on the most economically and socially disadvantaged members of society risks eclipsing small yet significant fluctuations in wealth and well-being among the urban poor as a whole. Such a politics understates their diversity.

“The Wrong Kinds of Migrants”

Anthropologists I met in Cape Town during the period of my fieldwork often told me that I was studying “the wrong kinds of [African] migrants” in their city. A well-meaned remark if hard to decrypt at first, this was circuitous, in retrospect valuable guidance in the customs and subtleties of local anthropological inquiry. It speaks to the complex politics of studying the urban poor in South Africa specifically.

Studying “the wrong kinds of migrants” encompassed several sets of concerns. It first referred to how the scales and sites of my project disturbed conventions. By conducting fieldwork with a diverse population of unaccompanied young male migrants in Cape Town who had traveled to South Africa from different West and Central African countries, had formed ties with each other in the city, and had organized themselves as debt economic networks that tentacled across the urban underworld, I was not studying a familiar diaspora of migrants joined by shared national bonds or a common ethnicity (cf. Greenburg 2010; Morreira 2013; Steinberg 2006). In further contrast to existing research in South African cities, particularly work in Cape Town, I had not embarked on a bounded fieldsite study on the lives of migrants in a specific suburb (cf. Dodson and Oelofse 2000; Owen 2011).1

The comment next concerned how I had failed to articulate my study in terms of the topical national debates and pressing political agendas that prominently shape the landscape of scholarship in contemporary South Africa (Becker 2007). Misaligning or at least too loosely connecting my research to these agendas, failing to pose my project “in terms of social ‘application’ or ‘intervention’” (Gillespie and Dubbeld 2007:129), the relevance of my fieldwork was brought into question. Though research on African migrants and refugees in South Africa was prolific at the time of my fieldwork (2006–2009), responding to vociferous discussion across and beyond the country about the presence and well-being of the millions of African foreign nationals who had come to South Africa since the end of apartheid (Crush and McDonald 2000; Hassim, Kupe, and Worby 2008; HRW 2006; Madsen 2004; McDonald et al. 2000), I had not framed my work—a study of entreprene

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1. “Migrant” is an old political, economic, and racial concept in South Africa. I use the term in an inclusive, recent, popular sense to refer to black Africans who live and work in South Africa who are not South African citizens. Like many migrants in South Africa, though most may qualify for it, few of the men I worked with have been granted refugee status there.
neuralism and survival in the shadows of an African city via networks of young male migrants—within such topical terms. I was reprimanded especially at the start of my fieldwork for not centering “xenophobia” sufficiently in my research proposals, a key word in postapartheid discourse (Desai 2008; Neocosmos 2006; Nyamnjoh 2006; Sichone 2008), which gained heightened saliency in May 2008, midway through my fieldwork, following a wave of exceptionally violent attacks on African foreign nationals in Johannesburg and Cape Town (Landau 2010; Pillay 2013). Circumnavigating urban South Africa in different orbits of surveillance and exchange to the majority of African migrants and refugees there, with different energies, aspirations, and social and relational fields, the youths I worked among were not seen as pertinent subjects for research at a time when migrancy and neighborliness had returned the nation so urgently to global headlines. The migrants were too minor to global saliency in May 2008, midway through my fieldwork, following a wave of exceptionally violent attacks on African foreign nationals in Johannesburg and Cape Town (Landau 2010; Pillay 2013). Circumnavigating urban South Africa in different orbits of surveillance and exchange to the majority of African migrants and refugees there, with different energies, aspirations, and social and relational fields, the youths I worked among were not seen as pertinent subjects for research at a time when migrancy and neighborliness had returned the nation so urgently to global headlines. The migrants were too minor to global saliency in May 2008, midway through my fieldwork, following a wave of exceptionally violent attacks on African foreign nationals in Johannesburg and Cape Town (Landau 2010; Pillay 2013). Circumnavigating urban South Africa in different orbits of surveillance and exchange to the majority of African migrants and refugees there, with different energies, aspirations, and social and relational fields, the youths I worked among were not seen as pertinent subjects for research at a time when migrancy and neighborliness had returned the nation so urgently to global headlines. The migrants were too minor to

Urban Poverty and Vulnerability

In her sensitive research on low-income households on the margins of the city, Fiona Ross describes political and economic processes that have produced a notoriously segregated landscape of wealth and poverty in Cape Town (Ross 2010, 2015). She references landmark works that historicize the study of urban poverty in South Africa, a reading of which might help explain why ethnographic research in South Africa today centers so consistently on the lives of the most vulnerable, the most harmed, and the most destitute and why South African anthropologists tend to see and critique their work inimitably in expressly moral terms. Possibly in contrast to how the urban poor have been constructed as an object of inquiry in anthropology elsewhere in the world, relatively late in the discipline’s histories (Das and Randeria 2015), Ross reminds us that anthropologists of southern Africa have been attentive to urban poverty for a very long time and have always conceptualized it politically.

My aim here is not to query the sentiments of the anthropologists in Cape Town who generously hosted and guided me during my fieldwork. Nor is it to enter ongoing local debates over whose research subjects are most relevant or appropriate (Nyamnjoh 2012; Van Wyk 2013). I want to pause instead on a small fragment of detail buried within the remarks made

2. Makwerekwere is a derogatory term for African foreigners used widely in South Africa, particularly Africans from southern African countries (Matsinhe 2011).
about the migrants in my project to elaborate a puzzle or inconsistency of urban life that I think is known to many who live in Cape Town but that is strangely often passed over in writings and reports on the urban poor. I want to present examples of this disconnect in the paper ethnographically.

As well as reinforcing this volume’s core claim that the urban poor do not make up a uniform whole (“the poorest of the poor” is an idiomatic phrase in South African scholarship, state discourse, and public conversation that already acknowledges their diversity), by framing my choice as between the poorest migrants from Southern African states on the one hand and the Somali migrants targeted most visibly by anti-immigrant violence on the other, South African anthropologists were also decoupling poverty and vulnerability as two contests of life in Cape Town. Many migrants in Cape Town live in appallingly impoverished conditions and struggle desperately to find work and housing, they explain, and many migrants are victims of violence, intimidation, and discrimination at the hands of state officials and local residents (a definition of vulnerability I use throughout the following sections), but, and crucially, these are not synonymous populations. My hosts were carefully separating two aspects of life among the urban poor that are widely assumed to coincide within the same groups and persons (as may indeed be the case for many poor black South Africans in much of Cape Town; see, e.g., Seekings and Nattrass 2005). Their comment helped me query the reliability of poverty as an index of migrants’ well-being and safety.

Reports into the causes of the organized violence against African foreign nationals in South African cities in May 2008 made similar conclusions (e.g., Bekker et al. 2008; FMSP 2009; HSRC 2008). While narrative accounts of the violence describe a general building up of antagonism and tense entanglement among the urban poor in South Africa since the 1990s, between African migrants and refugees and poor black South Africans most prominently, the statistical data painted a contrary and more specific picture. The data showed that the foreign nationals who suffered most directly from the anti-immigrant violence in 2008 (in terms of assets lost and physical injuries) were not the poorest. Anti-immigrant violence did not peak in areas of greatest social deprivation. Challenging sensational media coverage, the poorest African migrants in South African cities, who made up the majority of persons in the relief camps set up in the aftermath (Robins 2009), were very rarely victims of interpersonal violence.

**Poor Men with Money**

I conducted fieldwork in Cape Town between 2006 and 2009 with four networks of young male migrants aged 18–35, comprising almost eighty youths total from nine West and Central African countries. Their average age was 23 years. Almost all were unmarried and childless. I set out to understand how these migrants, representatives of a growing population of African youth crisscrossing international borders in search of employment and refuge, created opportunities for themselves in South Africa without legal documents, the support of family members, and the benefits of belonging as citizens.

The migrants demonstrated aptitude and resourcefulness as economic actors in Cape Town, a finding mirrored in comparative research on youth and livelihood in other cities (e.g., Cole 2005; De Boeck and Plissart 2005; Durham 2000; Hansen 2008; Honwana and De Boeck 2003; Mains 2012; Sommers 2012; Tienda and Wilson 2002; Weiss 2009). I sought to understand how they accomplished this. I studied the relations the migrants forged with patrons and partners in the city to courier and trade in small goods and illicit items. I mapped “territories” within which they worked and provided services. I observed how their mobility and forms of companionship made possible by their memberships in networks offered ways to elude the surveillance of the state and cultivate new niches for work.

The city itself became my fieldwork’s central actor. Its fast-changing form creates inconstant openings of opportunity and exposure. Attuned to its cadences and rhythms, the migrants made decisions to live and work in ambiguous, fast-changing urban areas in central Cape Town in which the possibilities for both fortune and risks were high. They poised themselves at volatile, distrustful nodes of citywide networks that exposed them to profound fluctuations in income and safety. These fluctuations make it hard to label these migrants stably as moneyed or impoverished, as vulnerable to risk or immune from it (though they identified passionately as both poor and vulnerable in our earliest discussions). Rather, and as I hope I bring out in what follows, there was always an unsteadiness to their wealth and well-being. Onsets of poverty and vulnerability were frequent and hard to anticipate. Daily life undulated between extremes; the sometimes illicit wares within which they worked and provided services. I observed how their mobility and forms of companionship made possible by their memberships in networks offered ways to elude the surveillance of the state and cultivate new niches for work.

Such opacities—a conspicuous access to money; blurry urban zones in which the migrants lived and worked; their rapid, unseen movements and vast reach of connections; an ability to survive in times of crisis; the sometimes illicit wares of their trade—turned these youths into persons of intense suspicion. They embodied a type of African migrant rife in public discourse, which made them infamous despite their small numbers: stylish, strong, and untrustworthily flush young men; “Nigerians” associated with unlawful activities and gangster violence, exemplifying capacities pungent with millennial capitalism and occult economies (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999).

I thus found and felt poverty and vulnerability throughout my fieldwork in Cape Town, but not continuously or transparently or in ways that matched the descriptions, calcula-

4. Such data included a breakdown of assaults of individuals, the destruction of migrant-owned property by time and location, and profiles of the persons who fled their homes as the violence unfolded.
tions, and intensities of poverty and vulnerability presented in most literatures on migrants in South Africa. In the following sections I try to bring out some sides to this: first, some scenes from a group of migrants’ nighttime work in the inner city, which shows young migrants amassing not insubstantial sums of money together from guarding cars and team trading in small goods and drugs, yet becoming progressively more vulnerable by doing so; second, the history of a household of different male migrants in the coastal suburb of Muizenberg, which initially thrived as a dormitory shelter for unaccompanied boys and young men but eventually succumbed to economic pressures and neighborly violence and emptied. These portraits muddy standard descriptions of urban life because they show poverty and vulnerability to be closely connected facets of daily life but in unpredictable ways and not directionally associable. The lifeworlds of this specific cadre of migrants might be best characterized by slight, irregular, and often rapid oscillations between prosperity and scarceness, danger and safety, solidarity and isolation. I argue anthropology’s focus on the poorest and most vulnerable migrants in South Africa eclipses such complexities and accomplishments.

Three points come through the ethnography. First, we see a flow of money through the hands and households of the migrants, sometimes in plentiful amounts. The youths’ trickiest challenge, in most cases, was not how to obtain money but rather how to hold it, keep it, and transform it into something of permanence. In the words of one migrant, they struggled to find ways to make their money “work” for them. Second, the ethnography shows unsteady, at times even inverse, relations between poverty and vulnerability. As the migrants’ entrepreneurial efforts began to blossom, for example, they faced greater scrutiny and resentment on the streets of the city. They scaled momentarily out of the discreetness and perhaps even security of poverty to become exposed and endangered. This challenges assumptions of poorness as a reliable gauge of social security.

Third, the ethnography shows once more how newfound prosperity among the urban poor places strain on relationships. This is where my paper speaks with other contributions from sub-Saharan Africa in this volume, where poverty and politics are explored in terms of relational wealth (De Boeck 2015; Englund 2015; Ross 2015). Among the young migrants, specifically from the perspective of the networks they worked and lived within, the advent of even small sums of money disturbed relations. Economic fortune thus not only brought heightened risks of violence and visibility, it also threatened to destabilize the bonds constitutive of the networks that allowed them to work and accumulate wealth as economic actors in the first place.

Night Work

The migrants’ work in Green Point ends promptly at 2 a.m. Though some of the cars they have been watching over since dusk remain unclaimed, thus unpaid for on the streets, they know it is unsafe to stay out longer in the city once the crowds have dispersed and the coldness and quietness set in. We gather to talk through the evening’s events and redistribute the money they have earned. An older migrant counts the pooled bills and coins at lightning speed and then dispenses the money back to the men in similar-sized handfuls. Money is stored over as many bodies as possible. No one risks traveling the city with the entire network’s earnings on their person. As they now start to leave their workplace to travel homeward through Cape Town in pairs and small groups, the youths are at their most vulnerable. These are the hours when the assaults and arrests of “Nigerians” occur.

For 6 months of fieldwork in Cape Town, for three or four evenings each week, I accompanied a 10-strong group to Green Point at nightfall to observe them guarding cars belonging to locals and tourists who patronize the restaurants and nightclubs in this expensive suburb. It is the classic occupational niche for male African migrants in Cape Town: an informal security service built from personal contacts; a line of work that demands charisma, patience, and an imposing physique more than permits or qualifications. The small sums of money migrants earn from guiding cars into parking spots on the streets and watching them until the owners return mask and enable their concurrent and considerably more profitable sales in “SIM cards,” the term we jointly invented for the small goods and illicit items being sold simultaneously. On a Friday or Saturday night, individual nightly earnings from guarding cards and selling “SIM cards” could exceed R200 per person, a considerable sum of money.

Although they are viewed by many in Cape Town as perfunctory and unskilled, I came to appreciate the remarkable collective organization and discipline their work required. The work is neither self-explanatory nor easy to observe. The migrants’ successfulness as car guards depends on the men always varying their roles and approaches, on staying alert and unseen in the city, on knowing when to use charm and when to show muscle, and on hiding their individual identities to present themselves publicly as an indistinguishable mass. Their well-practiced, unspoken, collaborative actions are swift and minute. The men dress deliberately in ways that allow the uniforms of traffic wardens.

5. Car guards offer an informal protection service to car owners parking on the street and in outdoor car lots in South African towns and cities. Car guards are typically male, South Africans or migrants. Newcomers to the city commonly mistake migrant guards for municipal employees on the grounds of the fluorescent bibs they wear, which replicate the uniforms of traffic wardens.
They taught me some of these movements. The first of these, “following,” referred to how the migrants watch each other on the streets. Each youth is assigned another youth to follow throughout a night’s work; this migrant follows another in turn. The web of surveillances forms a circuit among the migrants designed to ensure the network sees every potential customer. I sketched down their sight lines.

“Following” means the migrants have to keep track of two “stations” at once. As well as working their own corner or stretch of street in Green Point, the men must also ensure that the brother they are following has registered possible clients nearby, whistling to them if they appear distracted. It also means each migrant watches more than people. They must follow what has happened in an entire environment and also what might possibly happen to come. It is quite challenging in practice because “targets” are not always easy to categorize. Even close up, it can be hard to discriminate between a customer returning to their car, a shopper looking for a sale, and a passerby, each of which requires a different body, face, and style of approach. The men use every clue available to help classify their targets and assess situations between guarding posts periodically to prevent one migrant from guarding posts periodically to prevent one migrant’s face gaining unnecessary recognition by the police or patrons—was devised, they said, after masked Bakongo hunting rituals the youths had seen as children in which the identities of masked men performing (men they knew) were concealed from spectators. Presenting themselves as identical shells of persons but concealing and changing the individual inside, this practice partly addressed their security concerns in Green Point.

Other maneuvers were devised in South Africa. They said they had learned to copy Zimbabwean migrants’ habits of storing the takings of their work in sellable commodities. During an evening’s work, every hour or so, up to 1 a.m., the supervisors would gather coins earned from the men and snake over to Long Street to exchange them into bills, cigarettes, or “SIM cards,” which they could sell immediately. Such items were redistributed among the migrants to ensure no single migrant held the entire proceeds of their work at once.

Migrants’ actions in guarding and selling together proved coordinated, interdependent, and remarkably effective. The gestures and tactics they used were neither automated actions nor original inventions produced by contingencies or challenges of working in the city center. Rather, the men had assembled strategies to use in Green Point by copying others or finding ways to deploy old skills in a new economic setting. Shared terms personalized and dramatized their work. Past life operations found fresh use in this new city.

We see a migrant network here operating as a tightly ordered and profitable organization. Internally structured by a set of roles and duties that make up a working whole, the network deployed carefully planned techniques and strategies with corporate consistency. The migrants read moving landscapes collaboratively, arranging themselves in and across different working locations to boost their economic opportunities. They operated in the presence of tight surveillance, suspicion, and violence. Though individual migrants hold distinct places in the network’s history and life—among

6. Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.
themselves, each youth is known within the network for his distinct portfolio of skills, knowledge, and characteristics—at work on the streets, all of the migrants ultimately prove substitutable and secondary to the welfare and work of the network as a whole.

It was always difficult for me to reconcile the different intensities in the migrants’ behavior in Green Point. They conveyed palpable enthusiasm to work in this unsafe locality; migrants assigned car guarding duties elsewhere begged a transfer to Green Point. Even after incidents of violence, confrontations involving police or rival migrant groups, work spirits stayed high. When troubles occur on the streets, the network’s priority was to return to guarding positions as soon as possible. Migrants also know that the police will not intervene in fights between migrants or between migrants and local youths unless a tourist or a bar patron in Green Point is involved. “We’re alone out here,” one youth told me, emphasizing the vulnerability of the migrants in the inner city. They warned me many times that their sales pitch in Green Point could be lost instantaneously.

The Death of a Household

Joshua and Babatunde acquired the lease to their house in Church Street, Muizenberg, in February 2002, a sand-swept terrace tucked one street behind the scruffy coastal suburb’s main road. They lived in Church Street together until March 2008, sharing the house with large numbers of young male migrants they affectionately called their “sauvage boys,” whom they spoke of as both being employed by them and as under their care.

In 2002, when the men negotiated the lease to the Church Street house, Muizenberg was a thriving and greatly preferred place of residence for scores of African migrants and refugees new to South Africa (Owen 2011). Large migrant families moved into cheap, vacant houses and apartments in the area. Newcomers sought bed space in the homes of fellow nationals. Sensing opportunity, Joshua and Babatunde left their small apartment in the city to rent a larger property in Muizenberg and take in young tenants on a short-term basis, particularly those they deemed to have earning potential. They reasoned that the move would formalize their fledgling odd-job business in the Muizenberg area and enhance their status as connected, benevolent patrons. Joshua told me that over 60 boys had stayed with them since 2002.

In late 2006, when I met Joshua and Babatunde through three youths they employed, the household had stabilized to a dozen longer-term occupants. This occurred at a time when many migrants were starting to move out of Muizenberg to suburbs in the north or into townships, priced and pushed out by community efforts to regenerate and more strictly police the neighborhood—a demonstration of the fast-changing, patchwork geography of wealth, tolerance, and risk that characterizes the city’s urban form. Joshua and Babatunde’s once flourishing enterprises began to wane thereafter. In March 2008, unable to pay the rent they owed and fearing the repercussions that would follow from a formal eviction process, the men and their boys moved out.

The Muizenberg household was the largest in my study. Between December 2006 and March 2008, it comprised twelve permanent members. Joshua and Babatunde, 10 years older than the other members, comanaged the men’s work and household affairs. It was unusual among the migrant households I surveyed for its large and diverse membership, for how guests came by freely and frequently, and for how it remained fixed in one location for the bulk of its existence. Most unusually, however, it failed to demonstrate sufficient acuity of city life to withstand the financial and social pressures faced by young male migrants who tenant in Cape Town.

Church Street was two streets’ walk from where I lived. It held infamous status in the area. Church Street was singled out as the “epicenter of crime and antisocial behavior” in community and police forums in Muizenberg I attended at the start of my fieldwork. One enraged resident described the street as “a hell pit.” She called its mostly Congolese occupants “Nigerian drug pimps and gangsters.”

I spent many long evenings with members of the household. My relations there began in October 2006 when I met its three youngest occupants after a church service downtown that drew large migrant congregations: two cousins from Sierra Leone and their Liberian friend Simbah. I had seen Simbah’s Lone Star football shirt on Muizenberg’s beach several times before—he owned two of the shirts and was almost always wearing one of them—and that gave me a friendly comment to make as the four of us walked off in the direction of the train station. The three were impressed when I told them I had been to Liberia and had met several refugees from Simbah’s home county in Cape Town. We continued talking on the train, then over takeout coffee and chips on the beach, and later on the steps leading up to the Church Street house. I was struck by the ease with which the migrants poured out entire life stories to me at first meetings.

The mass of people and the sheer amount of activity in Church Street struck me most of all when I first visited the house in the last week of October: boys clamoring over saucepans of rice and stew Joshua had laid out on the floor for dinner; clothes and blankets strewn over floors and the backs of chairs; fast music coming from a stereo in one corner and a London football match relayed from a radio in another, each on full volume; garbage and beer bottles in piles; newspapers; more boxes than I could count; a cracked TV on mute. The dirty living room, where eight youths also slept, was cram. My entrance interrupted a mealtime, causing only a marginal disturbance. I was greeted inside like a close friend, told to step or sit where I wanted, then given a bowl and instructed to eat and drink. Dinner prefaced a typical evening in Church Street of talking and dancing and drinking that ended only when Babatunde decided to sleep and demanded quiet, or when the beer had finished, or when the Congolese
pastor down the road knocked on the door to plead for noise restraint.

Calm conversation was an alien mode of speech there. You shouted to communicate. For private discussions, the youths and I stepped onto the steps outside or into the storeroom off of the kitchen, which doubled as the bedroom for Mukanzi and I stepped onto the steps outside or into the storeroom off

shouted to communicate. For private discussions, the youths through a sigh of “Well, well, well” that indicated an important statement would follow; Babatunde by punching a wall or a boy—but a compelling story or a hymn from one of the youths could sometimes hush the household.

After a month of visits, I had become a familiar guest in the household and was accordingly treated less respectfully, though always given food and expected to eat if I called by at night. I was not the household’s only regular visitor. The men had friends and lots of girlfriends from Muizenberg and farther away who stopped by frequently, sometimes overnight—other migrants, lost whites in the area searching for drinking or smoking partners, and a few black South Africans. I enjoyed my uninteresting presence in their dilapidated house. The ebullient, rowdy atmosphere was a refreshing contrast to the seriousness and dangerousness of the other sites in my project. Despite the squalor, Babatunde’s moodiness, and the declining state of the network’s operations, it was an animated space, where stories of the day and tales from home supplied ample material for rubbing and teasing. Joshua encouraged raucous behavior. Fagin-like, he held court on his worn armchair as the men played cards through the night, paraded girlfriends in and out, smoked, drank, and scuffled. Lines between a playful argument and violence were sometimes hard to decipher. There were comical moments in Church Street, too, such as the occasional group prayers with the pastor, who prayed for the men’s souls and good fortune in their deal making. A memorable pastime was the youths’ reenactments of scenes from their favorite films. Titanic was a popular choice; Saeed and Davis could perform dialogues of courtship and drowning from memory, which had everyone laughing and calling for encores.

My familiarity in Church Street meant the householders’ behavior was less and less censored around me. I learned of Babatunde’s volatile temper quickly. I started seeing him behave more roughly toward the others, which he had restrained during my first visits. His outbursts unsettled me. Once, after receiving news from Johannesburg of an overdue utility bill, he lost his temper with Mohammed and Ibrahim and shattered four glass bottles at their feet. I reacted hysterically. The boys put their heads down and drank on in silence, giggling once he left the room.

I watched the household start to struggle financially month by month. Each member was expected to contribute to the upkeep of the house, but because their business operations were stalling, limited to some informal trading and a few contract jobs here and there (delivering, hunting down spare parts for electricians and mechanics in rougher parts of Cape Town, odd gardening), incomes were increasingly scarce. The shared evening dinner was sometimes their only meal of the day. The men were less confident in Muizenberg today than in past years, I was told, and almost always back at the house before nightfall. The younger boys started spending more time in my apartment at night, slipping home in the early hours after SMS messages were sent to them saying Babatunde was asleep. Simbah and the Leoneans sheltered at my house if they had been unable to earn during the day, which was common by late 2007. Joshua said to me that the pressures of making ends meet in the house were affecting Babatunde’s mood. It accounted for his rages and “new love of drinking.”

Church Street was the least discreet household I knew. As did other bachelor migrant households on Church Street, it achieved notoriety for its loudness and many visitors. Reflecting a growing, more acceptable intolerance toward migrants and refugees across the city by this time, it was blamed more openly and specifically for crime and drug sales in the area. Household members tried turning their increasingly anomalous status in Muizenberg into a story of themselves as a vanguard group. The men bonded more closely together.

Feuding between the migrants and their neighbors intensified. Bricks were thrown through windows on weekends and the men faced harassment on the streets. Tensions peaked in January 2008 when two household members were assaulted with broken glass and a spade, after which their pastor, rather than condemning the action and intervening in the community, pleaded they find a new house. A new property was hard to secure given the network’s size and now limited finances. The house they finally found in Retreat, three stops along the train line toward Cape Town, was smaller, more expensive, and in a suburb with fewer migrants. The extent of the household’s poverty was revealed to me on the day of their move in late January when their things fell apart as we lifted their furniture onto a pickup truck I had hired for them.

Joshua and Babatunde tried hard to recreate an atmosphere of dormitory playfulness in the new, quiet, and discreet property, but they had lost their remaining trading posts during the move and struggled to find new sales partners. Men were often left stranded in Muizenberg late into the night from where journeying home alone was terrifying. Girlfriends stayed longer and more often.

Unable to maintain itself, the household in Retreat dissolved in May 2008 even though there was no violence nearby. Alternative places to live had become better options; for some, these included the government camps for displaced persons. In January 2009, when I concluded my fieldwork, Joshua, Babatunde, and four other migrants were living in a single room of a shared building in Woodstock. Simbah and the Leoneans moved back to Johannesburg. The others moved first to the camp in Wynberg, later to the camp in Harmony Park, after which I lost contact with them. Two eventually elected to take the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees repatriation and left South Africa.
Reflections on Not Studying the Poorest of the Urban Poor

I set out to map the relational networks young unaccompanied migrants in urban South Africa lived and worked within as fully and carefully as possible—networks that bound the migrants together and through which they earned livelihoods, created opportunity, and kept themselves safe—in response to gaps I found in the literature, which expresses and theorizes forms of connectedness and action among the urban poor through social and economic networks extensively but that often lacks detailed descriptions of networks’ day-to-day maneuvers and movements. The migrants I worked among were not the poorest African migrants in Cape Town, even the migrants in Muizenberg, whom I watched fall quite quickly from a previous state of plenty.

The teams of young migrants I studied proved fortuitous economic actors in a competitive and dangerous city. Their excitement for work in the most hazardous parts of the inner city was often contagious. Yet their access to money made them persons of suspicion and increasingly vulnerable. They also struggled to transform their money into long-lasting assets or to spend and consume it efficiently. Landlords leasing apartments and houses to them exorbitantly inflated rental costs. Excluded from community organizations and rejected by NGOs that provide assistance to African foreign nationals in the city, they did not have access to formal banking services. Their uncertain legal statuses led to their avoidance of state officials. Our times together were strangely often more relaxed, enjoyable, and comradely when poverty and destitution set in: when money was short, relations were full; then, too, life in the city was safer. Poverty appeared to cloak or insulate the migrants from other kinds of danger, including threats of brotherly betrayal and rivalry.

The ethnography shows how African migrants in Cape Town are entangled in a miscellany of racial, social, economic, and political tensions that characterize contemporary South Africa.7 The politics of urban migrants are central to the story of the new South Africa. The ethnography posits migrants’ informal employment and housing as especially prominent intersections. The targeting of the Church Street household by its once friendly neighbors underscores the tenseness of the urban landscape in which migrants live. Drawn into a particularly sensitive firestorm around housing that is now making itself center stage in South African politics, the migrants are embroiled in disputes and dramas extending far beyond neighborhood or immigration. An inquiry into the outbreak of violence against foreign nationals in South African cities in 2008, for example, cited the state’s scant provision of low-cost housing and the ability of migrants to rent property in sensitive areas of urban development as the two most significant factors contributing to growing anti-immigrant sentiments (HSRC 2008). The growing presence of migrants as urban tenants and entrepreneurial street salesmen is loaded with political significance. Through their everyday accomplishments and visibility, migrants such as those I worked among reminded those around them of the slow pace of wealth redistribution since democratization. They reinforced a sore, past precedent concerning the limited prospects for poor black South Africans to claim the city of Cape Town as theirs. For these reasons, Cape Town was not a neutral backdrop in front of which the lives of urban youths unfolded but instead played an active role in determining which forms of living and livelihood were possible. Cities themselves are prominent actors in urban ethnographies of the politics of the poor.

The ethnography further shows poverty and vulnerability to be closely connected facets of urban life, but more dynamically than assumed, not associable in predictable ways. Far more detailed analysis is needed on how poverty, wellbeing, vulnerability, and opportunity connect and overlap among the urban poor in cities such as Cape Town and why assumptions that equate poverty with vulnerability persist so strongly in the social scientific literature.

The unstable disconnections between the poorest and most vulnerable populations in Cape Town I have attempted to sketch out are likely specific for African migrants and for younger male migrants especially. The challenges these young migrants face, however, have implications for generalizations made about the politics, relational infrastructures, and the accomplishments of the urban poor. I suggest that anthropology’s unrelenting focus on the most disadvantaged members of society, the “poorest of the poor,” is screening off vast terrains of urban life from our analysis.

Acknowledgments

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Plebeians of the Arab Spring

by Asef Bayat

How do we explore the relationship between the urban poor and large-scale revolutions? What kind of politics do they espouse in such extraordinary times? In this article I narrate the story of the poor people’s struggles for sustenance and citizenship during and after the Arab uprisings, focusing on Egypt and Tunisia. I suggest that while the abject poor and rural migrants avoid direct involvement in large-scale uprisings, the nature of which they do not comprehend, the “middle-class poor,” a product of the neoliberal restructuring, tend to engage in and lead others to these broader revolts. But most take advantage of the collapse of state control to extend their everyday struggles to secure life chances in their immediate environs—neighborhoods and work sites. This is also a time when they engage in extraordinary mobilization and organized protests to demand collective consumption and recognition as legitimate citizens of the city. Yet in the aftermath of the revolutions, when the new elites show their inability or unwillingness to respond to the rising demands, the subaltern retreat to their strategy of “quiet encroachment,” but with new capability and clout.

How do the urban poor fare in times of revolution? Do they espouse a particular kind of politics? Whereas in the Marxist tradition, the industrial proletariat was privileged as the agent of social transformation, “the poor” are often treated with suspicion. Poverty, deprivation, and ignorance are said to render the poor aloof and uninterested in any meaningful politics, let alone revolutions. In a partially Arendtian view of the political, the poor are seen as preoccupied with the constant struggle for survival and submission to God, or otherwise they would explode in violence and destruction. An image of this Lumpenproletariat as violent, unruly, and self-serving remains widespread among the elites, whose actual knowledge of the poor goes little beyond what they see in their servants, housemaids, or drivers. Elite circles in Egypt and Tunisia could not hide their scorn for the poor of informal settlements, whose engagement, they thought, would spoil the uprisings, turning them into the “revolution of the hungry” (thawrat al-jia), and create opportunities for street bums (ballajiah, thugs), plebeian fanatics, or the “ignorant” underclass. The passive/fatalist and violent narratives ultimately tie the political destiny of the poor to religious politics. Religiosity, fatalism, and deprivation would make the poor the natural ally of Islamism, whose emphasis on charity, welfare, simple religious language, and divine salvation as well as its clientelist networks in mosques, kin, and community facilitate this happy marriage.1

This claim has found considerable currency in political and scholarly circles. Thus, whereas the Egyptian elites and the middle classes backed the liberal and secular opposition after Mubarak, it was claimed that the poor brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power. El-Bradei could not hide his disdain for the “iliterate and ignorant” poor who supposedly backed the power-hungry Islamists. In Tunisia, frequent references are made to the strong support given to Islamic al-Nahda in the largest slum community, Tadamon. In Iran, a prominent reformist leader attributed the defeat of the Green Movement in the post-2009 elections to its middle-class social basis, “which is not prepared to take risks [fight physically],” whereas the “lower class [poor],” who backed the authoritarian Ahmadinejad, “do take risks” and wage violence against the democratic Green opposition.2

Such perspective underscores the views of a host of observers who regard the expansion of the informal communities and their “marginal poor” as dangerously aiding the authoritarian populist politics in the Middle East.3 This is not new for Latin America and its populist experience. What is striking is the fact that the claim is taken seriously by the authoritarian rulers such as Ahmadinejad, who, following the

1. For an early discussion, see Bayat (2007).
3. An anecdotal indication is reflected in the reception of my book, Street Politics: Poor People’s Movements in Iran, in Iran. After a decade of nonattention, the Persian edition of the book had a second printing in 2012 and become a best seller for months. A sudden interest emerged in understanding the “marginal poor” out of a deep fear that their rapid expansion in the informal settlements during the 2000s was deemed to boost the Islamist autocracy and undermine a democratic polity in Iran.

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2009 election crisis in Iran, envisaged a policy to downsize the middle class in Tehran (assumed to be the Green supporters) by repatriation and to expand the rural poor (assumed to support the Islamist regime) by monetary incentives for childbirth (Bayat 2010).

A contrasting view proposed by Hernando De Soto ties the politics of the marginal poor (some 180 million Arabs involved in informal work/life) to their supposedly keen interest in the free market, from which they are excluded. For De Soto, the Arab Spring is nothing but the revolution of the class-conscious underclass, the “aspiring businessmen,” like Bouazizi and 64 other self-immolators, for the free market. They wished to dismantle the bureaucratic constraints that have subdued their capitalist enterprises. When in December 2010 the police in Sidi Bouzid confiscated Bouazizi’s US$220 scale and fruits, it proved to him that Tunisia did not recognize his property rights. Bouazizi’s response, according to De Soto, reflected the desire of the poor to live in a true market society (De Soto 2011, 2013).

None of these perspectives captures adequately the complexities of the politics of the poor. While the passive/violent perspective remains unwarranted,4 De Soto’s claim raises important questions. Was the victimization of the likes of Bouazizi the outcome of the absence of property law, or was it rather the legal (albeit unjust) behavior of the municipality agent who deemed Bouazizi’s operation unlawful? More substantially, did it not have to do with the logic of the capitalist market and the state that violated the moral economy and ethic of fairness within which poor people like Bouazizi usually operate? The expansion of the “underground” economy and its subordinate position is more than simply the outcome of bureaucratic bottlenecks or the “mercantilist state” that De Soto stresses (De Soto 2002). As Portes, Castells, and Benton (1989) have shown, they are part and parcel of the capitalist economy. In fact, the expansion of neoliberal policies that the Arab regimes have adopted brought not only wealth and well-being for some but also deprivation and marginalization for millions like Bouazizi. The 180 million Arabs tried in their working lives and lifeworlds to make the best out of the neoliberal turn—using its benefits (as in technology and education) but recanting its adverse consequences (as in work discipline, rigid rules, cash nexus, and unemployment). They negotiated with the neoliberal order, creating their own informal communities of life and labor through protracted struggles in everyday life. In the end, the neoliberal restructuring generated conditions and actors that came to discard, through remarkable revolutionary movements, the very regimes that oversaw it. The urban poor were such an actor.

The Urban Poor and Revolution

What is the relationship between the urban poor and such revolutions? I take the “urban poor” as an empirical category to mean those “low-income, low-skill, low-status, and low-security” working people who largely (but not exclusively) navigate informal life and labor of precarious nature. Of course the boundaries remain fluid. A low-income government employee with a secure job may reside in an insecure shantytown, while a college graduate may have to endure insecure casual work. What is more, poor people are fairly stratified—a fact contributing to their diverse political behavior. Many are rural migrants, some newly arrived and others old-timers; segments remain the “abject poor,” while others experience income mobility. An interesting recent trend is the emergence of what I have called the “middle-class poor,” who exhibit a great propensity for political engagement. This is a class that holds educational capital, college degrees, good knowledge of the world, and high expectations; it has global dreams and longs for a middle-class lifestyle, and yet it is pushed economically to live the life of the poor in the slums and subsist on precarious informal jobs as taxi drivers, fruit sellers, street vendors, or boss boys. Humble in background but educated, members of this class are acutely aware of what is available in the world and from which they feel they are unjustly deprived. Encountering long-standing corrupt regimes and heavy-handed security apparatuses, they exhibit a profound moral outrage.

What gives a commonality to the differentiated categories of the poor includes a more or less shared experience of precarious life and labor that involves a kind of everyday politics that I have termed “quiet encroachment of the ordinary.” It describes the silent, protracted, but pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propertied and powerful in order to survive and advance their lives by unlawfully acquiring land, building homes, and getting urban services or jobs. They are marked by quiet, largely atomized and prolonged mobilization with episodic collective action—open and fleeting struggles without clear leadership, ideology, or structured organization. Quiet encroachment represents an instance of a broader category of “social nonmovements,” or the collective action of noncollective actors, where a discreet but persistent process of claim making in daily life establishes alternative (if extralegal) norms that often come to be articulated in terms of “rights” (Bayat 2013a). Thus, desire to have a shelter may in the process evolve into the right to have shelter.5 In a sense these struggles become a moment in the efforts for citizenship de facto, or what James Holston (1999) has called “insurgent citizenship.” But such citizenship becomes de jure when the gains are backed up by legislations—a process Partha Chatterjee deems to be the “political society” or the “politics of the governed” in most of the world (Chatterjee 2006).

In normal times, these amorphous nonmovements, often operating calmly and quietly in everyday life, serve as a cru-

4. I will elaborate on this later in the article; see also Bayat (2000).

5. I adopt this characterization from Worsley (1984).

6. I am grateful to Harni Englund for bringing to my attention the distinction between desire to have something and the right to have that thing.
cial venue to enhance the actors’ life chances—in securing shelters, urban amenities, collective consumption, jobs, security, and dignity. But these desperate struggles may assume organized, audible, and collective form when the gains are threatened or when opportunity for collective resistance and mobilization becomes available—when, for instance, the police control softens, the state slips into crisis, or some large, contentious movements come to fruition. Under such conditions, the dispersed struggles of these nonmovements may coalesce into and become part of broader political struggles—something that seemed to happen in the Arab uprisings of 2011.

But as shown in Cairo, Tehran, or elsewhere, different segments of the poor behave differently. The recently arrived rural migrants and the very poor—those whose knowledge of the events remains limited—often show reluctance to spearhead public protests of such magnitude and nature. Many of them are not clear about the dynamics, the aims, and especially the outcomes of such political upheavals. So, they prefer to wait and see what happens. For most of the illiterate and very poor, revolutions remain events too abstract to be incorporated into their precarious daily lives. They tend to be involved in the more concrete and local struggles—those that are meaningful and manageable for them. But segments do get involved, in particular when activists mobilize the poor in the localities. Here, the “middle-class poor” becomes central in connecting the poor communities to colleges and linking poor families, friends, and kin members to the organization and political imaginary of the insurrectionary movements. However, not everyone gets preoccupied only with insurgent and street politics of this sort. Insurrection episodes are also the times of individualized encroachments. Taking advantage of the collapse of police control, the poor militantly pursue taking over lands for shelter, illegal construction, squatter homes and apartments, and spreading business in streets and squares in off-limits locations and spots. For many poor people, the withdrawal of the police from the streets alone becomes a momentous victory given that police repression carries an undeniable class prejudice.

The immediate “postrevolution,” the day after the ancient regime falls, brings a wholly new dynamic to popular mobilization. It cultivates in the poor new ethics of “ownership of the nation,” a powerful sense of liberation, and an unprecedented feeling of entitlement. Confident of the absence of the oppressors and within the new free space, the urban poor exhibit an unusual interest in organizing and collective protests and in connecting to political and social movements. Organized activism overshadows the usual strategies of individual direct actions. The previously reluctant poor get involved; the marginalized communities become outward looking, breaking the exclusionary legal and spatial barriers to become part of the larger city. And the youth of the dispossessed, those who are shunned as “dangers” to the public, assert their presence in the main streets and squares. Yet alongside building organized movements and collective protests, the poor continue their encroachment, albeit more extensively and audibly. Land takeover for building shelters; extralegal home building; occupation of state or private apartments, hotels, or government offices; illegal extension of public services; and appropriation of street sidewalks to conduct business all assume a novel momentum. Competition between diverse political groupings—leftists, Islamists, nationalists, and the new regime—to win the support of the poor adds to the subaltern militancy, for it cultivates in the poor a new confidence and self-worth to fight on.

This new mobilization, however, may not last long. It depends on how far the postrevolution regimes tolerate subaltern militancy. Will the police change behavior once revolutionary fever subsides? What kind of social policy will the new regime pursue—populist or neoliberal? Even if social movement activism were tolerated, to what extent will it really deliver? Will social protests necessarily impel the neoliberal state, for instance, to upgrade slum communities or reextend subsidies? Undoubtedly, the work of organizing, mobilizing, and lobbying is costly; it needs skill, energy, dedication, time, and material resources. Will the poor actors undertake them if mobilizing efforts fall on deaf ears? In truth, the urban poor will revert to strategies that (despite their risk and insecurity) can result in tangible outcomes. Consequently, the poor may return to the strategy of quiet encroachment and nonmovement even when political opportunity for organized movements may exist.

From Quiet Encroachment to Collective Protests

Mid-2010 was a turning point in Egyptian politics marked by a cycle of opportunities wherein poor people’s quiet and dispersed struggles assumed audible and collective form. This was a long way from the 1990s, when the unimaginative nationalist, Islamist, and party politics dominated the political stage. The disenchanted youth pursued cultural politics and campus activism if they had not been lured by Islamism; otherwise, they mostly remained demobilized. For their part, the urban poor carried on with their nonmovements, quietly and often unlawfully acquiring land, building homes, connecting to the street electricity poles and water pipes, building roads, and organizing garbage collection. They strived to secure work mostly in the vast informal economy while investing heavily in their children’s education. In such extralegal fashion, the poor created vast communities of life and labor (60%–65% of Cairo’s population and over 61% of Egypt’s jobs in 2006) wherein the ethics of self-regulation, trust, reciprocity, negotiation, and kinship ties served their precarious lives better than formal rules, rigid contracts, or the discipline of time and space. Indeed, these very “traditional” ethics ensured their survival and integration into Egyptian modernity. Much of their claim-making efforts remained inaudible and individual, with rare occasions of collective protests, which would invite police repression.
Things, however, began to change when a new way of doing politics in Egypt began to evolve in the early 2000s with the activities of the Popular Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian and Iraqi People and later during the Kefaya democracy movement. Overriding ideological lines, Kefaya focused on popular mobilization rather than party politics; it brought the campaign to the streets rather than voicing it in institutions; and it centered on domestic issues instead of nationalist concerns. Professionals, lawyers, judges, journalists, academics, and workers waged new campaigns, using the opportunity of "democracy promotion" that the United States, following its invasion of Iraq, advocated. In this new political climate, secular and religious women formed new collectives; youth got involved in civic activism and social media. The Islamist, leftist, and nationalist groups became more vocal, while some independent press broke the taboo of publicly criticizing the Mubarak family or disclosing the corruption and thuggery of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). The taboo of street protest broke following years of corruption and shortages, and rising food prices that had created deep dissent among the masses. The activities of the Popular Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian and Iraqi People and later during the Kefaya and other activists went to such poor neighborhoods as Matariya to help mobilize protests over power cuts, water shortage, and rising food prices that had created deep dissent as well. “We had to sell our furniture to buy sugar,” read one of the banners (Semeika 2010).

Whereas the expanding gated communities in Cairo and elsewhere, with vast green lawns and swimming pools, expected an uninterrupted flow of water in a country that fell far below “water poverty,” some 40% of Cairo’s population, usually poor, had access to drinking water for no more than 3 hours per day, with at least four districts receiving no water at all. Indeed, millions depended on public wells for drinking or washing (El-Dahshan 2010). But for those who did have access, the IMF-initiated transfer in 2004 of water utilities to private corporations had in some areas doubled the cost, leaving many families to fetch water from the Nile River (Amin 2010). It was within this political and economic context that the collective protests of the poor over home demolition, evictions, rising prices, “urban rights,” jobs, and justice merged into the monumental uprising that came to fruition in 2011.

The Poor and the Uprisings

On January 28, 2011 (Day of Anger), just three days after the start of what is called Egypt’s January 25 Revolution, the mass informal community of Imbaba in the heart of Cairo joined the uprising in earnest. A small 50-person march, half of them children, following a Friday prayer, rapidly grew into a mass demonstration of which “one could not see the beginning and the end.” The crowd called for the downfall of the regime, invited others to join, battled with the riot police for hours, and continued their march toward Tahrir Square. Imbaba was known for its “Islamist” past when in the early 1990s hundreds of al-Gama’a al-Islamiyya militants had penned water pipes. The heavy cost of free consumption had often forced the authorities to formalize services in some of these neighborhoods while leaving others to exploit them illegally or resort to alternative sources such as digging deep wells. Yet once connected, any interruption in what immediately became “urban rights” caused collective outrage. Thus, throughout 2007 and 2008, protestors in towns and villages across the Nile Delta poured into the streets to rally over cuts in water flow. Deployment of massive riot police could not stop protestors from cutting off highways or blocking railways. In June 2010, villagers of Kafir el-Sheikh blocked Belqas-Hammoud road, burning car tires to cause disruption, while Kefaya and other activists went to such poor neighborhoods as Matariya to help mobilize protests over power cuts, water shortage, and rising food prices that had created deep dissent as well. “We had to sell our furniture to buy sugar,” read one of the banners (Semeika 2010).

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etrated this opaque space—with narrow alleyways without maps and home numbers—creating an “Islamist state within the state.” But by the time of the revolution, things had changed. “The last thing youth are talking about is religion,” said Ahmed Metwalli, a son of an ex-Islamist. “It is the last thing that comes up. They need money, they need to get married, a car…. They will elect whoever delivers that” (Shadid 2011). The poor of Imbaba had risen up because of their outrage at their denigration, having to pay bribes for going to the hospital, getting ID cards, pleasing the police. “We don’t need prayers, sheikhs, and beards; we have had enough of the clerics.” On January 25, some 200 activists had managed to mobilize up to 20,000 demonstrators in the slum community of Naheyen over the issues of police brutality and the price of bread.12 In the meantime, artistic youths inscribed the symbolic images of the revolution—murals, slogans, and images of martyrs of the revolution—on the walls of these underdog neighborhoods.

Of course, not everyone joined the revolutionary protests. It is probably true that the rural migrants, older groups, and the very poor preferred to stay away from such overwhelming events. Many of them were not clear about the dynamics, the aims, and especially the outcome of these upheavals. For them, revolution was too abstract to capture its dynamics. They would rather get engaged in the local struggles that they found manageable and meaningful. Yet the very heterogeneity of these neighborhoods where residents held diverse educational backgrounds tended to facilitate the link between the parochial and the cosmopolitan. The ashwaiyyat communities such as Imbaba housed not merely the rural, illiterate, and abject poor but also segments of the “middle-class poor”—government employees, newly married and educated couples, as well as professionals such as lawyers and teachers—who could not afford to secure housing in the formal market. The members of this class, traversing between the “middle-class world” and that of the “poor,” critically linked the local struggles of their dispossessed parents, relatives, and neighbors to the world of the universities, journalism, cyberspace, associational activism, and the main streets.

Beyond joining the big revolutions, the poor also conducted their own “minirevolutions” in their localities. In Cairo’s Mashiyat Naser, where hill rocks had demolished several homes, residents attacked and set several homes, residents attacked and set

Dictators Abdicte

The fall of the dictators in Yemen, Tunisia, and Egypt and the subsequent postrevolution paradoxes dramatically transformed the public sphere in these countries. The revolutions had generated new consciousness, heightened expectations, and free space for mobilization but had ironically disrupted the very institutions—the state administration and economic enterprises—that were to meet those same expectations. This mix of both opportunity for mobilization and dashed expectations enhanced poor people’s dissent and militancy, prompting them to pursue three strategies: aggressive encroachment to grab land and urban services, acquire state housing, and secure informal jobs; building organized movements to consolidate gains or make new claims; and collective protests to offset threats to their gains.

Tunisia saw an upsurge in new informal settlements and consolidation of existing extralegal homes. Communities such as al-Sayed al-Menoubya and Tadamon in Tunis became the subject of elite stigmatization as the bastions of anarchy, extremism, and social strife not only for the 1982 riots but also for the new fear that poor people would support the Islamic al-Nahda Party.14 To the dismay of the elites, the poor took over a dozen sidewalks in the central district adjacent to the Medina and turned them into vibrant market places—scenes that reminded me of the central areas of Tehran just after the 1979 Iranian revolution and of Cairo’s

12. Amnesty International, We Are Not Dirt, p. 3.
13. I am grateful to the revolutionary activist Alaa Abdel-Fattah, who brought this point to my attention in Cairo, June 2013.
central streets just after Mubarak’s downfall. The fact that Bouazizi, the hero of the Tunisian revolution, was a street vendor gave street vending much legitimacy and immunity, which the poor utilized to enhance their lots. In fact, before the Ben Ali’s ouster, local activists in Sidi Bouzid had deliberately (mis)represented Bouazizi as an “unemployed university graduate” to associate his spectacular drama with the plight of some 250,000 jobless college graduates—Tunisia’s most likely revolutionaries, the “middle-class poor” (Gana 2013). The postrevolution political and economic turmoil, however, left little chance for substantial progress in poor people’s lives. If anything, many of these educated youths hung around in the local cafés with the dream of migrating to the West, while the working poor felt that the old order had in essence continued. Their response was stunning. By 2013 Tunisia became the nation with the highest number of labor strikes and social protests—some 45,000, or 90 per day.

In Egypt things were no less intense. Land grabbing and illegal construction went on in earnest. Within the first 6 months, January–June 2011, some 110,000 hectares of mostly agricultural land were taken over illegally for construction, mostly of homes. In June 2013, the Awqaf authorities spoke of 9,335 encroachments, or 2.5 million square meters on Awqaf lands, of which half were in agriculture.15 Most of these encroachments were carried out by the needy (but also opportunistic developers), at times in violent clashes with the security forces. In the coastal town of al-Arish, families seized lands from military property, claiming them to belong to their ancestors for hundreds of years. The claim led to violent scuffles, injuries, and hospitalization.16 In Quorsaya Island in Giza, hundreds of residents battled with the military over 500-feddan land rights, which the Army had claimed since 2007. Soldiers fired gunshots while residents fought back fiercely, injuring a number of soldiers and succeeding in overturning the eviction. Activists, artists, and intellectuals gathered to celebrate the people’s victory.17

Beyond land acquisition and illegal construction, throughout the country thousands campaigned to obtain state housing, fought gentrification, and contested rent increase. The poor residents of Duweicha, who had been relocated from their unsafe shelters to tents and then to government rental flats in the early postrevolution, faced financial problems due to the crisis and conflict. In order to get a release from their rent, they entered into a sit-in at the Cairo governorate headquarters, chanting, “Oh governor, tell the truth, are we not the priority?” Warning that they would launch the “Revolution of the Ashwaqiyat,” they cut off the main road, causing a noisy traffic disruption, while fighting the security forces that were trying to disperse them.18 In Alexandria, residents of the Imam Malik neighborhood protested in outrage at the governorate office because the authorities had evicted them for their unsafe shelters. And others in the northern city of Ismailiya staged a hunger strike at the city’s housing department, demanding the government grant them apartments because their shelters had been demolished; as a hunger striker got hospitalized, activists got involved in boisterous protests. Tent residents of Cairo’s Shubra al-Khaima, whose dwellings had been demolished, threatened an indefinite sit-in and hunger strike at the district court if they were not relocated to government flats. And where the authorities warned that they would evict residents from “unsafe” dwellings (as in Falaki in Alexandria), families refused to relocate in an attempt to get governmental housing.19

But claiming state housing, a diminishing trend since the 1980s, involved its own set of conflicts—over bureaucracy, ownership claims, and rent. For instance, dozens of Sannoud city residents in southern Egypt attacked the city council and chained its doors in a protest over what they saw as an “unjust” lottery method to allocate government flats for which they had been on the waiting list, and in the city of Port Said, in a highly dramatic show of force, some 6,000 people from families eligible for the National Project of Mubarak Housing, angered by the authorities’ failure to clarify the conditions of occupancy, descended on the Suez Canal to halt the flow of ships. Ferries ceased operating as hundreds of cars waited on both sides of the canal, while a giant 190-kilometer line of waiting ships revealed the extraordinary effect of the protest.20

Collective Protests

While some segments of the poor were engaged in aggressive encroachment, others collectively resisted the claims made by the authorities on their gains. This became evident immediately with respect to the gentrification policies, in particular Cairo 2050, a massive project from Mubarak times that would overhaul central Cairo and lead to the relocation of hundreds of thousands of poor families into the desert towns (Tarbush 2012:176). Even though the project was temporarily halted after the revolution, parts of it nevertheless continued. Thus, when the developer Sawiris offered to buy off the dwellings of some 600 families in the Ramlet Boulaq squatter settlement adjacent to the luxurious Cairo

19. The narratives are based on eyewitness accounts as well as, respectively, from the following print media: Vito, May 16, 2013; Al-youm Essabe’a, March 1, 2013; Al-Badil, May 23, 2013; and Al-Ahram, October 5, 2013.
towers, most residents refused to sell, at least not for £E3,000–4,000 per meter when the real value hovered around £E30,000 per meter (Dale 2012). Resisting relocation to the desert town of Medina Nahda, people looked out for one another to form a solidarity network. "We are like fish; this is our water; if you take us out of here, we will die," an elderly man stated. The neighborhood exploded when an incident (a fight between a resident and his employer in the towers over pay) led to one death and 22 injuries by the security forces. Residents smashed windows, set fire to cars, and blocked the main Corniche Avenue. Following a number of arrests, activists, notably lawyers, got involved assisting the residents to defend their right to stay (Al-Jaberi 2012a, 2012b). A year later when I visited the area, the case was still in court and the mood tense. Yet life seemed to go on as vibrant as ever in the neighborhood, with people feeling a new sense of empowerment from the revolution and from their own cultural capital. As a colleague and I walked through the narrow alleyways that linked lines of feeble dwellings, residents surrounded us, inviting to their homes. Unlike the shabby and makeshift exteriors, indoors it was a different world, full of life, energy, and hope. Family members navigated between the tiny kitchen and small but clean and orderly rooms decorated with religious symbols and family photos; they brought drinks, talked, cracked jokes, discussed politics, and watched television. Friends and neighbors joined in, and the young showed off their baggy pants, gelled hair, and mobile phones. Yet beneath this hidden world of hope, humor, and humanity, there was also a deep-seated anxiety about the fate of their habitat. But they stood firm in their determination to not let their living space go cheap.

The quiet (and aggressive) encroachment had over the years resulted in major gains in collective provisions (energy, piped water, sewage system, paved roads, garbage collection, and security), which, once formalized, turned into "entitlements." Thus, when those gains were threatened or taken away, the poor went on a rampage. Postrevolution Egypt saw remarkable social protests when basic urban services such as electricity, water, or the sewage system faced disruption. The daily power cuts, caused by enhanced consumption and shortages to poor schooling and physical damage during the revolution, they now wanted to overturn the daily water cut, sometimes 12 hours per day, which they had endured for the previous 6 years. The poor were outraged by what they saw as discriminatory power cuts against low-income neighborhoods (Halwa 2012b). Thus, residents of a community in Qalyoubiya got mobilized, chanted slogans, and blocked the railway, objecting that they had not had water for the previous 4 days and had to obtain it from other villages. Security forces were dispatched to end roadblocks, and water authorities promised to attend to the problem. In the village of Faris in Aswan, residents blocked Cairo-Aswan highway because sewage water had disrupted life in their community. Again police and local authorities intervened to end the crisis.24

Protestation of this sort reflected an aspect of broader developmental deficits that had gripped the subaltern life. Indeed, claims for social provisions, a de facto call for the return of the social contract, underlay a widespread dissent that contributed to the fall of President Morsy’s Islamist government in July 2013. Villagers of Meris in Luxor set out to close down the local council to bring attention to the "terrible services," which ranged from power cuts and water shortages to poor schooling and flawed waste management. Thousands from the Alexandria slums protested in front of the city’s wastewater offices because the authorities had neglected their faulty and flooding sewage system. Joined by activists from the April 6 and Kefaya movements, slum dwellers mocked Morsy’s “el-Nahda project,” which was supposed to tackle such social ills. Similar neglects caused residents of a district to halt traffic in Aswan, while the poor in Minya occupied the defective power station whose sewage had infiltrated their neighborhoods; they went home only when the security forces and authorities pledged to address the prob-

21. This is from a video interview made by the anthropologist-architect Omnia Khalil.
22. For instance, since 2011, Egyptians have been using over three million air conditioners in their homes.
an extraordinary spread of informal activities, notably street economic livelihood. In Tunisia, where Mohammad Bouazizi ignited the revolution, street vendors rapidly proliferated in the central districts and strategic locations in large cities. In Syria police ignored unlawful street trade, and in Morocco the urban poor aggressively occupied key streets in Rabat and Casablanca as well as in provincial towns such as Nador to spread their business. Instead of outlawing informal street trade, the authorities banned the sale of small-quantity gasoline tanks for fear of self-immolations (McMurray 2013).

Egypt experienced a spectacular expanse of reportedly five million street vendors in the key spots of the large cities and small towns throughout the country. In Cairo, the Tahrir Square, Nile Corniche, downtown streets, and Ramsis Square among others saw the largest concentration of stalls, kiosks, and mobile vendors. The presence of millions of protestors on the streets offered the vendors a lucrative market. Tahrir Square, wherein epic rallies and demonstrations continued for months, became at times a surreal space of contention and commerce. While the revolutionaries battled the police, built barricades, and dodged tear gas canisters, the square vendors carried on with their routine of trading hot tea, cold drinks, food, fruits, and domestic appliances and revolution vendors had their own stories. Nagwa, a female seller, left her abusive husband to come to Tahrir to support her children; many men had lost their previous jobs, and others had just joined the job market. They did not pay tax and enjoyed a good degree of autonomy and flexibility, but they often felt insecure and had to dispense bribes of up to £E70–250 for their unlawful practices (Charbel 2012). Yet as part of a vast informal economy that produced 40% of the GDP, or £E218 billion, they were all seizing these moments to better their lives even though their plebeian livelihood invited the fury of local merchants, the disdain of the elites, and the hostility of the state. Local merchants complained that they could not compete with the cheap offerings of the vendors; the elites whined about a “backward” image, public sanitation, and (for some) “sexual harassment”; and the authorities expressed concern over traffic congestion, illicit trade, and public disorder. For this, both the military rulers and Morsy’s government moved to crack down on street trade. In fact, little had changed in the official policy of criminalizing the unauthorized vendors since 1957 (law 33). Under Mubarak, unlawful vendors received a 3-month prison sentence and up to £E1,000 fine. The Islamist Morsy increased the penalties to 6 months in prison and a £E5,000 fine. Meanwhile, ministries joined forces to “cleanse” the central districts of Cairo.


26. Reported by the Egyptian Center for Social and Economic Rights, 2013. The Egyptian Ministry of Manpower reported that during 2011, workers organized 335 strikes (including 135 sit-ins in the public sector and 123 in the private sector) and made 4,460 complaints to the ministry; Al-Masyr al-Youm, January 17, 2012.

27. Office of President Morsy, published in a poster and distributed officially, June 2013.

Activists played an important part in these collective endeavors. Just as lawyers assisted street vendors and slum dwellers legally, the youth organizers of the campaign Upgrading Only in Name (Ehya’ Bel-Esm Faqat) went to slum neighborhoods (Gezira al-Forsaya, Bab al-Nasr, al-Salam, al-Nahda, Ramlet Boulaq, and similar locales in Suhag) to help bring basic services there. Residents understood these attempts as fulfilling their “right to enjoy a minimum standard of living” and the “right to live in a decent housing,” as one articulated (Ali 2013). Other groups organized a We Want to Live campaign to help remedy poor people’s livelihoods at a time when the persistence of neoliberal policies had made public provisions (such as trains, hospitals, or drinking water) more costly. The We Will Not Pay campaign advocated that poor residents not pay their electricity bills unless a clear schedule for power cuts in different districts be supplied and a fair distribution of power supply/cuts with affluent neighborhoods be guaranteed. Beginning first in Giza’s Saif al-Laban, the campaign moved to towns and villages in the Delta and Upper Egypt and was adopted by the leftist Popular Alliance Party (Gamal 2012). Reminiscent of Masukhane in postapartheid South Africa and the Chilean slum dwellers refusal to pay campaigns in the 1990s, these reflected a struggle for leveling, that is, equality in what a city can or cannot offer to its citizens.

The Poor and the Revolutions of Neoliberal Times

Poor people’s struggle for (urban) citizenship has been truly remarkable in the Arab revolutions. Reinforced by a strong “entitlement ethics,” it embodied attempts to secure shelter, claim state housing, battle eviction, contest high rents, demand collective provision, and push for leveling. Urban citizenship also meant that the poor wished to be an integral part of the city—not only with their disadvantaged work and habitat but also with their physical presence and habits. They disdained policies and people that rendered them as “outsiders” or “intruders.” They wished to extend their horizon of the city beyond their backstreet localities by forging access to the larger community. Thus, in Cairo, the informal settlements located around the inaccessible Ring Road (designed to detach and halt the further encroachment of these settlements) took the matter in their own hands just after the revolution to construct access ways to the highway. Microtaxis (tuk tuks) could then bring people from the nearby settlements to these “transfer points” from which they could move to the rest of the city. Other settlements built exit ramps to facilitate car access to the highways. In one settlement, the residents paved the road, opened a police station, produced a CD about the initiative, and invited the governor to officially inaugurate their access ramp. In such ways the poor ensured their physical entry into the city at large. Still others, such as the residents of the Ard el-Liwa informal community, mapped their neighborhood; a local tailor drew

Giza, Daqahliya, Mansoura, and Alexandria from the “parasitic vendors”—a measure that the prerevolution governments had tried but largely failed to achieve.29 Through an everyday war of attrition, street subsistence workers simply resisted—temporarily retreating and then returning and regrouping. It was a war that continued relentlessly thanks to vendors’ persistence, police complicity, and bribing. When in October 2012, a 12-year-old fruit seller working in the heart of Tahrir was shot dead by a sniper, thousands of vendors staged a powerful demonstration from Tahrir to the Supreme Court. The extraordinary scenes of vendors with their pushcarts and mobile stalls marching through the main streets of Cairo remain one of the evocative hallmarks of Egypt’s street politics.

This act of solidarity served as a prelude to serious attempts to organize the street vendors in a national syndicate at a time when unemployment jumped (from the prerevolution 9%) to 31%, or 5.3 million, of whom 72% had lost jobs and one out of three had college degrees.30 Now proliferated and visible, street vendors felt the need to unite to deter eviction threats and insecurity. By December 2012, activist vendors led by Ramadan al-Sawy had collected 4,000 signatures from colleagues to set up a union. Soon they established an office in Cairo and obtained support from counterparts in Helwan, Giza, Suez, Alexandria, and Asyut. Assisted by lawyers from the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, they set out to obtain legal recognition. Their struggle for urban citizenship was coming to life. “Just give me a reasonably priced and strategic spot that I can rent—even if it is only one meter—then I will happily pay rent and taxes,” said a vendor (Charbel 2012).

Indeed, building organization had at this juncture become a common feature of poor people’s politics after years of restriction. Thus, following Mubarak’s downfall, a citywide association of Ashwaiyyat (informal settlements) was formed in Cairo to work toward securing and upgrading slum communities and calling for the dismissal of corrupt local officials. Numerous popular committees (Ligan al-Sha’biyya) formed during the uprisings to protect neighborhoods turned into local associations for development. Industrial workers set up their new independent unions and battled against employers who had violated their traditional entitlements and denied them a decent minimum wage, benefits, and job security. And the Zabaleen demanded the new government to systematize their work, assigning districts to groups of Zabaleen who would then charge a fee (of US$1 monthly per household) for their service. They also demanded that the government dismiss the multinational company that covered 40% of waste collection (Viney 2012).

an elaborate sketch of streets, alleyways, hills, bridges, and homes, giving their community a life on paper and forging an official recognition that it formerly lacked. In the meantime, the revolution eased more than ever the poor people’s mobility and presence in the cities’ public spaces, from which they were usually shunned away. Places such as Bourghiba Boulevard in Tunis and Tahrir Square in Cairo became the spaces of mixing and mélange of the people with different class backgrounds, briefly subverting the diktat of the spatial structure and elite attitude about where the poor (and the rich) could or could not go, sit, shop, or loiter. More than anything, the crucial role of the Ultras, Egypt’s football fans in the revolutionary streets, pointed to the unusual presence of the poor youths in the city’s strategic locations. The public drama and display of the Ultras including mostly lower-class youths reflected not only a form of subaltern male fun but also an enunciation of “I exist” in a public arena in which the underdog felt scorned and castigated.

Such feeling of self-determination is a common feature of immediate postrevolution times when the people, freed from state control, take initiatives to assert their will. Empowered as “free citizens,” as “owners of their country,” and yet facing a disrupted state and economy, they move to exercise self-rule. The grassroots embark on self-management in farms, factories, universities, workplaces, and neighborhoods. Such radical politics have a long history in most revolutions. In the aftermath of the Iranian revolution of 1979, workers occupied hundreds of factories to run them through shuras, or “factory committees” (Bayat 1987). Farmers took over agribusiness (in Mazanderan and Fars provinces). The urban poor grabbed lands to build homes, occupied apartments and hotels, acquired urban services, and demanded security of tenure; they colonized central street sidewalks to conduct outdoor businesses and formed organizations of squatters, street vendors, and unemployed. Segments of the lower classes dominated the urban streets, squares, and mosques with great confidence and boldness. For a while, spatial hierarchies crumbled, replaced by the scenes of managers and workers dining together in the nation’s workplaces. The poor were further empowered by the intense competition between various left and Islamist groups to secure their support. And their radical measures were backed, at least for some time, by the idioms of “equality,” “social justice,” and “socialism” that held currency in most of the twentieth-century revolutions.

But as I have argued elsewhere (Bayat 2013b), Arab revolutions were different; they occurred in an ideological age when the very idea of “revolution” had been discredited, a time when neoliberal rationality had become “part of our commonsense understanding of life” (Massey 2013). So while the Arab revolutions embodied in practice radical initiatives on the part of the subaltern, no serious ideological frame or social movement anchored them. If anything, the “commonsense” neoliberal thinking among the political elites, secular and Islamist alike, dismissed such radical practices as “out of place,” “extremist,” “utopian,” and above all “illegal.” Thus, in Egypt, factory takeover and workers’ control did take place, but only in 12 plants whose owners had left, had given up, or had gone bankrupt. The media, politicians, and even the unions dismissed the practice as “unlawful,” violating the principle of property ownership. In the end, only one factory, with 250 workers, remained self-managed, and the rest were settled in some sort of “comanagement.” The urban poor, as we saw, did engage in remarkable social struggles to enhance and defend life opportunities, yet structural discrimination against them continued. Despite their aversion of the complex bureaucratic institutions, the poor still had to grapple with government agencies, schools, municipalities, ID cards, police stations, and hospitals in which they often received discriminatory treatment. It is true, in the “city inside out,” the poor appropriate public spaces to conduct their outdoor subsistence economy and social interaction (Bayat 2012). Yet it is a sad truth that the use of green space, at least in Cairo, remains notoriously class based, where only the rich can afford the private clubs where a semblance of free space and greenery exists. Once again, the fear of the poor as the spoilers of public order, creators of insecurity, and perpetrators of violence and sexual harassment keep rendering them as outsiders. In these neoliberal conditions, the poor had lost their traditional ideological anchor. Except for a few activist groups that did give support to the poor, the urban subaltern was left largely on their own on their social networks and on their cultural capital. Nor did the postrevolution governments concretely address the plight of the poor despite the rhetoric of improving the ashwaiyyat. “Social justice” remained the revolution’s most unattested slogan. The Muslim Brotherhood government offered plenty of Islam and moralizing, but “these are things for God,” as a poor resident of Boulaq lamented; devoid of any progressive vision, it did little to fulfill “our rights” (Fahim 2012). With no radical rethinking in social and economic policies, the poor were poised to continue with their collective contention or else resort to the familiar strategy of quiet encroachment. Obsession with the logic of the market, “the other path,” may not serve the liberation of the “aspiring poor,” as De Soto would suggest, but be a cause of its despair and the subject of its contention. The specter of Bouazizi may continue to haunt.

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32. Interview with worker activist Fatma Ramadan, Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, June 9, 2013.
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Political Leadership and the Urban Poor

Local Histories

by Veena Das and Michael Walton

Based on survey research and ethnographic interviews, we analyze struggles over housing and access to infrastructure in two low-income “unplanned settlements” in the National Capital Region of Delhi, India. We argue that political leadership in these two different areas cannot be regarded as a simple extension of traditional forms of authority from the village to the city. Rather, the local leaders emerge in the process of learning how to engage institutional processes of law and bureaucracy in an urban context to secure housing and infrastructure. The enfoldings of structures of governance with democratic politics in these neighborhoods reveals the overlapping movements of law, bureaucracy, markets, and democratic mobilization through which social life is made durable for the urban poor. Instead of asking what democracy has done for the poor in India, we shift the focus to ask, How does the work that the poor perform through and with these institutions give form and substance to democracy in India?

The summary description of the course Foucault gave titled “The Birth of Biopolitics” at the Collège de France in 1979 stated, “What should be studied now is the way in which the specific problems of life have been posed within a technology of government which has always been haunted, since the end of the 18th century by the question of liberalism” (Foucault 2004:329; cited in Fassin 2009:37). One place to locate the technology of government is in the practices followed by bureaucrats, as in the excellent work of Gupta (2012) and Hull (2012). Such technologies, however, also have a life outside the offices of the bureaucrats because they are negotiated in other places, such as in the low-income neighborhoods we describe in this paper. This shift of perspective seems crucial if the poor are not to be seen as passive populations managed by different agents of the state, assigning them a place outside the realm of politics almost by definition. We do not imply that the neighborhood can be treated as a self-closed entity. Instead, our analytical task demands that we incorporate different scales of social life in our analysis—those of law, bureaucracy, electoral democracy, forms of patronage, and the minutiae of power relations at the level of neighborhoods we describe. We do not conceptualize the state or law as larger entities that contain the smaller scale; rather, we are interested in seeing how phenomena at different scales intersect in the life of the neighborhood (Han 2013). Instead of regarding law, bureaucracy, and the state as overarching institutions that regulate life from above, we ask how these institutions are folded into the life of the neighborhood (see Das 2011). While for Foucault, technologies of governance have been haunted by questions of liberalism, for us, the work that the poor perform in their everyday lives interrogates the basic assumptions on which liberal notions of the sovereign subject are based (see Englund 2012 for an elegant formulation of this issue).

We first give a brief account of the legal and bureaucratic structures within which various kinds of “unplanned settlements”—such as recognized slums, unrecognized slums, unauthorized colonies, and resettlement colonies—are placed. We then take up one particular case—that of housing—and offer a comparison between two different low-income settlements, each standing in a tense relation with law and bureaucracy (available in a PDF as CA+ online supplement B). We then argue that the nature of political leadership that has emerged in these two different areas does not result from the simple extension of traditional forms of authority to the city; rather, the local leaders emerge in the process of struggles for securing infrastructural necessities for sustaining everyday life. We do not wish to suggest that this makes the leaders altruistic people working for the public good. Instead, the rough and tumble of politics—its forms of patronage, corruption, violence, as well as the possibilities of democratic mobilization—become evident as we track the nature of political life through the efforts made for securing housing, electricity, or water.

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Slums and Other Unplanned Settlements

According to the 2021 Master Plan of Delhi, the unplanned settlements in Delhi can be divided into the following types: resettlement sites, designated slums, urban villages, regularized unauthorized settlements, unauthorized settlements, and squatter settlements, also known as JJ (jhuggi jhopdi) colonies. Different kinds of settlements enjoy different degrees of security of tenure, so, for instance, designated slums have rights against eviction under the Delhi Slum Act of 1956, and resettlement sites that came up under the government’s own initiative, most notoriously during the beautification-cum-sterilization drive under the National Emergency in 1976 (Tarlo 2003), gave permanent lease to holders over the land allotted to them. Some squatter settlements might have obtained stay orders against eviction from courts, but the possibility always looms over their lives. According to different estimates, about 50%–70% of the population of Delhi lives in these “unplanned settlements”—thus, these people are not marginal to the life of the city but constitute its very fabric.

Punjabi Basti: What Does It Mean to Have an Address?

Punjabi Basti, located in West Delhi, is an area of 34 acres with a built-up section of 21.59 acres. It has 2,318 plots (combined houses and shops), though multiple households may live within the same house. Let us take a deceptively simple question: from where do these figures come? How did a house or a shop acquire something as simple and taken for granted as an address? Punjabi Basti did not figure as a separate colony in official records till 1995 because it was assimilated in the larger area of Baljit Nagar. Even now, many documents, such as ration cards or voter ID cards, record the locality as “Punjabi Basti, Baljit Nagar.”

Until a few years ago, streets in Punjabi Basti did not have numbers or names. Certain landmarks were used to orient oneself to the place—thus, crossroads were named after small temples that had come up through local effort (e.g., Gayatri Chowk is named after the goddess Gayatri). Certain sites were marked after important events, such as the hosting of the national flag on independence day (Jhanda Chowk, literally “Flagstaff Crossing”). Boundaries between neighborhoods were fluid. The geography of the area thus reflected an order that emerged from an evolving collective life rather than from official planning or control.

Families of the earliest settlers in Punjabi Basti had moved here from different parts of Delhi soon after 1976 because these settlers saw the opportunity to claim empty land. The local term for this process is jagah gherna, which literally means “enclosure of a place,” and it can be used in a neutral way when people are making a reference to the amount of labor that went to enclose a piece of unoccupied land and convert it into a house. Alternately, the term has the connotation of illegality when one voices the perspective of law, seeing the world through the eyes of government officials. Residents of Punjabi Basti could take both perspectives, claiming simultaneously that it was their labor that had made the area inhabitable and at the same time conceding that the land had been taken without going through the legal mechanisms that bestowed ownership within the formal regime of property relations.

Three of the older residents who gave detailed accounts of their experiences—Dhanno Devi, B. D. Joshi, and Hargovind Ramgarhia—were among the first settlers who moved to this area in the seventies. All three migrated from other areas of Delhi, where they were engaged as unskilled laborers hired in construction work. The initial settlement was of about 40 households who had enclosed (encroached on) and demarcated certain areas and then worked this land to make it inhabitable. These early settlers in time sold off parts of the land they had occupied to others—Joshi claims, and others agree, that at one time the whole street on which Joshi lives was an enclosure created by him through the act of jagah gherna and that he “settled” that part of Punjabi Basti. Such transactions of land and shanties or houses have a very ambiguous place in law, although there are well-worked-out procedures by which selling, buying, and renting houses takes place within the local world in which such settlements are made. While documents of these transactions are not registered in the Municipal Corporation, they are nevertheless recognized through mutual witnessing (see Das 2011; Rao 2013).

According to Joshi, it was some time in the 1980s that a major setback occurred. Ramjas Foundation, a large charitable foundation, claimed that it was the legal owner of the land that these families had occupied and started to levy a “license fee” on them. Ramjas Foundation also began to assign addresses to houses, which they used in licensee agreements with the residents and in receipts issued to them. These addresses were assigned haphazardly—P124 could well be nestling against D28—and sometimes the same address was assigned to various bureaucratic records and sale deeds.

1. Veena Das presented a more detailed analysis of the address interviews in this locality in the second M. N. Srinivas Memorial Lecture at the King’s India Institute, London, in March 2013. Veena would like to express her gratitude to Sunil Khilnani and Kapila Kriti for their kind invitation and to members of the audience for their perceptive comments.

2. In all, there were 40 interviews with residents from different parts of the neighborhood on the address history of the house and the history of street names.

3. The whole expression “jagah gherna”—enclosing a place from the local perspective and encroaching on the land from the strict legal perspective—refers to the act of taking a piece of land and making it one’s own through one’s labor. In other areas the term kabza is widely used by residents in both India and Pakistan to refer to land or houses or even mosques that are “occupied” and for which there are no legal entitlements (patta). The difference between patta and kabza occurs in various bureaucratic records and sale deeds.
found on several different houses in different parts of the colony. Because there were no street names, addresses were indicated by “landmarks,” for example, “1–128 near the Gayati temple” (see fig. A1; figs. A1–A4 available in CA+ online supplement A).

Ramjas Foundation enforced its license fee by threats of legal action and by the use of physical force. As an act of defiance, some residents started using different self-assigned addresses. They also formed a registered society titled Punjabi Basti Sudhar Samiti (literally, Society for the Improvement of Punjabi Basti) in the same period. Thus, the initial impetus to form themselves into a formal organization came from the friction created by the threat posed by the Ramjas Foundation—according to Joshi, the office holders as well as other members who were registered were local members of the Congress Party.

The Legal Battle over Land Rights

The following summary of the legal issues is from Ramjas Foundation v. Union of India, civil appeal no. 6662, filed in 2004 and settled in 2010. Earlier cases by the Ramjas Foundation pertaining to the same land go back to 1959, 1968, 1971, and 1992. We focus on the points at which the Punjabi Basti residents’ claim over housing came to rub against the claims of Ramjas Foundation’s fight with the Government of India over ownership of this land. The facts of the case as they emerged in the process of adjudication were as follows.

Rai Sahib Kedar Nath, who retired as district judge from the Punjab Judicial Service, started three schools in parts of old Delhi between 1912 and 1916 to honor the memory of his father, Lala Ramjas Mal. Kedar Nath had bought 1,800 bighas of land from his own resources as well as through donations in what were then the villages of Chowkri Mubarakabad and Sadhra Khurd. In a public function held on December 25, 1916, Kedar Nath had announced that he had formed a waqf (an inalienable religious endowment under Islamic law) and donated all his movable and immovable properties for charitable purposes to provide aid for the education of the poor. In 1917 he formed the Ramjas College Society and had it duly registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860. Later, he transferred all his property to this society, which was renamed the Ramjas Foundation in 1967.

The legal conflict with the Government of India has its genesis in a notification issued in 1959, under the Land Acquisition Act (sec. 4), by the Chief Commissioner of Delhi, which proposed the acquisition of 34,070 acres of land for planned development in Delhi of which a portion (870 bighas and 17 biswas) was claimed by the appellant. However, exemption from acquisition was granted to several categories of property, including waqf property. Ramjas Foundation claimed that the land it held was waqf property and hence exempt from acquisition by the government. After hearing the arguments on whether a Hindu could create waqf property, the court held that though Hindus could create waqf property, it could only be used for furthering the cause of Muslims or Islamic institutions. It is clear that while in 1916 words such as waqf were used in the general sense of an institution for charitable purposes, in independent India waqf had become an exclusively “Islamic” category.

While this battle on the larger issues was being waged in the courts, Ramjas Foundation filed cases in lower courts against several residents of Punjabi Basti and of adjoining unauthorized colonies for nonrecovery of license fee. We have documents that detail one such case, but we understand that several residents faced police and legal action as well as harassment by what are described in local narratives as hired goons. The case we describe pertains to a lawsuit for recovery of possession and damages that was filed in the Tis Hazari Court in Delhi against one Daya Ram Yadav of Jhuggi number D-204, Punjabi Basti, Baljit Nagar. It was claimed by the plaintiff that the defendant was the licensee of the plaintiff in respect of land under Jhuggi number D-204 (though now the locality is Punjabi Basti, Anand Parbat), which in the revenue records appears as khasra number (i.e., plot number) 367 of the original village, Chowkri Mubarakabad, and the license deed executed in 1986 was attached. The plaintiff further demanded possession of this plot as well as damages of Indian Rs 5,472 (ca. US$300 in 1990) for nonpayment of the license fee.

The defendant (the jhuggi dweller) claimed that the plaintiff was neither owner nor in possession of said property and that the land in dispute was owned and possessed by the Government of India. He also claimed that the land in dispute did not even fall under the khasra (plot) number given by the plaintiff but was registered under another number and that the plaintiff had got some blank paper signed from the defendant by taking advantage of his being illiterate.

In her judgment the presiding judge noted that the Ramjas Foundation had known all along that its claims over the land were in dispute. Having gone into the subtleties of lease versus license, the judgment finally stated that “The notification (of land acquisition) was issued on 13.11.1959 and license was granted on 21.06.1986. Thus the plaintiff was ‘very well assured’ that the acquisition proceedings in respect of the land (i.e., by the Government of India) of which the suit property forms a part had been initiated. Thus the plain-
tiff had no authority to create any licenses qua the land in question.”

People living in the area were not entirely clear about legal and constitutional issues involved in the characterization of waqf property. There was, nevertheless, a clear understanding that the legal strategy of the foundation was a continuation of the intimidation and coercion it had pursued. It is worth emphasizing here that this particular conflict was not fought with the help of any activist organizations or legal help cells outside the locality; rather, it was the Punjabi Basti Sudhar Samiti led by Joshi that gathered the necessary expertise from various sources to fight for the residents because they understood that the rights over housing for all residents were under threat if the Ramjas Foundation won the case.

This conflict with Ramjas Foundation looms over the discussions with local leaders and other residents about the nature of politics in the locality. Joshi claimed that they had sought the help of various officials from the lower-level Patwari to the keeper of revenue records in the Delhi administration using various networks of lower-level workers in these offices to get access to higher-level officials. It is with the help of the sympathetic officials that his organization had extracted the khasra numbers that covered the area that the Ramjas foundation was claiming as its own.7 In the process of these legal battles, the residents had come to acknowledge that although they had won the battle against the powerful foundation, ownership of their land vested not with them but with the Government of India. Here we want to point out that there is an implicit acknowledgment of the fact that rights over their dwellings are split between the government and themselves in the contractual languages that have evolved for transactions of buying and selling houses in the area.

A typical “agreement” of sale mentions the buyer and the seller as well as the location of the property. It concludes, however, with the statement that “the money that is being charged for the house is for malba and mehnat.” Malba literally means “debris,” and, in the normal course of a construction, it is the material that must be removed after the construction is complete. In the slums and JJ colonies, however, the word malba is used to refer to building materials—an acknowledgement of the provisional nature of the house that is built. The word mehnat refers to “labor” or “effort.” It is then fascinating to see that what is being sold is the cost of materials and effort—it is implicitly assumed that the land is not theirs to sell. Yet there is a general sense of agreement in the locality that first, there are some rights over their dwellings that have already accrued to the residents, and second, that even if the particular plots of land on which they built their houses are encroachments, the locality as a whole must engage with state agencies in order to improve their conditions of living.

The Struggle for Electricity

The 138th Report of the Law Commission of India that was given the mandate to report on how law could be marshaled in aid of the poor had commented on civic provisions in slum areas in the following terms:

The slum dwellers in occupation of their units situated within the municipal limits are so often refused essential facilities such as civic amenities, sanitary services, water supply, street lighting, electricity supply, approach road etc. Two grounds are mentioned for supporting such upholding or denying, viz. (1) that they are unauthorized occupance of land and/or (2) that they do not make any contribution by way of municipal taxes etc. (GOI 1990)

Elsewhere, Das (2014) has analyzed in some detail how the locality managed to get electricity and the efforts made by one of the local leaders, Sanjeev Gupta, a Congress Party worker and office bearer of the Punjabi Basti Sudhar Samiti. Gupta had formed another registered society with different office bearers because he felt that different civic issues require different organizations to be at the forefront of “the struggle.” Here we briefly recapitulate some of the important points through which the project for getting electricity legally was waged.8

The story of the electrification of this neighborhood begins with the privatization of electricity in Delhi in the years between 2000 and 2002. When power reforms began in 2002 in Delhi in light of the heavy losses incurred by the state-owned Delhi Vidyut Board, the latter was unbundled into three privately owned companies. Sanjeev Gupta and many others told us about the terrible harassments that residents faced when electricity officials of the private company lodged complaints with the police about theft of electricity. As in

8. It is of course true that the material character of different resources (houses, land, electricity, water, garbage, sewage) leads to organizational differences in how services might be prioritized, but it would be hasty to assume that, say, electricity is less important than water because one can always do without electricity but one cannot do without water. First, many households run small karkhanas (workshops) in the house or engage in other forms of domestic production that require electricity, so that frequent cuts in the supply of electricity or increasing the rates can jeopardize the economic resources available to a household (see Das 2014). It is also the case that once people begin to make a distinction between water that is fit for drinking and cooking vs. water for other kinds of domestic or industrial use, there are concomitant changes in how a household organizes itself for getting water. In Punjabi Basti, all households surveyed used more than one source for accessing water. We have not analyzed the survey data from other localities.

7. These are not vague references. Joshi named at least two officials of the Delhi Development Authority who had been singularly helpful in teaching their organization how to petition their department and the Department of Revenue to get access to records. He also showed me several letters that he had written to various officials on behalf of his organization in connection with the harassment faced from the Ramjas Foundation.
most such neighborhoods, people had earlier drawn electricity illegally from street poles to draw lines to their homes, shops, or karkhanas (workshops) to power domestic or commercial appliances (see fig. A2). The networks of private contractors and low-level officials of the Municipal Corporation who were routinely bribed had assured that the residents did not face criminal charges for theft of electricity. Now with privatization they were finding that the game plans had completely changed. Sanjeev Gupta used his position as the president of the zonal congress committee to arrange a meeting (sometime in 2005) between the representatives of the locality and the officer in charge from the zonal division of the company Bombay Suburban Electric Supply (BSES) to discuss the issue of electricity theft and harassment. Here is the description of what transpired (we juxtapose fragments of the account given by Sanjeev Gupta [in Hindi] to Veena over several informal discussions with an account of the issues involved in electrification as given by one of the officers [Vidyut Sir] of the private company who granted an interview to Veena [mostly in English]) by Sanjeev Gupta.

After electricity was privatized, there was this big move to install meters—now, as you know, in colonies like ours there were no regular meters—there were local contractors who used to supply electricity for payment by drawing lines from the high tension wires—or else, many people drew the lines themselves, and there were regular payments extracted by the local linesmen and the policemen. We said to Vidyut Sir, “Sir, we have been demanding regular supply of electricity, but you do not sanction meters for us. On top of it you file complaints, and the police treat us like criminals. They come and catch hold of the person by the neck as if he has committed a major crime, as if he is a murderer. What kind of justice is this?” Vidyut Sir replied that their records showed how much electricity had been consumed in this locality and what was the recovery of money against it. He said vehemently, “I say on that basis, I say that I have proof, I say, that people are stealing—they are thieves.” We said, “Sir ji, how can you call us thieves? If you don’t give us electricity on the grounds that we are not an authorized colony—and people naturally need electricity—a man wants to run a fan, his little children are burning in the heat—he will get electricity with whatever means—then why call him a thief?”

In his interview with Das, Vidyut Sir related how his boss and he were both struck by the force of Sanjeev Gupta’s argument—was it ethical of them to deny electricity to people when the government was itself tolerating these unauthorized colonies? But they were also concerned as to how they would be able to recover costs, because the addresses were all haphazard, and there were no numbers or names of streets. As he said, “It was a maze.”

Sanjeev Gupta for his part was truly stung by the accusation of theft and vowed that they would remove this stigma of theft from their locality. As he related, “Vidyut Sir guided us—so did another officer. The big issue was that houses did not have addresses in sequential order, streets did not have names or numbers—sometimes if a linesman was expected to deliver a bill, the client would simply rip apart his meter and say, “my house is not C4—that house is in another street.”

Through interactions with the officers in BSES, Gupta came to understand the importance of getting an authorized map of the area with house numbers, for without a list of houses and their correct addresses, the electricity company could not install meters.

Sanjeev Gupta and some other leaders then organized meetings in the area and persuaded most households to contribute Rs 200 per household for a map of the area. After many difficulties due to the topography of the area, a private firm of architects finally made a map. After an exchange of many letters, petitions, and pressure from the chief minister’s office, the town planner of the municipal corporation finally approved the map (see fig. A3). This enabled the BSES to prepare a list of consumers and to install meters in the houses after augmenting electricity supply by installing seven transformers in the area. In the process, each house was assigned a new number, but Sanjeev Gupta managed to get the electricity company to agree to write both the old numbers and the new number on the bills so that now, in all official correspondence, the address appears to be a composite of the two numbers. In that way, electricity bills can be used for purposes of establishing residence for any new scheme, but residents do not have to apply again for change of address for such purposes as bank accounts.

We do not want to give the impression that all this—the map making, the assigning of new numbers, the installation of the transformers—was achieved by agreements arrived through rational deliberative discourse. Accusations have been made in the locality that all the money that was collected was not properly accounted for. There were fights over the exact location of the transformers—for instance, the leader of the local dalits complained about a transformer being placed in the Ambedkar Park that adjoins the streets where most dalits live, saying it amounted to an insult to Ambedkar’s memory.

The gravest threats to Sanjeev Gupta came not openly but in many covert ways from the network of “entrepreneurs” who were earlier supplying electricity illegally and whose business was adversely affected. One day when Sanjeev

9. All personal names in the paper except that of Sanjeev Gupta (on his own request) are pseudonyms. The suffix Sir simply follows local practice to denote respect.
10. Politicians are sometimes honored by the addition of the Hindi particle ji, which is also used in contexts of kinship.
11. It was not possible to locate the persons who constituted this network, but some employees of the earlier Delhi Vidyut Board were implicated.
Gupta was relating the efforts they had to make to complete the project, he suddenly choked, and his eyes were tearing. He said, “I was even attacked one night when I was coming home.” “What happened? Did you get hurt?” “No but they showed me a revolver and told me to stop these activities.” “Who were they?” “Oh, the ones who do this dukandari [literally, “market transactions,” but carrying a tone of illicit transactions here]—whose dhanda/da [illicit work] would have stopped.” “Did you report to the police?” “No, the local police are always on their side.” “So what did you do? How do you know you are safe?” “I told you I was not a die-hard Congress man. I am in the party because I cannot do without it. So those above were informed, and they must have talked to them—after all, the ones who were intimidating me are also part of the same set up.”

It was characteristic of Sanjeev Gupta’s mode of relating a story that he refused to name those who had intimidated or threatened him. Clearly, he lived and worked in a context in which people were involved in what he thought of as corruption. For instance, when describing an ongoing case of demolition of shanties in an adjoining neighborhood in which many poor people lost their abodes, he predicted that they would be back and would reoccupy the land but that they would have to pay again to the very people who had first encouraged them to occupy the vacant land. “It is the same people who had first allowed them to occupy this land by giving an extortion fee to them and then had the demolition squads out and will now again extract money from them.” He would only name the “people” as the local bhu mafia (land mafia)—”you think that land mafias all come from outside with the big building lobbies, but there is a local bhu mafia, too, that operates right from within.” Gupta said, people are 60% good and 40% bad. The general sense was that relations of proximity required that one saw in everyone some good and some bad.

We reserve the commentary on these struggles for housing and electricity for the conclusion, but we do wish to underscore that an authorized map became a major resource for an application that was moved on behalf of the locality to Delhi Development Authority to convert the neighborhood into an authorized colony, which was given provisional approval. We now move on to the second neighborhood, the shanty settlements in Sector 5 and Sector 8 of Naveen Okhla Industrial Development Authority (NOIDA).

NOIDA: The Politics of Surveys

NOIDA was set up as part of the National Capital Region during the National Emergency (1975–1976) to absorb increasing migration to the city. The administration was later taken over by the Uttar Pradesh government as migration increased. According to the 2011 census, the current population of NOIDA is 642,381, and it is primarily composed of migrants from other cities as well as rural migrants. The official descriptions of the township boast of a high literacy rate (89%) as well as major educational institutions and a hospital in every residential sector. Yet nestled in between these affluent zones are the clusters of shanty settlements, some of whose residents have been living there for more than 40 years. What started as settlements of mud and straw shanties have now become crowded settlements with most houses made of bricks and cement, though they are still tiny, often windowless, and with no proper drainage. The narrow spider-y mud lanes are dotted with garbage dumps, open drains, and stagnant water pools, and very few houses have proper toilet facilities.

An interesting feature of the political landscape among the poor of both Punjabi Basti and NOIDA is the proliferation of local leaders, but whereas in Punjabi Basti, a leader will speak of himself in terms of specific achievements—this one for getting electricity meters, that one for arranging water tankers or for getting a tube well—in NOIDA the picture has become much more confusing, with considerable rancor over who has achieved what. It was rare to find any local leaders who did not trade accusations of siphoning off benefits for their own relatives or party members. In much of the literature on urban slums in Delhi, it is assumed that the term pradhan refers to those who wield traditional authority on the basis of caste. However, we found that the authority claimed by Pradhans (a term used much more frequently in NOIDA than in Punjabi Basti) is based on their associations with particular political parties or with politicians at the district or state level rather than on the basis of caste.

The Struggle over Housing

People attribute some of the changes in the structure of leadership, which they say has descended to a state of anarchy, to the fact that NOIDA has a dual administrative structure because it is part of the National Capital Region and also a part of the District of Buddhanagar in Uttar Pradesh. They also see the shift in the nature of leadership as part of a generational shift that has taken place in the structure of sensibilities as new migrants have come into the neighborhood—“ab har ghar mein pradhan hain—har koi apane
identify several past kingdoms as Gujjar or Gurjara in origin. However, in 1998, when Das initiated an exploratory project on the urban poor in Sector 5, there was only one recognized Pradhan, Nathu Ram, whom she interviewed a number of times in 1998.

Nathu Ram rose to a position of power in the locality some time in the midseventies because of his ability, he said, to deal with outsiders, especially the agents of the state, such as policemen. In this aspect he was somewhat like the big men first made famous by Godelier and Strathern (1991), because he did not represent traditional authority. Although not the traditional caste Pradhan, Nathu Ram used his dense kinship connections in the area to build support. He counted eight families of close relatives who lived within the same cluster of jhuggis, while other, more distant relatives had been encouraged by him to come and settle in an adjacent park on kabza land. We should note that there were no formal mechanisms for the selection of Pradhans (as is the case in rural areas), but people sought Nathu Ram’s mediation in personal disputes or to deal with the police (Harris 2005). His authority was evident in different projects he initiated for the settlement (see Das 2011).

Let us fast forward to the nineteen eighties, when the residents of the area were embroiled in a conflict with the neighboring Gujjar community, the original residents of the area before it was claimed for industrial development.14 For the Gujjars, whose fortunes over the years had changed radically as they too had taken advantage of the growth of industry in this area, the presence of a lower-caste cluster of jhuggis in the neighborhood was seen as threatening to their economic dominance and would, they feared, “corrupt” their young people. Nathu Ram explained to me that most men in the jhuggis were performing the tasks of sweepers or working as load carriers for the local factories that were coming up since the late seventies. These were not jobs that the Gujjars were willing to take on because of their higher status, but as longtime settlers in the villages in this area they did not want new settlements to come up. The Gujjars had clout with the police, so the police were all set to demolish their jhuggis. In Nathu Ram’s words, “the bulldozers were literally on our threshold.”

“Someone” advised Nathu Ram that he should try to get a court order to stall the demolitions. The lack of specificity in Nathu Ram’s account of who that someone was or how he came to know him was a common feature of narratives among the urban poor that Das encountered in the early years of her research here. This particular feature indexed the diffused forms of knowledge over which no one ever had full control but that one could follow, and, like a gambler’s move, it could pay dividends. (A new generation of leaders, though still unclear about how to make the legal or bureaucratic system work, are much more savvy about the nature of party politics at the state level.) Having gathered this bit of advice, Nathu Ram decided to go to the High Court in the city of Allahabad, though he did not seem to know anyone there. From his own account, it appeared that he would go to the High Court with a bag of chickpeas and sit on the stairs hoping that someone would take notice of him. We should note that such a strategy for getting attention of state officials, of doctors, of teachers, though not routine, is not uncommon. As luck would have it, an activist lawyer saw him sitting there everyday and asked him what he wanted. Nathu Ram explained his predicament, and the lawyer agreed to file a petition for a stay order on the ground that the residents belonged to the scheduled caste category, were economically downtrodden, and hence should not be deprived of their homes and their means of livelihood. The lawyer, however, insisted that the jhuggi dwellers legally register themselves as a society under the Uttar Pradesh Registration of Societies Act, 1860. The jhuggi residents thus acquired the legal status of a Registered Society under the title of Harijan Mazdur Sangharsh Sabha.15 They were successful in obtaining a stay order from the court and used it in bargaining with the police. Simultaneously, they tried to pursue the demand for alternative accommodations with various political parties, especially during elections, organizing public meetings, holding demonstrations, and submitting petitions to various political leaders. Despite promises made every 5 years during elections that alternative housing would be provided to them, nothing concrete has resulted from these endeavors.

The registered society formed by Nathu Ram had become defunct in 2001, having failed to meet certain procedural requirements. Nathu Ram’s nephew had helped in registering it under another name—Jhuggi Jhopdi Welfare Association—but this nephew absconded soon after to escape arrest because of a criminal case in which he was involved. The society was again registered in 2006, this time with the nephew’s son (Vinod) who had now risen to a position of some power as the executive head. Under the auspices of this society, there was a writ petition filed in court submitting the names of 1,140 jhuggis as eligible for allotment of alternate housing. The High Court found merit in the petition and ordered the NOIDA administration to provide alternate accommodations to these households on the payment of 62,000, to be paid in monthly installments of Rs 120 per household. The lawyers of the society contested this decision on the grounds that as a welfare state, India could not charge such exorbitant sums from the poor. The listing of these

14. Though classified as a “backward” community now belonging to the administrative category of “Other Backward Castes,” historians identify several past kingdoms as Gujjar or Gurjara in origin.

15. The name of the society bears trace of the intervention of the upper caste lawyer who might have suggested the name. Harijan was the term Gandhi used for untouchables, but later dalit leaders rejected this appellation. Of the 23 or so registered societies that are now active in the local politics of the area, none uses caste terms, preferring such titles as Jhuggi Jhopdi Welfare Association, Society for Worker’s Struggle, etc.
1,140 jhuggis, however, led to other petitions filed on behalf of other registered societies claiming that their members had been left out of the list of those entitled to receive alternate housing. Thus far, any agreement on who are the legitimate beneficiaries of the original petition has eluded the locality as bitter fights have broken out over who is to be included or excluded from the list of recipients entitled to alternate accommodations.

Thus, for example, two new registered societies filed writ petitions in the Allahabad High Court against the attempts to evict them from their hutments even as late as 2010. The Allahabad High Court in 2010, in a case filed by a coalition of local NGOs (Jhuggi Jhopri Lagri Kalyan Mahasabha) versus the NOIDA Authority, gave specific instructions regarding rehabilitation of the jhuggi dwellers and passed a new interim order based on the existing order of 1998. There were other writ petitions filed accusing the NOIDA authority of contempt of court for not acting expeditiously on the orders of the court. In response, NOIDA Authority officials assured the court that a new scheme for rehabilitation of jhuggi dwellers had now been finalized and that a fresh survey would be conducted in 2010 to identify all legitimate jhuggi dwellers. The results of this survey were posted on the NOIDA Authority website, but the number of jhuggis identified were far fewer than the actual existing jhuggis at that time. For instance, the website mentioned 525 jhuggis in Sector 5 whereas our census showed 830 jhuggis in one cluster alone in this sector. Thus, individual petitions as well as collective appeals to political parties continued against the NOIDA authority.

It would be evident from the above description that the matter of securing rights over their residence did not end for the jhuggi dwellers with obtaining the various interim orders against eviction. It is true that this protected them from the jhuggi dwellers with obtaining the various interim orders against eviction. It is true that this protected them from eviction, but it did not ensure that they were provided alternative plots of land or apartments with permanent rights, which is their goal. Rather, the jhuggi dwellers continued to find a variety of ways in which they could deepen their claims over housing.

At the individual level, the strategy for deepening the claims over the jhuggis built on occupied land is to gather as many documents as possible to establish long-term residency. The most important of these documents are ration cards and voter identity cards. The new impetus by the government to cover the entire population of India through unique identity cards had not yet had an effect on household strategies of building incremental rights over their dwellings, although this was already emerging as a major issue in 2013. The strategies used by leaders for security of tenure has since come to focus on two alternative goals—either to secure alternate accommodations or to get permanent rights over the land that they have occupied. At the collective level, different political leaders at the local level who are affiliated with different political parties continue to petition powerful politicians, form new registered societies, and use the media, especially during elections. Yet the bureaucratic plans for rehabilitation are following their own logic. We visited Sector 125, where in 2012 an area was earmarked for multistory buildings for rehabilitation of all jhuggi dwellers. There were tenders floated by NOIDA authority to invite builders to submit building plans, but it was equally clear to the inhabitants that the issue was not going to be resolved in any hurry. An articles in the Hindi newspaper <i>Amar Ujala</i>, for instance, had reported on March 13, 2011, that the 2010 survey yielded a total of 11,500 jhuggi dwellers in five sectors of NOIDA and that a tender for 3,472 flats was floated. Although application forms for allotment of flats were made available and advertised, there were few takers, as considerable controversy broke out over the authenticity of names included in the survey in the localities as well as the conditions of allotment. The very discrepancy between the number of jhuggi dwellers identified in the survey and the number for which a tender was floated was evidence for people that the bureaucracy was making empty gestures to satisfy the courts.

Thus, a stalemate continued on the plans for alternative accommodations (Chatterji 2005 and Chatterji and Mehta 2007 for similar conflicts in Mumbai at the time of their fieldwork in 2001 and 2002 in Dharavi). Meanwhile, with parliamentary elections scheduled in 2014, many local inhabitants who were politically connected started converting their jhuggis into two-storied <i>pucca</i> houses in both Sector 5 and sector 8 because they were convinced that no demolitions would be risked in an election year. In this case, at least, their gambles paid off.

Unlike the case of Punjabi Basti in which, despite the presence of different political parties and the electoral contests, the local leaders had been able to unite over the issue of getting an authorized map or electricity meters, in the case of NOIDA, the surveys to determine who were the original inhabitants and who were the newcomers generated intense open conflict so that no final survey could be taken as the authorized document for recognizing rights for claiming compensation in the event of resettlement. Thus, the form that local politics took in these two areas shows the importance of local ecologies: rather than a generic category of the poor, what we find is that local histories of settlements are vital for understanding how governmentality and dem-
ocratic politics inflect each other to produce different outcomes.18

As the paper by Amarasuriya and Spencer (2015) shows, the ethnographic present poses especially important challenges for analysis as changes at the level of state politics can translate rapidly into the rise and fall of particular local leaders and particular projects. In the years since the bulk of data collection was done in the two areas described here, Delhi saw the changing fortunes of political parties that included the near decimation of the Congress Party in 2015 after it had ruled Delhi from 1998 to 2013, the national rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and its subsequent defeat at the hands of Aam Admi Party (AAP) in the assembly elections in 2015. But part of the burden of our argument is precisely to show the fragility and volatility of the housing and infrastructure projects in these areas and the waxing and waning of aspirational politics that emerges within this milieu of uncertainty. What can the struggle for housing and for better infrastructure then tell us about the politics of the urban poor even as we argue in this volume that any generic category of the urban poor is not helpful except as a placeholder (see Das and Randeria 2015)?

Do the Poor Have Politics?

Some political philosophers have argued that because the poor are driven by the immediacy of need, they are not capable of the kind of collective action that constitutes the realm of politics. In Hannah Arendt’s (1963) view, for instance, the raison d’être of politics is freedom, and its field of expression is action. Action, however, is distinguished from both labor and work—the first related to necessity, wants, and urges and the second to self-expression, as evidenced in the work produced by the artisan. Neither of the two constitutes the realm of freedom and collective action that Arendt considers as attributes of politics. A full development of the critique of Arendt is not possible here, but even if we were to grant that the kind of struggles over needs (for housing, electricity) we describe here fall more on the side of work than labor because there is an aspiration for infrastructural projects that would be lasting, these forms of collective action would still constitute only the conditions of possibility for politics to arise in Arendt’s framework, not evidence of politics itself.19

From our perspective, such theories as advanced by Arendt often bypass the question of what it is that the poor actually do. While subaltern studies in India did much to analyze the subaltern groups as political actors, their exclusive emphasis on resistance does not help in analyzing the way in which the poor participate in political activities as part of their everyday lives. Chatterjee’s (2004) concept of political society, though more sensitive to everyday life, creates a teleological story in which the efforts of the poor are seen as converting a “population” into a “moral community” by engaging politicians over such issues as housing and electricity, but the notion of moral community manages to erase any signs of the power struggles within the community.

In the case of both neighborhoods discussed here, the trigger to organize themselves for collective action came in the form of a crisis over housing. The turn to the courts of law in both cases was initiated to avert a crisis, though the nature of this crisis was somewhat different. In the case of Punjabi Basti, it was the fight with a powerful private foundation, which led to the formation of the Punjabi Basti Sudhar Samiti. Although the cases the foundation had filed were against individuals, it is very important to underscore that residents were able to see this as a collective threat that required action on behalf of the whole community. In the case of NOIDA, it was the fight between migrants and the local settled population that led to recourse to law, which was intended in the first place to ward off police action against them. The trajectories that these fights took became quite different. In the case of Punjabi Basti, the local leaders were able to forge sufficient unity among themselves to establish an authorized map of the colony. They took the initiative to organize their own surveys and, despite conflicts of various kinds in the locality, they were able to get a final agreement on the list of homeowners as well as establish a boundary of the locality.20 In the case of NOIDA, the conduct of surveys was left to the administrative authority. While surveys to fix titles were periodically conducted and a number was produced each time, an agreement on a final list of homeowners eluded the residents. Instead, the number itself led to further escalation of conflicts within the neighborhood along lines of party politics or along different spheres of influence.

18. We invite the reader to pursue the tables provided in CA+ supplement B to see the differences in the access to housing and infrastructure in Punjabi Basti and NOIDA. We also want to stress that interpersonal enmities, land grabbing, and forceful occupation of empty plots were not entirely absent in Punjabi Basti and point to our sense that new configurations of power relations might arise. What effect these configurations will have on the ongoing projects for access to water and sewage disposal must be left as an open question for now.

19. We thank Michael Degani for pushing us to think further on these issues, though we must leave a fuller examination of the implications of our findings for the tripartite arrangement of labor, work, and action in Arendt for another occasion. However, see Pitkin (1998) for a sympathetic but rigorous critique of Arendt’s insistence that labor and work do not belong to the domain of politics.

20. We do not wish to suggest that people regularly participate in the activities of the NGOs and of registered societies or even regard themselves as members of these organizations in any formal sense. In the case of Punjabi Basti, the agreement to be represented by the relevant NGO for taking the claims of the locality to the officials for getting it regularized was an important step. In the case of NOIDA, the proliferation of registered societies, each with its own claim of representing the residents, reflected an escalation of conflict.
We also saw that in both cases local leaders were connected with political leaders from outside the locality. They were also able to petition bureaucrats or officials who helped them to negotiate the complex terrain of rules and regulations. Local leaders in Punjabi Basti stressed the importance of learning about the "system," inserting the English word, though they are not English speakers. In the case of NOIDA, the connections with politicians were used most often to increase one's own sphere of influence—the leaders in this locality saw these as personal ties. For instance, they emphasized the importance of having such connections for negotiating with the police in cases where someone was accused of petty crimes or got caught in local disputes. Thus, elements of patronage were present in both cases, but in one case the local leaders were able to establish a measure of autonomy while in the second case the local leaders saw themselves primarily as mediators who delivered "goods" such as votes or "people" for political rallies in exchange for the influence yielded by the politician-patrons in negotiations with police or with local government officials.

We also want to underscore that the poor participate actively in electoral politics, but they do not see elections as the only political activity they engage in. In a random sample of 1,200 households drawn from four localities (including these two clusters in NOIDA), it was found that 86% respondents had voting cards and 75% reported voting in elections. However, when in detailed ethnographic interviews with 40 households chosen from the sample we asked the reasons why people voted, it turned out that one prominent reason was that they thought that their names would be struck off the voter’s list if they did not vote and that in the absence of a voter card they would not be able to have proof of residence. They feared that this would lead to their being excluded from different government schemes, including rights to alternate accommodations. Thus, far from wishing to evade the eyes of the state, in these matters, at least, they were demanding to be counted as citizens with entitlements that they could claim without being seen as recipients of charity.

It is not that other considerations for voting for one or other candidate were not offered. In Punjabi Basti, people spoke of MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly), MPs (Members of Parliament), or ward councilors in terms of who had done what for the constituency. In NOIDA, too, the Uttar Pradesh state-level politics were watched closely for any shift in policy regarding the right to alternate accommodations (see fig. A4). What was striking, though, was the sense that they were entitled to live in the city and that it was their votes that had brought the politicians into positions of power. These kinds of considerations and calculations might not constitute politics in the purest form as Arendt envisaged it, but we claim that it is in the process of engaging the legal, administrative, and democratic resources that are available to them—in courts, in offices of the bureaucrats, and in the party offices—that the poor learn to become political actors and not simply recipients of the state’s benefits.

Perhaps the most important point we want to underscore is that we should be considering not simply how well democracy has served the poor but how democratic politics have been deepened by the participation of the poor. After all, it is because they have put political labor into going to courts, insisting that the law take into account what the constitutional provision of the right to life actually means, or their active participation in asking how city life is to be made viable that democracy has taken shape, for all its benefits and shortcomings. We can do no better than cite Sanjeev Gupta, who, with some assistance from Veena Das, was able to write an op-ed piece in the national newspaper, the Indian Express, articulating his criticisms against the policies of AAP, who won the Delhi elections in 2014 (Gupta 2014) and who has now emerged again as the ruling party with a thumping majority. Gupta then wrote, "For us, democracy is measured by the spaces for action that are opened up for us and not by the free gifts we might be given as charity. We have worked to shift the perspective of our fellow residents from that of expecting charity to that of demanding rights.” This aspiration might not be an accomplished fact, nor might the position of Gupta be assured within the neighborhood as old enmities reemerge with the change of fortunes at the level of state politics, but the articulation of such an aspiration is not to be dismissed either. Neither the talk of the lure of elections as expressions of the sacred (Banerjee 2007) nor the assumption that it is the ubiquity of relations of patronage that provide durability to politics in India (Pilavsky 2014) provides us with the framework of understanding how to conceptualize the kind of aspirations we described here or the work done by those who inhabit the poorly served areas in Delhi as a sign of the thickening and deepening democracy in India.

22. Nikhil Anand (2011) makes the important point that large-scale mobilization for housing rights, political representation, and what he calls the “moral economy” of petitions and favors may have been able to secure infrastructural services in the slum areas in Mumbai, but they also serve to create further claims to resettlement. Thus, the “politics of compensation” that has led to negotiated settlements between developers and settlers in many areas in Mumbai cannot be simply treated as a compromised form of insurgent citizenship (see also Roy 2009 for a nuanced argument on how rights to resettlement and accumulation by dispossession coexist in Mumbai). None of this is to deny that bulldozers are still used to dismantle whole settlements, but it complicates the issue of why a differential geography emerges in the city with regard to the possible forms of political action against eviction.

21. The source of these figures is a CPR-ISERDD survey of 1,200 households in four localities—two in Delhi and two in NOIDA funded by the ESRC-funded study referred to in the acknowledgments.
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The Need for Patience
The Politics of Housing Emergency in Buenos Aires
by Valeria Procupez

In this paper I explore the attempt to organize in order to secure permanent housing among poor urban families in Buenos Aires who reside temporarily in government-subsidized welfare hotels. My aim is to examine the passage that appears to take place between the ever-present tropes of “need” (and being assisted) and of “patience” (and being an activist in an autonomous and project-oriented movement) in the families’ experience of time as they embark collectively in this endeavor. I argue that as activists strive to move away from the subject position of asistido into which social programs seem to place them, they assume a political engagement that requires “patience,” a kind of work necessary for overriding the feeling of urgency often connected with a condition of need.

Introduction

You initially join a housing organization out of desperate need, but that is not why you end up staying. . . . It is really due to something else; the group becomes your haven, where you find your support. It takes so much patience. . . . You have to wait long and learn to work with others, but then you devise a plan together, you become companions in a journey [compañeros de ruta]. (Interview with a housing activist, 2005)

When I first went along with Elvira and Marcela to the welfare office at the Buenos Aires Ministry of Social Services in order to renew emergency housing subsidies, I was amazed at the sense of aplomb with which they carried out their interview with the social worker. Elvira and Marcela were activists in a grassroots housing movement and were filing paperwork on behalf of themselves and other members of a housing cooperative. They were all temporarily residing in government-subsidized welfare hotels while their future homes were under construction. Although these interviews are usually stressful situations for the applicants, when decisions depend on the discretion of the officer performing the evaluation, Elvira and Marcela’s confidence in this case revealed their awareness that their bids had been preapproved by prior agreement between their organization and the city government. Still, they were required to submit documentation certifying they had not yet moved into their new homes. As Marcela watched the officer stamp the documents, she looked at me, rolling her eyes, and said, “I can’t believe they still ask us for all this paperwork. We need to be so patient!” (No puedo creer que todavía nos pidan todo este papelero. Se necesita tener una paciencia!).

In this paper I depict the attempt to organize in order to secure permanent housing among poor urban families in Buenos Aires who reside temporarily in government-subsidized welfare hotels. My aim is to examine the passage that appears to take place between the ever-present tropes of “need” (and being assisted) and of “patience” (and being an activist in an autonomous and project-oriented movement) in the families’ experience of time as they embark collectively in this endeavor. I argue that as activists strive to move away from the subject position of asistido into which social programs seem to place them, they assume a political engagement that requires what they call “patience.”

The trope of need is pervasive in families’ explanations of their current residential conditions, be it in their justification for requesting subsidies or in their reasons for refusing to participate in long-term projects when their situation requires an immediate (even if fragile) solution. But need is also a category around which they are expected to fashion their identity in order to apply to social services for state-funded support programs, as if admitting to their own helplessness or inability to satisfy their needs by themselves. Sometimes they might...

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even be required to provide evidence of participation in other assistance networks, which certifies them as “poor.”

Several studies of community organizations in Latin America have remarked the centrality of the notion of need for urban grassroots organizing (Díaz Barriga 1996; Jelin 1998; Merklen 2005) while noticing that as need may be an encouragement for people to mobilize, it can also induce acquiescence, particularly when they are burdened by necessities that require immediate responses. This conundrum constitutes an ongoing debate among popular organizations in Argentina torn between positions entailing diverse degrees of autonomy or co-optation, the question being whether to demand direct participation in decision-making processes or accept ready-made solutions to pressing needs, such as accepting subsidies.

In fact, need might push people to mobilize, but once they become part of a larger organization, need gives way to something else. As the quote above states, after a certain point in the struggle, the practices, routines, discussions, and affective relations become even more important than the end itself. The tyranny of urgency is thus superseded by the work to be done, by the acknowledgment that solutions will not be immediate, by the need for patience.

As I have written elsewhere (Procupéz 2012), housing activists often invoke “patience” as a necessary quality to undergo the process of legalizing their housing situation. In fact, I have often noticed that patience is deemed necessary for becoming activists, although it is hardly ever mentioned in reference to the instability endured in the welfare hotels. The demand for immediate solutions to a pressing need might involve some degree of waiting (which is usually lived as “impatience”), but it cannot afford patience, which entails a project and a sense of future.

In the following sections, I characterize the situation of vulnerability experienced by the “subsidized” families and trace a historic and an ethnographic approach to the housing emergency program sponsored by the city government to depict how social policies engage beneficiaries by individualizing and fragmenting their demands. I then discuss how even when organizing to overcome emergency might not immediately alter the families’ current residential situation, it reframes it within an alternative temporal structure, as the impossibility of waiting that “need” seems to invoke is replaced by the long-term perspective involved in “patience.” I engage varied literatures on waiting and the temporalities of social mobilization in order to explore how the shift in the experience of time enables the development of organizations that go beyond basic demands and generate long-term political engagement. I argue that patience is here a political stance and is better understood as a collective mode of inhabiting temporality rather than as a cultivated virtue.

The Urgency of Need

Around 2000, in the wake of economic crises, the city of Buenos Aires suspended housing subsidy payments, and hotel residents found themselves on the verge of eviction. At the time, several residents—including Elvira and Marcela—joined a grassroots housing organization (Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos [MOI], Movement of squatters and tenants) with the aim of finding a solution to their turbulent and unstable situation. Once they managed to cancel the imminent evictions and ensure temporary shelter in the hotels, they formed and legally registered the housing cooperative Independencia and applied to a mortgage program sponsored by the city government in order to acquire permanent housing. After two long years of mobilization, the co-op was granted a collective low-interest mortgage loan to finance the renovation of a rundown former warehouse into shared permanent housing for its members. They also secured a subsidy for the families’ temporary accommodation in welfare hotels throughout the construction and renovation process. After all their mobilizing, then, the families actually remained living in welfare hotels, often in the same dire conditions of abuse, overcrowding, and inappropriate sanitation. However, their situation had significantly changed in two relevant aspects. On the one hand, families would no longer need to apply individually to renew their subsidies, submitting to the scrutiny of the social workers once every 4 or 5 months. On the other, their destitute living conditions had now effectively become temporary: they were just a stage in the long-term process of acquiring their permanent homes.

By the time I accompanied Marcela and Elvira to renew the subsidies, the co-op building was already under construction, some apartments had been completed, and 21 families had already moved in. However, the arbitrary nature of official certifications and the irregularity of fund allocation made it very hard for the co-op to keep the work going at a regular pace and according to schedule. Families blamed the administration for the delays, and this accounted in part for Marcela’s frustration in having to prove that they still needed the temporary housing. When she invoked the need for patience in order to deal with what she deemed were unfair requests, it was not just in the sense of waiting but also in having the fortitude and composure to overcome adversity.

Low-income sectors in Buenos Aires have long endured severe housing deficiencies. As with other Latin American metropolises that underwent rapid urbanization, the city has never been able to completely accommodate its population, constantly increased by rural migration once sparked by in-
ciptent industrialization and later by stagnant regional economies. Eventually, the lack of adequate and affordable housing in the city was further affected by long-term unemployment, underemployment, and income precarization. Still, the availability of casual or menial jobs, health care and social services, public education, and an existing urban infrastructure often lacking in the suburban areas continued making Buenos Aires a better option for poor residents (Procupez and Rodríguez 2001:223–224).

Roughly since the return of democracy in 1983, different administrations have deployed a certain “tolerance” toward informal settlements, giving rise to a range of (inadequate) alternatives. Along the already well-known villas and inquilinatos (tenements), these included single-room renting in welfare hotels, asentamientos (organized land takeovers) in the suburbs, and squatting (illegal occupancy of houses and buildings) in downtown areas.

However, in the 1990s citywide processes of real estate valorization and projects of urban renewal in the south area of the city threatened these forms of precarious housing and in many cases resulted in the removal of the resident populations and their displacement to the more inexpensive (and underserviced) outskirts of the city. The deployment of several “exemplary” evictions reinforced the definition of an incipient pattern of expulsion of the poor from the urban center (Rodríguez 2005:72–83).

My two friends had significant experience living in subsidized welfare hotels. Elvira had lived in and out of tenements and squatter buildings ever since arriving in the city from her native province of Chaco in 1992. She and her family had finally landed a subsidy upon being evicted from a decaying old house where they had been squatting along with three other families in the southern area of the city. By the time I met her, Elvira had become very savvy in navigating charitable institutions and government offices to solicit different kinds of assistance. She once explained to me the complex schedule she had devised in order to pick up her children from two different schools in time to make the second shift at a soup kitchen run by a local church. After lunch she roamed the neighborhood streets with her kids to allow her husband a few hours of quiet sleep before starting his night shift at his most recent job as a watchman in a downtown warehouse.

She also knew her way around the social services office, where she applied for varied programs ranging from a supply of school materials to subsidies for medical prescriptions. The office houses all the welfare programs run by the city government as well as the department of social workers who certify eligibility for public assistance. In addition to family services, they also deal with the emergency assistance programs directed at poor or destitute families or individuals, including the housing aid that subsidizes temporary accommodation in commercially owned residential hotels until beneficiaries find a more permanent solution.

By the time Elvira entered the program, around the year 2000, it was still under the aegis of a decree from 1997 that continued, under the newly appointed representative government, a regime of assistance that had been in place before the city became autonomous. Either families applied on their own or they were visited by a social worker in the event of imminent eviction, and in both cases they were required to produce mandatory documentation, such as photocopies of IDs for each family member, proof of schooling for all the minors, and copies of the judicial notification documenting that the squatter building was being reclaimed and that procedures for an eventual eviction were underway (Biaggio and Verón 2009). Under the program’s 1997 format, the city directly contracted the services of a number of the single-room-occupancy establishments scattered in different neighborhoods, and once families were approved, they were assigned a room and instructed to report regularly to the social worker in order to maintain their status. The beneficiaries, thus, were never involved in negotiations between the public office and the hotel management. Generally rooms came already furnished, and because of their limited size and overcrowding (only one room was assigned per family), people were forced either to leave their possessions behind or store them in city storage facilities (from which they hardly ever recovered them, at least in acceptable condition). At the residences, people dealt directly with the manager, usually a resident man or woman who leased the rooms.

5. Between 1977 and 1981, the military dictatorship applied a repressive policy of forced removal of villas (shantytowns) that had steadily grown in the city roughly since the decade of the 1950s, producing a dramatic decline in their population from 280,000 in 1976 to 14,000 in 1981 (Osłak 1991). Families were either sent back to their provinces of origin or relocated in underdeveloped suburban areas (Rodríguez 2005:61).

6. Villas involve the illegal occupation of public land characterized by the absence of proper urban planning, a prevailing deficit in urban infrastructure (sewage, sanitation, running water, natural gas), and serious overcrowding in precarious residences built from inappropriate materials. They were repopulated after the return of democracy and have experienced a dramatic increase in the last 2 decades.

7. Most notorious were gigantic projects to renovate previously undervalued neighborhoods, the opening of luxurious shopping centers in redeveloped old markets, and an incipient trend of refurbishing old warehouses for loft living. (Di Virgilio 2002).

8. In the next section I will discuss in more detail the different stages the program went through during different administrations, and I will also delve deeper into the temporal conundrums involved in the notion of “emergency” that affect the way policies are planned and designed.

9. The Programa Integrador para Personas o Grupos Familiares en Situación de Emergencia Habitacional was sanctioned by decree 607/97, which overtook a policy that had existed since roughly 1986, but if before, the budget for its implementation was provided by the national government, after the decree, it was funded directly by the government of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (Thomasa 2008).
Even though they were closer to tenements in that they did not provide any services for guests, the single-room occupancies worked (and still do) under the legal license of residential hotels, charging daily rates per person without a lease, which legally allowed them to cancel services and evict tenants from one day to the next. In addition, this system meant that the city spent unwarranted monthly sums in a program that, even if it was defined as “temporary,” lead to rather extended stays. The policy in fact was not articulated with any subsequent stage that would help reduce reliance on temporary shelter by providing access to permanent solutions, such as increasing the construction or renovation of affordable permanent housing. Thus, even if in its definition it was supposed to provide immediate solutions to keep families out of the street for a short period, the “emergency” subsidy became rather “permanent.”

Marcela was a single mother who lived with her four kids (ranging in age from 3 to 15 years) in a subsidized welfare hotel. They all shared a small room with two bunk beds and two armoires where they kept their belongings. Like Elvira, she had arrived in the city (from neighboring country Paraguay) a few years earlier with two young kids and had since met the father of the other two. She had later filed a situation of abuse that forced her to move several times, always leaving possessions behind. She had applied for the social services housing subsidy on her own, on the recommendation of an acquaintance, and after being interviewed by a social worker to explain her family situation and having presented the paperwork, she was “given the key” to the small room. However, being savvy and presenting oneself as a subject of need would soon prove insufficient to remain in the program, particularly under the circumstances that eventually produced what grassroots organizations have called the “crisis of the hotels.” As these women’s stories illustrate, a different kind of struggle would be required.

In fact, by the following year, at the peak of the economic crises that would culminate in the financial default and popular revolts that ousted the government in December 2001, the emergency housing program had reached an untenable condition. With the constant increase of evictions since the end of the 1990s, the growing rate of unemployment, and the ever-rising value of urban real estate, the program grew from subsidizing around 1,160 families in 1999 to over 8,000 in 2001 (Biaggio and Verón 2009). In this situation of sudden growth and budget limitations, the control capacities of the secretary of social services were completely overburdened, and the already squalid living conditions in subsidized welfare hotels worsened. Faced with the derelict state of some of the establishments, such as inadequate physical conditions and sanitation or even lack of basic provisions such as hot water, the city ordered the inspection of the single-room occupancies in order to close down the deficient ones (Biaggio and Verón 2009; Marcús 2007). In September 2001, the administration made an attempt to definitively cancel the existing subsidized hotel program and replace it with a onetime subsidy to be assigned to the families who would then be in charge of finding lodging by themselves, forcing them to make (individual) decisions and making them responsible for their choices.

In this moment of despair in the context of general unrest that dominated the country as a whole, however, the subsidized hotel resident population reacted with an incipient process of mobilization and contacted several grassroots organizations and NGOs working on housing rights as well as the Defensoría del Pueblo (Office of the Ombudsman), which filed charges against the Ministry of Social Services for the cancelation of assistance. Several groups and associations were formed, and eventually they were able to force the ministry to meet with hotel residents and sign some kind of agreement on the solutions to the crisis. Finally, in 2002 a new decree (895/02) was drafted to replace the previous program, and the new format of the subsidy (to be given initially in six equal and consecutive monthly installments of up to a maximum of $700 per month and renewable only for four more months) still required the beneficiaries to procure by themselves the lodging to be subsidized. They were asked to submit applications including not only the documentation required in the previous program but also a budget for the room on paper displaying the hotel letterhead. In the meantime, however, special provisions were devised for those people who had been residents of the closed down hotels who were already organizing on their own.

It was during this time of turmoil that Elvira and Marcela met, along with many other hotel resident families, as they initially organized to resist the program cancelation. Seeking support for their struggle, they ran into activists from MOI who eventually convinced them to form a housing co-op and continue working toward a different kind of project that would help them attain definite and permanent housing and thus supersede the instability endured in the hotels. As Marcela describes it, “When we started Cooperativa Independencia, we were all families from the hotels, but many people left, and only some of us remained. . . . It was difficult for all of

10. The program involved a subsidy for a total of US$1,800 per family, to be paid in six installments of US$300 per month. The families were to negotiate with the single-room occupancies privately, and once they obtained signed certification of their acceptance for accommodation, they had to sign monthly documents that the managers would submit to the secretary of social services to be paid on behalf of that family (Biaggio and Verón 2009; Thomaz 2008).

11. The Office of the Ombudsman of the City of Buenos Aires has been active since the city gained autonomy, defending the interests of the public. The office has helped citizens, particularly those who did not previously have legal representation, to file judicial complaints against maladministration on the part of city authorities.

12. Even though the availability of courts to place demands has been an enormously important change, organizations such as MOI are reluctant to judicialize demands and promote instead collective organization and the politicization of demands to pressure authorities for policy change.
us to learn to cooperate. Some people were pretty desperate, and in the end they did not stay. Because this really takes a lot of work, and it is sometimes difficult to foresee whether you will have your house in the end.”

When they started organizing, people’s expectations were framed by the temporal structure of their urgent needs, which required an immediate solution. The temporality of need is such that it occludes any kind of long-term perspective that would effectively offer alternatives to the situation. Moreover, as the quick solutions to pressing needs are not accompanied by the prospect of a subsequent stage, they lose their “temporary” condition and become permanent even if they are still referred to as “provisional.” In fact, a recent sociological study of welfare hotels in Buenos Aires states that “a paradoxical situation is the tenants’ perception according to which living in a hotel is an emergency temporary situation, which clearly contrasts with the actual evidence of extended stays. Renting a room in a hotel, instead of being a provisional and short term solution to reduce the housing problem, seems to have turned into the permanent solution for a perdurable problematic” (Marcús 2007:141).

As one of the arguments for closing down the temporary subsidy programs stated, the assisted population did not move out and remained in place for very long periods of time. Of course, as we shall see, it is the absence of coordination between government programs that results in those extended periods of subsidized residence in the welfare hotels. Besides leading inevitably to the failure of the program, the temporal conundrum in which something posited as “temporary” or finite actually becomes endless—or at least lasts so long that its transitory character becomes blurred—is at the heart of the problem I seek to unravel in this paper. A central consequence of this situation is the extreme vulnerability in which it places the families, who repeatedly depended on the renewal of their subsidies. People ended up living as if in a constant present, always waiting for the renewal, with no other prospect.

Several anthropological studies have approached the issue of a temporal orientation toward a permanent, timeless present, notably a collection of papers about “living for the moment” (Day, Papataxiarchis, and Stewart 1999). There, the authors analyze a few experiences of different social groups they locate on the margins of society due to, among other things, their focus on the short term. Their inability to conceive or plan for a time when their current misfortunes will subside is interpreted as—to some extent—liberating. Although I find this argument undeniably provocative, the experience of the residents of subsidized hotels points rather to a sense of oppression and being trapped in a constant present, more akin to how Lotte Buch Segal (2013) describes the experience of the wives of political prisoners who seem to live in a circular time in which routines have to be constantly repeated. Time seems to contract, and the women feel captive to an immediate present, much like the hotel residents in Buenos Aires.

In Permanent Emergency

Marcela’s bewilderment at having to file petitions to remain living in the same conditions points to the temporal disjunction between the accelerated rhythm taken up by the cooperative’s project and the slow timing of bureaucratic procedures that seem to take forever and that made her believe in a covert intentionality in the delays. In fact, since the formation of the cooperative, the existing programs were altered several times because of, in addition to significant budget cuts, severe increases in poverty rates resulting in the need for even more social services. But what more likely troubled Marcela was the feeling that nothing was progressing at an acceptable tempo due in part to the lack of coherence between the programs run by two separate government offices with different logics and timings. Not only was the Ministry of Social Services overwhelmed by its intent to provide provisional quick solutions to pressing needs, but also there was no coordination between these temporary programs and those for permanent housing run by the city housing authority Instituto de Vivienda de la Ciudad which took its time to control every legal and construction aspect of the future housing projects.

It would be wrong, however, to deny any consistency to the variety of state actions regarding housing policy, which—seen in perspective—seem to continue the 1990s trend of basically facilitating the functioning of the real estate market. The transitory character of housing subsidies sponsored by social services, the excessive requirements to afford the public mortgages offered by the housing authority, and the urban policies directed at valorizing and redeveloping “deteriorated” areas in the city support the transformations of the real estate market at the same time that they deny housing its character as a “social right” (Biaggio and Verón 2009:49). It is often agreed that the state “retrenched” during the time of neoliberal reforms, decreasing its role as leveler and provider of services of universal scope. However, the situation of the housing policies in Buenos Aires reveals the notion of “retrenchment” to be misleading, being instead more a change in state functions. Even though many provisions were suspended or privatized, there has been a significant development of regulatory and financial systems for private construction and commercial mortgages for middle and upper sectors of the population since the mid-1990s. For the poor, however, the only policy was localized instruments to soften situations of housing emergency (Thomazs 2008).14

13. Arjun Appadurai argues that the “tyranny of emergency” dominates the lives of the urban poor and prevents them from building effective assets (Appadurai 2013:30).

14. This, of course, was not exclusive to Argentina. Urban analyst Andrea Echeverría cites a World Bank document of 1993 summarizing guidelines for housing policies titled “Housing: Enabling Markets to Work.” The central recommendations involve ceasing public finance and direct construction of social housing and promoting possibilities for private investment, mortgages, and the building industry (Echeverría 2005).
Several scholars have written about changes in public policy regimes—social policies in particular—in the wake of the demise of the Argentine version of the “welfare” state, what many have called a “populist” state (Biaggio and Verón 2009; Fidel 2004; Hintze, Grassi, and Neufeld 1994; LoVuolo and Barbeito 1998). Although they diverge in locating the beginning of this process—either starting in the late 1960s with the crisis of the developmentalist state project or during the military dictatorship between 1976 and 1983—they all agree that it culminated in the 1990s during the time of the most profound neoliberal reforms. Basically, since the Peronista government in the mid 1940s, but throughout the ensuing decades of alternate democratic and de facto regimes, the Argentine state had developed an extended system of social rights. The model was a combination of universalist and corporatist coverage not so much on a notion of citizenship but rather on one of worker or workforce (Hintze, Grassi, and Neufeld 1994). In a society of full employment, as Argentina was until the mid 1970s, this meant that except for some services that were provided universally by the state—as for example public education—most social rights coverage was provided through a combination of state and work-based programs—such as union-managed health care or employment-based social security. Within this context, social policies—strictly speaking, those directed at solving basic needs—acquired a residual character: they were conceived as assistance for those who, for health, age, or disability reasons, were exempted from the workforce. With the widespread neoliberal reforms of the 1990s, which entailed consistent policies of privatization and deregulation aimed at overcoming the last vestiges of an economic model of state-centered development, poverty and inequality increased to degrees unprecedented in Argentine history. Official data for 1998 show 32.2% of the population—around 13 million people—was poor (Procupez and Rodríguez 2001:218). Because of the meteoric growth of unemployment, the system was completely dismantled and replaced by a model centered around the notion of “consumer.” Most social provisions (health care, social security, etc.) were privatized and became individual responsibilities, and social policies were reconfigured and focalized to identify and cover those who were not able to cope on their own. The profound changes were obviously not limited to state institutions but also involved processes of mobilization of the popular organizations no longer based on unionization or wage struggles but rather on ensuring access to the state provisions for their constituencies (Lopes de Souza 2006).

Public programs delineate a “beneficiary population,” imposing very specific, strict requirements for people demanding access to resources. They define the identities of potential recipients as both in need and deserving a subsidy while determining a category of excluded subjects. Recipients have to perform the identity designated by state regulation in order to qualify (with claims that fall under those the program is designed to solve) and have access to the benefits of the programs (Biaggio and Verón 2009). Therefore, if the social policies of the populist state interpellated individuals as subjects of rights, the current version interpellates them as “poor,” “needy,” or “unable.”

In fact, one of the results of the transformations in social policies was programs that were so focalized that they established very restricted limits demarcating their scope and defining their beneficiaries while situations in reality are marked by boundaries that are porous and mobile. For instance, the housing subsidy program was limited to people in “housing emergency,” a category that was constantly redefined by different administrations up to the most recent version, which applies exclusively to a status of actual homelessness and excludes situations of imminent eviction. Moreover, instead of conceiving needs in general as resulting from a particular socioeconomic context, the social programs seem to detach them from their conditions of production and address each one individually, as if they were misfortunes that might befall anyone despite their background. Social services offers subsidies of different kinds for medicines and health care, schooling materials, certificates of indigence to avoid being charged for official paperwork, construction materials to make improvements to rooms or shacks, and so forth. People are required to apply individually and specifically to each program, thus generating a never-ending situation of submission.

Of course the state materializes needs through acting on them, and it can only do this after singularizing them. But through establishing their particularity, it depoliticizes the collective identities that underlie the notion of need and the more general claims and vindications—for social justice or redistribution of wealth, for example—that could be built on them. Paraphrasing Nancy Fraser (1989), through this mechanism, subjects are positioned as single possible recipients of bureaucratically preformatted programs rather than as agents involved in interpreting their own needs who can shape their demands and their everyday life in accordance with the needs and claims of others or with any sum of collective historical experiences.15

The hotel subsidy program requires people to make individual choices, and thus it tends to fragment incipient forms of organization among the families. Some residents might even be prevented from placing complaints about the derelict conditions of the rooms for fear of jeopardizing the status of their subsidies. The hotel where Marcela lived, for example, comprised 24 minuscule rooms in two floors, with two bathrooms and one small kitchen per floor. Each room sheltered on average between five and six people who had to keep all their

15. “As a result of these expert redefinitions, the people whose needs are in question are repositioned. They become individual ‘cases’ rather than members of social groups or participants in political movements and are rendered passive” (Fraser 1989:306–307). Of course, Fraser’s theoretical depiction differentiates too straightforwardly between official positions and people’s positions, while in the empirical cases described the borders between them are more porous. In fact, the rest of this paper will be dedicated to describing how residents are far from “passive.”
possessions there, including kitchenware and a refrigerator—if they had one. Marcela described her life in the hotel as one of “wait,” where she had to “wait to cook, wait to do laundry, wait to bathe the kids.” In addition to the general conditions, subsidized residents often felt discriminated against by the managers because of their situation as “assisted” clients (asistidos). Even when hotel residents started participating in grassroots organizations such as MOI, many of them had to fend off stigmatization by some of the activists, who were very adamant in requesting a change of attitude from being “subsidized” to working for a project and demanding the social rights they deserved.

As I mentioned earlier, there is also a fragmentation within programs that contributes to a temporal disjuncture between different stages of a process. The Ministry of Social Services, which funds emergency situations such as the hotels, and the Housing Authority in charge of funding housing production, for example, do not necessarily coordinate programs. This of course leads to the blurring of the temporal dimension of each program (one provisional, the other for permanence), as those dimensions can only really be defined in relation to one another. “Emergency” in fact directs one to the presence of urgency but always with the perspective that its resolution will lead into something else (when it would cease being an emergency). And a program that is “temporary” requires enabling the possibility of an ensuing stage, without which it seems to lose grounding. In its plain form, the subsidy program betrayed itself in that, as it did not facilitate the development of alternatives for a gradual change into secure and durable housing solutions, it perpetuated “emergency,” and people tended to remain subsidized for long periods as in permanent crisis.

It would be the housing grassroots organizations, MOI among them, who eventually managed to connect the two programs. Around 2002, when the hotel crisis had slightly settled and the subsidy policy was being redesigned, the movements were able to secure an agreement with the ministry to ensure the availability of rooms in the hotels for those families who belonged to cooperatives and were working, within the frame of the public mortgage program, to acquire permanent housing through collective means.

The different organizations would sponsor families before the state agency provided that they conform to certain criteria, such as keeping up their participation in the projects. In this format, the program worked as a subsidiary service to the project of permanent housing as supported by the grassroots organizations and assisted them in providing for emergency situations for which they previously had no response. In other words, the “temporary” program became reframed as a section (or subprogram) of a longer and more encompassing housing program, thus recovering the provisional quality it was originally meant to have.

It is within this temporal structure, one that conceives of a present situation in relation to a future one, where patience as a disposition might emerge. This does not necessarily imply a project with clear timing—after all, the projects I am describing here probably have taken much longer than they were initially supposed to—but rather it refers to the way the temporal is lived or inhabited. Instead of an ever-present urgency, where there is an absolute lack of control over time and waiting can be conceived as potentially unending (Buch Segal 2013; Schweizer 2008) and disempowering, this alternative temporal frame places subjects as facing a subsequent prospect for which they need to prepare.

**Life as a (Political) Project**

Most housing associations emerged in the 1990s with the aim of staging protests and resisting evictions from hotels or squatter buildings, but they eventually developed demands for basic needs such as secure tenure, adequate housing, and access to services. As organizations articulated with more complex networks, they developed more ambitious and elaborate goals, such as the availability of public funding for collective housing projects to be directly administered by the participating residents themselves. Such programs would enable squatters and tenants to find affordable ways of becoming legal residents while contributing with their own labor to the construction projects. Even though there were many different kinds of organizations, there was a certain common aspect in the “passage from defensive or resistance actions to an active disposition manifested in the elaboration of normative instruments and proposals to city council and authorities” (Rodríguez 2005:65).

Similar to what Arjun Appadurai (2013) has noted in analyzing the practices of slum dwellers in Mumbai, these political aims are more encompassing than basic demands for subsidies or assistance programs, but they also entail more complex dispositions, such as restraint and deliberation in order to decide when and how to combine pressure and negotiation and when to wait. The way in which popular organizations in Argentina face this conundrum is nicely characterized by sociologist Denis Merklen (2005:65) as the tension between “urgency” and “project,” two poles of the spectrum where collective action gets articulated. He observes that the

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16. Ghassan Hage (2009) proposes a notion of “stuckedness” to indicate the state of crisis being normalized, affecting the assumption of existential mobility attributed to a sense of progression in time.

17. This is still listed today as one of the Ministry of Social Services’ programs, under the name of Temporary Housing Program. Official requirements include certification from the cooperative of the family’s participation status and an estimation of the period necessary for the conclusion of the homes. (The official website is www.buenosaires.gov.ar/areas/des_social/atencion_inmediata.)

18. I am referring here to “community based organizations,” or those whose members are at the same time the beneficiaries of their activities, distinguishing them from more formal NGOs (Forni 2002).

19. Appadurai describes a “politics of patience” as a slow process entailing a practice of accommodation, compromise, and long-term asset building and accumulation of small victories (Appadurai 2013).
organizations that persist face the double bind of having to respond to the urgency produced by the cyclical worsening of living conditions on the one hand and of building a collective project to guide their praxis on the other. He adds that the resolution to this tension is further complicated by the organizations’ acknowledgment that the reproduction of the daily life of their constituencies depends on resources controlled by the political system, thus facing the peril of being subsumed into a different political struggle.  

This dilemma is what, in my view, requires patience on the part of the activists not merely as a choice of one form of political practice among other possible ones or as calculated strategy but rather as a disposition toward time and their own political experience, a disposition that only emerges when there is a prospect. Furthermore, it is not deliberate individual cultivation—as in virtue—but rather a feature set on the group by circumstances, such as dealing with bureaucracy and its timing, in their urgency for ensuring accommodation. Collectivity—the notion that waiting is an activity to be endured together and the affirmative engagement of working with others toward an envisioned objective—is a characteristic feature in this definition of patience. In proposing that patience is collective, however, I do not suggest it assumes an internal homogeneity; as I have shown, it is populated by diverse intentions, desires, fears, and projects.  

But it is what sets apart this modality of waiting from other possible ones. In Patients of the State, for instance, Javier Auyero (2012) sets out to characterize the experience of waiting among the poor in Buenos Aires, arguing that making them wait is one of the modalities in which the state exerts domination. He depicts different instances of desperate urgency and intolerable delay, such as people waiting to be relocated after a fire in a shantytown or to be removed from a dangerously polluted environment, and even scenes of people waiting for a housing subsidy at the welfare office, and he concludes that as these subjects find themselves progressively deprived of parameters for action, they become “patients” in lieu of citizens. I greatly sympathize with Auyero’s aim of examining people’s experiences of (waiting) time, but I believe his methodological focus leads him rather to emphasize the effects of power on people’s perceptions of time. Through his subjects’ comments and interpretations, he reveals mechanisms of time management used by authorities and the ways in which they induce submission by inculcating in beneficiaries the knowledge that their time is worthless. Auyero’s analysis involves mostly individual accounts, and it predominantly foregrounds the action of waiting, thus overlooking other issues, such as what people do while they wait in order to try and shorten the waiting time or what their (collective) forms of coping may be, even when he does notice the emergence of shared understandings among those who wait. From a Bourdieu-inspired perspective, he characterizes people’s compliance as the outcome of incorporating domination (Auyero 2012:155), but he overlooks the fact that the modality of waiting is shaped not just by those who provide what is being waited for but also by those who wait (Hage 2009).

In the reflection on the collective struggles of housing organizations I present here, the sense of agency that arises is a rather different and complex one, resulting from the intersection of heterogeneous temporal vectors: the urgency of needs, the delays in administrative incongruences, the provisional solutions, the hopeful expectations, and the seemingly unending wait. Activists invoke the need to “be patient” when they have actually envisioned an end, when there is the prospect of fulfilling an aim, actually, when anticipated outcomes generate impatience. Thus, far from an attitude of conformism or passivity, patience involves here the collective acceptance to work toward an objective in the long term.

Debates among social movements about their political attitudes of confrontation or negotiation have intensified in Argentina since the peak of the economic and political crisis of 2001, resulting in a variety of views on whether it is possible to remain autonomous while accepting government subsidies (Lopes de Souza 2006:331). The fact that movements and organizations were having these debates is an indication of the widespread process of politicization of demands, both those to satisfy pressing needs and also those that aim at broad-
ening the legitimate space for democratic participation. At the
time of the crisis, cooperatives of production, consumption, or
housing as well as other forms of collective economic undertakings—such as the takeover of bankrupt factories “recovered”
by the workers—mushroomed throughout the country. Net-
works of grassroots organizations spread along the lines of
“social economy,” fair trade, and solidarity principles (Procupe-
zel 2008:329). In this repertoire of actions and associations, Merk-
len (2005:36) finds elements of the formation of new forms of
politicization in the lives of popular sectors, which had for so
many decades been guided by unions and political parties.

In many cases, as anthropologist Virginia Manzano (2009)
notices for recent housing construction schemes sponsored
by the national government, it is even the social programs
that require collective applicants, thus contributing to the
constitution of new collectivities. Something similar happened
in Buenos Aires around 2000, when the city expanded public
mortgage programs for low-income households to include “le-
gally verified” associations as possible beneficiaries. An unpre-
cedented number of new housing cooperatives (around 200)
were registered throughout the year, with constituents coming
from a variety of situations, such as squatter buildings, tene-
ments, and low-cost temporary rentals. A year later, at the peak
of the “hotel crisis,” subsidized hotel residents also turned to
forming housing co-ops with the aim of applying for the mort-
gage program. However, it would take three more years for the
city administration to appoint staff, assign a budget, draft regu-
lations, and implement an actual program. And even then, the
application and certification processes involved complex ad-
ministrative requirements, such as architectural plans and fea-
sibility studies, far removed from the capacities of low-income
nonprofit housing projects that lacked the resources to hire con-
tractors and professionals to elaborate adequate projects.

Most of the cooperatives did not last because members had
impending situations that did not allow them to wait, as they
were urged to find immediate solutions. As I explained earlier,
however, once urgent need is attended to and in the absence of
a subsequent stage, the situation tends to become permanent
and is experienced as a continuous present.

I suggest that the way the temporal is experienced is one
of the main factors that enable people to engage in long-term
projects. This of course does not refer to having an accurate
prediction about when an event will take place but rather to
having an expectation and conceiving that event as a phase
within a more encompassing scheme. Henri Bergson’s (2001)
illuminating insight into the notion of duration might be rel-
vent here. His reflections direct us to consider the temporal
beyond a sequential or linear sense and rather focus on the
simultaneity in which past and present are lived. Duration, in
this sense, refers to the way in which the past makes itself
present in the present, inhabits it as its inherent condition. It
does not indicate that time remains the same but that it opens
itself to difference, the new, the indeterminate future (Grosz
2005). It is precisely this sense of promise, that the present
situation can become something else, that makes people in-
volve the need for patience.

Patience, in this definition, designates a willingness and
acknowledgment that work is to be done—on the collectivity
(to nurture it and tame anxiety) as well as on the project
(to actually make it happen). It is then a very active en-
gagement, radically different from a sense of waiting as all
encompassing and disempowering (Auyero 2012). Nor is it
equivalent to comparable notions, such as “waithood” (Hon-
wana 2012). This term, resulting from the combination of
“wait” and “adulthood,” refers to the undefined period in
young Africans’ lives when they find themselves suspended in
their passage from childhood because economic and social
conditions prevent them from effectively entering adulthood
in its socially expected form. Even though originally the con-
cept might imply passivity, authors such as Alcinda Honwana
(2012) interestingly show that it might be a period during
which youth creatively engage in alternative ways of inter-
acting in society, ranging from survival strategies to criminal
activities (Honwana 2012; Honwana and De Boeck 2005).
More fruitful for the conception of patience presented here is
Maliq Simone’s (2008) depiction of waiting as a modality of
life in African cities. He argues that in the absence of a map
or signal to identify the moment that has been waited for,
waiting is revealed as an attitude or predisposition rather than
as a clear trajectory.

Patience, it seems to me, indicates not the action but the
disposition, not a discrete period but its inclusion within a
longer venture. It involves a shift in the way the temporal
is inhabited or duration endured, from the experience of a
continuous present to the expectation of future change. In
his reflections on waiting, Ghassan Hage (2009) argues that
according to Pascal, the moment of expectation is even more
important than the moment of fulfillment. I suggest that
at least it might be more exhilarating, more productive. As
patience is understood in the case at hand, it is waiting while
working to make something happen, it is (reluctant) hope
and the formation of a collective subjectivity.

A Politics of Patience

I have argued in this paper that it is not the conditions of
poverty and duress but rather the process of collective or-
organizing that requires patience on the part of the residents.
Patience is necessary for dealing with bureaucracies and fel-
low activists but also for coping with the particular shape that
the temporal acquires once present conditions become part of
a project with a desired conclusion. The dire conditions of
poverty require endurance, but not patience. The latter only
becomes a necessary disposition when there is the prospect of
something else emerging in the future. The passage from a
stagnant situation of ever-present risk (living in a subsidized
welfare hotel) to one of pervasive—if restrained—hope (po-
litical organizing) requires patience.
But what does it entail to say that people move from the realm of needs—what Merklen (2005) calls urgency—to one of being patient and working on a project? And furthermore, how does this passage constitute a “politics”? As I stated earlier, need might encourage people to mobilize for a solution, but there is nothing inherently political there. It is in their capacity to turn their grievance into a collective claim that the political is achieved. Furthermore, what turns it into a political struggle is that they strive to solve their needs collectively by snatching resources from the government and ensuring that immediate solutions remain “temporary” and are superseded; that is, that the procurement of stable and permanent solutions is already in progress.

This understanding of the political goes beyond Nancy Fraser’s conception about the relationship between “need” and the political. Fraser (1989) departs from a position akin to that of Hannah Arendt, who envisions a clear division between the private and public spheres and locates needs—as related to biological survival—in the private domain. However, where Arendt rejects the possibility that needs might give rise to actual political claims, Fraser argues that needs—more accurately discourses about needs—might become “politicized,” or moved from the domestic or private sphere into the public domain (Fraser 1989). Fraser retains, notwithstanding, the division of spheres and limits the definition of political to only one kind of practice.

From an anthropological perspective, however, practices that might have been misread as passive—such as patiently working for a collective project to avert grievances together—are revealed as involving political behavior. Moreover, the work invested in creating innovative forms of being together and organizing to alter their living conditions can effectively be thought of as a politics emerging from a situation of need. This might be expressed by the subsidy programs run by the Buenos Aires government to accommodate families in welfare hotels.

Through collective work and organization, specific needs can be moved away from the selfishness of urgency and become a politics. It might be argued, in fact, that it is precisely because they start up from needs—and also because they navigate between the tropes of urgency and project approaching those needs from a collective political perspective—that organizations have encompassed the domestic and public domains in their political struggles, a feature highlighted by most analysts of contemporary social mobilization in Argentina (Palomino 2004; Zibechi 2008). If need is what makes people mobilize and consider options they had not contemplated before—such as collectivity—these forms of collective organization work within a different time frame and require patience.

Need does not allow people to plan for the future or for a permanent situation because they are urged toward an immediate solution “right now,” but eventually the “now” becomes permanent. Families arrive in a hotel for a supposedly temporary stay, but—not having any other prospect—their residence becomes permanent in the sense of living the moment, the here and now, the present. However, when the situation is finally reframed within a long-term project, there is a shift in temporality as the same residence in hotels becomes just a stage toward something else. “Need,” then, signals toward immediacy and an overriding concern with its satisfaction, while “patience” involves the necessary disposition to embark on a project such as the ones promoted by MOI.

As I have argued, patience in this sense does not entail passivity or resignation but the work being done toward a long-term objective, work that requires time. In the perspective of the families, patience does not appear as a tool to be deployed but rather as an active engagement, as a modality of being or a mode of inhabiting temporality. Being patient is not just waiting and dealing with bureaucratic delays and peer disagreements; it also involves a change in perspective. This new experience of inhabiting time combines both urgency and restraint: patience is thus the active inhabiting of this anxious space, a collective disposition toward the experience of temporality within a project-based politics.

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25. Arendt locates all aspects related to the maintenance and reproduction of life in the private domain, more specifically as an issue of economics (in its literal/original meaning of oikonomia in Greek, or the management of the household or domestic domain). For her, political analysis is limited to the public domain of ideas and deliberation, away from basic necessities (Arendt 1989; Das 2010).

26. The question of whether in becoming the norm “emergency” can still remain as emergency (understanding the notion as the precursor to something worse) is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is interesting to notice that the administrative terminology for housing deficit in Buenos Aires is emergencia habitacional, designating a kind of state in which underprivileged families reside, and that the complete official term for shantytowns is villas de emergencia, which seems to assign a short-term quality to a kind of settlement that has been permanent for several decades.
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“With That, Discipline Will Also Come to Them”

The Politics of the Urban Poor in Postwar Colombo

by Harini Amarasuriya and Jonathan Spencer

After the end of the country’s 30-year civil war in 2009, the Sri Lankan armed forces continued to grow despite the complete absence of obvious military threats to the government. Under the guidance of the president’s brother, the Ministry of Defence has played a leading role in town planning through the Urban Development Authority (which formally became part of the ministry in 2010). Colombo has seen an aggressive program of improvement, which started with a “war” on alleged underworld figures, took in the eviction of hawkers from pedestrian spaces, and involved the clearance of “substandard” housing, especially in places such as Slave Island, a historically dense area near the city center. In this paper we try to capture the temporal properties of a particular moment in the history of the city when speculative capital and military force combined in an attempt to bypass the well-worn channels of urban politics. At the end of the paper we consider events of early 2015, when the incumbent president was defeated and urban development was immediately removed from the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence.

Postwar 2009–2014: A Work in Progress

Imagine you wake up one morning and discover that now that the long war is over, the Ministry of Defence has taken over the city. Soldiers are clearing public areas of unsightly hawkers, constructing parks, and cleaning up weed-choked canals. For the first time in living memory, three-wheeler drivers are sullenly forced to charge the fare recorded on their journey meters. Pedestrians step into crossings on the busiest roads without the fear of sudden death. And poor people live in fear of the orange stickers that might indicate that their housing is scheduled for demolition.

While the Tamil-speaking areas of northern and eastern Sri Lanka stagnated economically during the 30 years of war, Colombo and its large suburban penumbra boomed. High-rise apartments, luxury hotels, and supermarkets spread out from the center of the city, amid the uneasy ebb and flow of checkpoints and road closures set up to contain the threat of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) suicide bombers. It is whispered that Colombo’s top-end shopping center (Odel, opposite the Town Hall) is housed in a building that had been used as a torture center by government forces during the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP; People’s Liberation Front) insurgency of the late 1980s.1 Whatever the truth of the story, it is hard to think of a more apt metaphor for Colombo’s relationship to the history of the war, an inconvenient history of torture effaced in a blitz of shopping.

Postwar Colombo is a work in progress, as is Postwar more generally. Aided by an ineffectual and directionless opposition, President Mahinda Rajapaksa has consolidated political control through a series of victories in national and local elections. “Reconstruction” is the word on everyone’s lips, and it is mostly taken very literally—building a new airport, a new harbor, new hotels and resorts. The most conspicuous signs of Postwar are the new roads being built across the island, introducing a change in the rhythm of travel as smooth, fast stretches alternate with slow, bumpy progress past the latest unfinished roadworks. But for all the signs of a government in total control, there is also a sense of constant improvisation in Postwar statecraft, a feeling that someone at the top is, for want of a better description, making it up as he goes along. Initiatives are announced (and sometimes forgotten) in a spirit of apparent whimsy. This is compounded by the fact that government is rarely singular and rarely coordinated. Ministries, of which there are many, operate as the personal fief of the ministers, although the choicest berths are

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1. The newest, and possibly glitziest, shopping complex in the city, the Arcade at Independence Square is said to occupy the site where the writer and activist Richard de Zoysa was murdered in 1990.
almost entirely reserved for members of the president’s extended family. One of these is the Ministry of Defence, controlled by the president’s brother Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa is formally a civil servant, the secretary to the ministry for which his brother the president is minister, but he has used his ministry as the base from which to launch a remarkable public career. As a former soldier engaged in high-profile public work, he is always keen to emphasize the fact that he is not a politician.2 With no war to fight, his Ministry of Postwar has expanded its ambitions to include a broad range of activities, from helping the Ministry of Higher Education to provide “leadership” training for university students to urban planning and something called the “Colombo Green Growth Programme.”

Alongside the improvisation is a pervasive sense of apprehension: hard-core Buddhist nationalists, having won the war, solemnly announce they are threatened as never before. Rumors fly from person to person: Muslims are stocking their mosques with weapons in order to prepare for jihad; toxins have been discovered in New Zealand milk powder; furtive men covered in oil—“grease devils”—are attacking unprotected women. The uncertainties of Postwar are the subject of this paper. We started on the trail of the urban poor, apparent victims of proposed resettlement, but found ourselves in the midst of a bigger, more inchoate phenomenon, an attempted reimagining of urban space, apparently inspired by Singapore and Los Angeles, and an experiment in new forms of governance that cut across the more established channels of urban politics.

In what follows, we first provide a little context on Colombo as a city and its place in the politics and political economy of Sri Lanka in the years of civil war. We then look more closely at one high-profile case of threatened redevelopment, the central area of the city known as Slave Island, where long-term residents face eviction and uncertainty. The Slave Island scheme is part of a larger project, the so-called beautification of the city, led by the Defence Secretary. Alongside the leisure facilities for the expanding middle class and the cleaned-up pavements, the city has also seen somewhat less beautiful new political phenomena in the form of attacks on mosques and Muslim-owned businesses. In our paper we seek to treat all these phenomena as potential components of a single process, a politics of postwar uncertainty, embodied for some in the person of the Defence Secretary himself. We contrast this emerging form of postwar politics with more established modes of urban politics, frequently identified with the figure of Ranasinghe Premadasa, Colombo politician and former president, whose name is still evoked by civil servants and poor residents alike 20 years after his assassination.

The bulk of this paper was written in 2013 and early 2014, as we conducted and updated the fieldwork on which it is based. In what follows we employ a very particular voice, employing the present tense to convey the peculiar temporality of that moment in the history of Sri Lanka, but also allowing our skepticism about the government’s authoritarian performative style to come across at points in the argument when we thought such skepticism appropriate. We return to the issue of voice, and the time of our writing, in the closing section, which brings the story forward to the early months of 2015.

Colombo and the Political Economy of War

Colombo is by far the biggest city in Sri Lanka, and not surprisingly serves as both a hub for economic activity and a complex cultural signifier—of colonialism, of development and modernity, of class and privilege. Colombo is first and foremost a port city, a relation of Penang and Singapore, Mumbai and Cochin, in the family of Indian Ocean trade. It very conspicuously lacks overt ties with Buddhist nationalist historiography; it is not found in the list of sites visited by the Buddha on his legendary trips to the island, nor was it ever the seat of Buddhist kings. It was the center of Buddhist activism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, but those activists often had to look beyond the city’s boundaries—to Kelaniya and farther afield to Anuradhapura—to find a geographical focus for their new forms of public Buddhism (Nisan 1985; Walters 1996).

Colombo has grown in the years since independence, but it remains well short of anything like a stereotypical Asian metacity. The latest census figures give a population of 2.3 million for the larger Colombo District, which includes the surrounding suburbs, but only 318,000 for Colombo municipality itself.3 Demographically, the heart of Colombo is multiethnic and multireligious, but it is surrounded by growing suburbs.

2. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa served as an officer in the Sri Lankan army until his retirement in 1992, after which he moved to the United States and lived for a time in Los Angeles. He returned to Sri Lanka in 2005 when his brother Mahinda was elected President, and he was appointed Secretary to the Ministry of Defence immediately after the election. His appointment was followed by an immediate hardening of attitudes toward the LTTE (still officially observing a ceasefire with the government), and he was widely credited (not least by himself) with overseeing their eventual defeat in May 2009. As a public figure he has had an especially turbulent relationship with the media, publicly threatening his critics in the press on many occasions.

3. The overall population distribution by ethnicity is Sinhala 75%, Sri Lanka Tamil 11%, Muslim 9%. Most Sinhala are Buddhists, but with a minority of Christians; most Tamils are Hindu, but again with a minority of Christians; Muslims have been classified as an ethnic group (or “race” in colonial nomenclature) since the nineteenth century. While the larger Colombo District is 77% Sinhala, in line with the national average, Colombo municipality is only 25% Sinhala, with Muslims (40%) and Sri Lankan Tamils (31%) the biggest ethnic component of the population. In contrast, some of the suburbs which have grown since the 1970s are much more ethnically homogeneous; Maharagama is 96% Sinhala, Homagama is 98% Sinhala, Kebelew is 97% Sinhala. The same is true for religious affiliation: Buddhists are less than 20% of the population in Colombo municipality but over 90% in many of the suburban districts.
that are strikingly monoethnic and monoreligious. The heart of the city is Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist; some suburbs are overwhelmingly Buddhist. The expansion of the Colombo suburbs is a product of the social transformations that have followed economic liberalization in the late 1970s. These suburbs are the home of the new Sinhala middle class. They are also the areas of strongest support for the new forms of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism that took shape in the final decade of the war. Despite considerable continuities with the style of Buddhist nationalism that came to prominence in the 1950s, the “new” nationalism of the later war years has rather different targets and concerns. Its main enemies are not the secessionist fighters of the LTTE but evangelical Christian groups, international NGOs, and more recently, Muslims. Rooted in the new middle class that has grown as a result of economic liberalization, the new nationalism displays an ambivalent relation to that same liberalization, which is often presented as a source of cultural and moral degeneration.4

Four other long-term political trends have shaped Colombo as we find it today. Its relatively small size is a result of a post-independence population movement in which the rural poor sought a better future in migration, but rather than migrate to the cities, they moved to less densely populated rural areas in the dry zone of the north and east (Kearney and Miller 1985; Moore 1985, 1990; Spencer 1990, 2003). Official planning for the first 40 years of the country’s history focused on a vision of rural rather than urban modernity and on the socioeconomic potential of these apparently “empty” areas of the island’s dry zone (cf. Gunaratne 2006). The areas where the migrants settled now have very high concentrations of rural poverty and not coincidentally became the main sources of security force recruitment as the police and army expanded in the last years of the war (Venugopal 2009; World Bank 2007). They are also the heartland of Mahinda Rajapaksa’s electoral support. Insofar as security force employment has come to provide a role in urban development. Colombo, in contrast, has been one of only two sites of significant electoral defeat for the government since Rajapaksa’s presidential victory in 2005, and this must make it especially attractive for a certain kind of social engineering.5

The Mews Street Incident

We start our story in 2010, when, after winning his second term in power, President Rajapaksa formally placed the Urban Development Authority (UDA) under the MOD.6 The war between the military and the LTTE ended in May 2009, yet financial allocations for the MOD have grown ever higher since the end of the war (Ratnayake and de Mel 2012). A growing share of this has been used to implement Gotabhaya Rajapaksa’s vision of urban development. Describing the Greater Colombo Development Project in 2011, the Defence Secretary said that Colombo’s potential needs to be unleashed. Thus, the Greater Colombo Development Project includes repairing the drainage system, rehabilitating lakes and urban wetlands, creating a new transport system and a new road network, building a new city on land reclaimed from the sea, and what is termed “rationalizing” land use and “freeing up” land for development. While the “rationalizing” of land use involves shifting key administrative units to the country’s capital complex at Sri Jayawardenapura Kotte, “freeing up” land for development also includes relocating “slum dwellers” in Colombo.7 Colombo, like most other Asian cities, has its share of poor housing and low-income communities (UNDP 2012). Stereotypically, this segment of the population is usually blamed for most of the city’s crime and squalor; they also provide the brute force that helps politicians from all sides of the political spectrum subdue their opponents when required.

In a 2012 interview with Business Today, the Defence Secretary set out his vision for Colombo and specifically talked about the clearances in the area known as Slave Island.

We have started a programme to remove unauthorised constructions such as slums and relocate them into proper housing. We cannot allow these people to live under such low standards. . . . We must give them the opportunity to live well. With that, discipline will also come to them. It is not that they don’t like to live like that.

His interlocutor mentions potential unpopularity and receives this reply:

Yes, but we are not throwing people out of their homes. We always look after them but they must understand, this is for their benefit. We have to do such programmes for the advancement of the people and the country. . . . Unfortunately there are people who, without understanding or thinking of the country, its future and development, try to mislead. That is why they protest. It is very important for the public to understand what we are doing. We need to demolish unauthorised constructions and remove pavement hawkers if we are to move forward and develop their

4. The ultranationalist party, the Jathika Hela Urumaya, which fielded Buddhist monks in its election campaign in 2004, won eight of its nine parliamentary seats in the area around Colombo. For more on the changing shape of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism after the 1990s, see Amarasuriya and Spencer (2012), Berkowitz (2008), Deegalle (2004), and DeVotta and Stone (2008).

5. The other zone of dissidence is the Tamil-dominated Northern Province, where provincial council elections were won by the Tamil National Alliance in late 2013, and this, too, is an area of major military involvement in social and economic transformation.


lives and standards. We must move fast because we were lagging behind due to the war that lasted 30 years.

A petition filed in the Supreme Court by several residents of Mews Street documents another side of the same story. Mews Street was one of the first sites of “relocation.” Mews Street is located in one of the oldest parts of Colombo, Slave Island. Slave Island’s name derives from colonial days, when, it is said, slaves from East Africa brought by the Portuguese and the Dutch were kept there (Gunaratna 2006). Interspersed between hotels and commercial spaces, on narrow lanes and alleys are residential streets. The residents in these areas are mainly Muslim, predominantly from the small Malay community, with some Tamils and Sinhalese. On May 4, 2010, Mews Street residents were visited by officers from the UDA and asked to attend a meeting the following day. About 20 residents who went to this meeting were informed that the UDA had received instructions from the MOD some months earlier to demolish the houses. The residents were asked to vacate their houses by May 8, as that was the date fixed for demolition. The UDA officers told them they would be provided with alternative housing, and the residents then requested that they be allowed to inspect these alternative houses.

On May 6, several residents visited these alternative houses accompanied by an officer from the UDA. They found that most were temporary houses built with planks, with shared outdoor bathroom facilities, and some were already occupied. The residents said that they were not agreeable to these temporary accommodations. Despite the residents’ refusal to vacate their homes, and with no assurance of acceptable, alternative housing, on May 8, according to newspaper reports and court documents, around 2,500 members of the police, riot police, army, air force, and UDA officers arrived at Mews Street and started demolishing the houses using backhoes and diggers. In total, 17 houses were demolished, home to 107 residents, of whom 24 were minors. Residents tried to contact local politicians, some of whom arrived on the scene, but many of the more powerful and well connected conspicuously kept away. (Some are said to have prudently switched off their mobile phones as events unfolded [Thaheer 2014].) Protesting residents were forcibly removed by the armed forces and the police, who refused to record their complaints. On the same day, the army began constructing a wall, assimilating the land on which these houses were built to the adjacent MOD headquarters. A military school for children of the armed forces now stands on the land.

On May 11, the former residents of Mews Street, many of whom were living in makeshift tents opposite their demolished houses, were asked to attend another meeting at the UDA. At this meeting, they were informed that they would be granted a rent of Rs8,000 per month for a period of 12 months to enable them to find alternative housing. The UDA promised to provide acceptable alternative housing within 12 months. The residents were also offered Rs5,000 per house as “transport cost” to move whatever belongings they had salvaged from their demolished homes to their new accommodations. They were also told that they would receive new apartments in the Mihindu Sempura housing scheme that was being constructed outside the city. However, in 2013 these apartments were given to supporters of a ruling-party politician and not to the residents of Mews Street as promised. A prominent opposition MP accused the government of attempting to change the demography of Colombo by shifting minority communities out of the city. He claimed that the Mews Street residents had now been told they would be given housing outside the Colombo Municipal Council limits. The residents themselves are not unaware of the wider politics of these evictions and development plans. “We always voted for the UNP [United National Party], no? That is why they want to move us. But they are stupid. Do they think we will stop voting for the UNP because they move us from here? Wherever we are, we will vote for the UNP.”

Residents of Java Place, Malay Street, Justice Akbar Mawatha, and Masjidul Jamiah Mawatha, all located in Slave Island, have since been told to vacate their homes to make way for redevelopment under the Slave Island Area Project. Residents said that they had attended several meetings organized by the UDA and had attempted to argue against these developments. One woman claimed that at a particular meeting, Gotabhaya Rajapaksa had threatened to throw them out by their necks if they made too much noise. The Indian-owned TATA Development Company has been given the contract to build apartments and “develop” the area. Some residents petitioned the Supreme Court in an attempt to get a stay order on the project. However, the court ruled that the evictions would go ahead, with residents being given a lump sum to cover alternative housing for 2 years. Residents have been told by the UDA that by that time an apartment complex would be built in the same area, to which they could eventually return. The controversial Chief Justice Mohan Pieris reportedly endorsed the ongoing development of the Colombo area and stated that improving housing and lifestyles of low-income communities would ensure that they refrain from crime and vice. Since this latest court decision, some residents have started moving out. Others complained that they have yet to receive money, that those who filed cases are being deliberately targeted, and that their money is being

10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
delayed. As one evicted man told us, “This is a vicious government—protesting against them is like stepping on a snake; they turn around and attack you—that is how this government behaves.”

“Officially,” these communities are gripped by poverty, crime, and deviance, but this is far from obvious to visitors to the area. Slave Island is a bewildering maze of narrow alleys lined with houses of varying sizes and designs. Most of the homes extend up two or three stories. Many are brightly painted with impressive facades. Some are surprisingly spacious when you enter, usually accommodating several families. Most houses also are sites of some kind of income-generation activity. One elderly couple, who share their home with the families of their son and daughter, cook thousands of “string hoppers” daily to supply nearby shops.14 The grandchildren go to one of the ubiquitous English-medium “international schools” nearby. The son-in-law is a chef in a local restaurant, while the son is away working in the Middle East.

By late 2013, some residents had already started moving. They had received money and found homes to rent in other parts of Colombo. However, their children still attend schools in Slave Island, and many of the adults have jobs in the area as well. One man, watching a neighbor prepare to move, claimed that he had decided to stay on in his home till he died. He moved his family, he said, but he refused to leave the area. “I don’t need the money they [the government] are giving me. I have an income of 200–300 thousand a month. One of my daughters is in France. I have a good job in a bank. This is my home. I am not leaving.” He pointed to the funeral announcement of an old lady pasted on a nearby wall. “She died of heartbreak. Not even two weeks after she moved. She couldn’t stand the sorrow of having to move from her home.”

Promises made to residents offering alternative temporary accommodation, rent money, and the possibility of returning to new apartments often fail to take account of the complex household arrangements that exist in these communities. One woman who had leased her house for over 15 years claimed that she had received nothing while her tenants were given money to rent another house for 2 years and promised a new apartment in the future. “Because we are Muslims, these officials think we are uneducated and stupid. That we don’t understand anything.” One of the biggest complaints is that the new apartments are built for small nuclear families, whereas current living arrangements are far more complex. As families expand, they build on existing property, usually adding floors to existing houses. One family living in Java Lane, shifted to the woman’s maha gedera (natal home) close by in Church Street. They simply added another floor using the money they received from the government for rent. The maha gedera now holds the parents, two grown-up sons, a daughter, and their respective families. “If we are asked to move from this house, will we each be given an apartment or rent allowance?” asked one of the women, “How can we all fit into one little apartment?”

Plans and Politicians

Master plans for the development of the Colombo region have come and gone for decades, but none have ever been comprehensively implemented. At the same time, successive governments have created ever more ministries in order to ensure every ruling-party MP has a seat at the table, a berth, however small, on the gravy train of state resources. As a result, there is a bewildering range of departments, units, and divisions—each claiming some part of urban development and planning in Sri Lanka—not to mention a plethora of plans and documents. In addition to the UDA, which is currently under the MOD, there is also a National Housing Development Authority, the Urban Settlement Development Authority, and the National Physical Planning Department, all of which currently fall under the purview of the Ministry of Construction, Engineering Services, Housing and Common Amenities. The Colombo Municipal Council has its own planning, construction, engineering, and development divisions. The UDA looms large over all these institutions and seemingly has the authority to override any of their decisions, not least because of its vasty bigger command of capital and labor power.

International donor agencies and private developers have also entered the picture. The World Bank is one of the main sources of funding for the Metro Colombo Urban Development Project and the associated Green Growth Programme. The Japan International Cooperation Agency is supporting a township development project that includes a new road and transport system. Much of the property development is apparently taking place through private developers from China, India, and Pakistan. This dizzying mix of agents and agencies means that it is not easy to unravel who is responsible for which part of the development. This blurring of responsibilities has meant that agencies also struggle in a micropolitics of representation. On the whole, the UDA is keen to attach the imprimatur of the World Bank to its many signboards on improvement sites even as the bank itself is just as keen to maintain a distance from more controversial projects, such as the threatened evictions.

But in the eyes of the public, all the “development” and the “beautification” is linked with one person: Gotabhaya Rajapaksa. Above all, the new Colombo is seen as his vision and as a product of his style of governance. He is presented as a person who can get things done. While his methods may disturb a few, the Colombo that is being envisaged is one with which the middle class is quite comfortable. Soon after the war ended in 2009, several “underworld” leaders were killed—allegedly in intergang skirmishes. Most of the victims were Muslim, prompting protests from that community.15 There were reports of


beggars disappearing. Perhaps the greatest furor was over the disappearance of Colombo’s stray dogs.

Gotabhaya Rajapaksa’s disregard for political consequences also resonates with the attitude of the middle class to politics— that politics is about manipulating and appeasing constituencies for votes. Politics is viewed as dominated by short-term expediency rather than doing what is right. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa’s disregard, in particular, for the concerns of Muslim constituencies long regarded as controlling Colombo city also resonates with the newly resurgent form of Sinhala Buddhist nationalism that has become more strident and anti-Muslim since the end of the war.

The other person whose mark on the city is still spoken of in reverential tones is the late President Ranasinghe Premadasa, whose own career started in Colombo urban politics and who retained a keen interest in urban housing up to his 1993 assassination by the LTTE. Often viewed as authoritarian and dictatorial, his period in office was one of Sri Lanka’s most violent and turbulent times, yet after his death, Premadasa is evoked more for his programs in favor of the poor than his part in these other events. During the early years of liberalization in the late 1970s and the 1980s, UNP politicians like Premadasa created grandiose personal projects to fuel their political careers (Tennekoon 1988). Premadasa’s projects included the Village Awakening Programme (Gam Udawa), the One Million Housing Scheme, and the Janasaviya Poverty Alleviation Programme (Brow 1996; Wanigaratne 1997). While the special focus of these projects was the rural poor, Premadasa also targeted the urban poor and the middle class. Low-income urban areas were “upgraded” with better access to basic amenities and regularization of title in many cases, and the middle class were provided with the opportunity to invest in state-led “housing schemes” that sprang up in the suburbs. The central area, which was Premadasa’s own constituency, received special attention. Many of the wattas (shanty settlements) earmarked for development under the current regime contain beneficiaries of Premadasa’s housing projects. Over the years, residents have built on and added to these homes, resulting in a complex legal situation where establishing ownership is rarely straightforward. However, people in these areas continue to refer to their homes as “Premadasa mahattayage geval” (Premadasa’s houses).

Premadasa’s legacy is still visible in Slave Island as well. On one of the streets in Slave Island is a little Kovil (Tamil Hindu shrine). Curious about the presence of a Kovil in a mainly Muslim area, we wandered up to it. A few people were seated on steel chairs placed in a circle outside. One man, bare chested and long haired, wearing earrings and a multitude of holy threads around his neck, stood up as we approached and asked what we wanted. He turned out to be the priest in charge. He also has another job as the manager and main musician of a papara band.16 He reeled off the names of all the elite Colombo boys schools who call on him to perform at cricket matches and “old boys” dances and events. The outside wall of his house is festooned with pictures and paper cuttings. On closer inspection, it appeared that one of the pictures was a framed collage made up of images of President Premadasa as a child with his parents. A framed certificate, signed by President Rajapaksa for performing at a National Youth Council event, hangs next to this. The priest said that he had collected newspaper articles and pictures of Premadasa all his life. He then went into his house and emerged with the deeds, which he had obtained during Premadasa’s time, and showed them to us. “I have all the right papers to show that I own this property. I keep them with me so that they can’t just throw me out.”

Premadasa’s program of upgrading low-amenity housing in urban areas has continued up to the present, albeit punctuated by rather different approaches to the urban poor (Wakely 2007). In a project that anticipated many of the new UDA schemes, a high-rise apartment building known as Sahasrapura was built on the outskirts of Colombo in the late 1990s, and shanty dwellers were cleared from prime central land and moved into the new building complex. The idea was that private investors would pay for the new housing by buying up the site of the old housing, but the promised new investment never arrived, and the scheme was not replicated at the time. But this project, although seen as a partial failure at the time, now serves as the model for the new proposed developments in Slave Island and elsewhere.

The Antinomies of Beautification

Visitors to Colombo notice that there is a lot of construction work going on in the city. Whereas there was a certain randomness to past roadwork and disruption, this roadwork has a new uniform quality to it. Old pavements are dug up, and pale pink bricks are laid in all the newly constructed pavements. Roads have been widened, and a bewildering one-way system has been established, considerably inconveniencing users of public transport while possibly easing traffic for private vehicles. Old and not-so-old walls that surrounded government buildings have been pulled down, making spaces suddenly larger than before. Trees that had lined the streets for hundreds of years and had grown somewhat chaotically—proving hazardous for unwary walkers or causing sudden disruptions during thundershowers due to falling branches—have been chopped down or pruned. New trees are now being planted at regular intervals. Observant visitors would also note that those working on the construction and clearing and cleaning the spaces are not typical workers. Many of them are dressed alike, sport the same haircuts, and carry themselves with a certain precision; much of the reconstruction work in Colombo is being carried out by military personnel. This is

16. Papara bands consist of a group of musicians playing a range of brass instruments and drums. These bands are a popular sight at cricket matches and even society weddings and dances. Their rhythmic and loud music is usually a signal for all to get on the dance floor.
Also a new feature of Sri Lanka’s Postwar, where the military has been gradually involving itself in assuredly nonmilitary activities ranging from farming to construction to the hospitality trade. When vegetable prices skyrocketed in Colombo, the military sold vegetables. In the Jaffna Peninsula, they have opened a luxury hotel.

Certain spaces have been completely transformed. Independence Square in Colombo 7 is marked by a rather majestic monument built to celebrate independence from the British. This area occasionally attracted attention during Independence Day, or when a visiting foreign dignitary arrived, but otherwise it was used mainly by Sri Lanka’s elite athletes for training. A few of Colombo’s residents also used to walk for exercise in the area. Under the UDA Metro Colombo Development Project, the area has been turned into a beautifully organized walking area. Paths have been laid out between neatly planted trees and carefully laid grass. The area is well lit, and police patrol discreetly. During early mornings, and in the evenings, the surrounding areas are filled with walkers who have driven there for their exercise. Men and women of all ages, sizes, and shapes can be seen walking briskly and purposefully along the paths. An occasional jogger may brush past the walkers. In the evening, children can be seen learning to ride bicycles along the paths.

The link to the military is never quite far in spaces like this, but nowhere is it perhaps as obvious as in the Nawala Urban Wetland. Nawala is an emerging Colombo suburb, midway between the city of Colombo and the new capital complex in Kotte. A long-neglected canal runs through Nawala, and at one end of the canal, a small expanse of empty land was used by construction workers for many years as a site to buy and sell cement and sand. In 2012, the construction workers were abruptly moved, and the area was cordoned off. The area has now been neatly landscaped with artificial ponds and waterfalls. Paths for walking have been laid, and the adjacent canal has been cleaned up. Admonitory signboards abound: food cannot be consumed in the park; dogs cannot be walked; visitors are enjoined to behave “decently.” Weirdly, a military tank has been placed in one corner—children visiting the park can be seen clambering in and around the tank and posing for pictures by it.

But alongside this new vision of urban beauty, there have been darker developments. Mosques and churches have been attacked amid a rising sense of apprehension that the city may find itself engulfed in a repeat of the violence of July 1983. These fears have most recently surfaced as a result of the activities of a new group of militant monks and their supporters, called the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS). The BBS emerged seemingly from nowhere as the proud occupants of a shiny new multi-story Buddhist Cultural Centre, built in 2012 on a prime site close to Colombo University and the army headquarters. In early 2013, BBS launched a campaign against the use of halal certification in food labeling in the supermarkets that have proliferated in the last decade. Within weeks, there were attacks on Muslim businesses amid wild rumors of jihadi groups training in mosques and secret contraceptives being fed to unwitting Buddhist women who made the mistake of shopping at Muslim-owned stores. It was widely believed that BBS enjoyed the support of the Defence Secretary himself, a belief apparently vindicated when he made a speech at the opening of a new BBS training center in early 2013.

Colombo is not a traditionally Sinhala Buddhist space. The areas marked for “development” are spaces where Sinhalese are a minority and Muslims are the biggest ethnic group. This regime cemented its power by waging and winning a ruthless war against the LTTE. Its support comes from a Sinhala nationalist base. The fact that the same military forces that defeated the LTTE are now in charge of urban development invests the plan with a power that previous proposals lacked.

As a shopkeeper in a shopping complex in a Colombo suburb marked for “development” who had been served with an eviction notice told Amarasuriya, “It is Mr. Gotabhaya Rajapaksa who has told us to go.” The emergence of BBS and its anti-Muslim campaign, its link to Gotabhaya Rajapaksa, and the renewed drive to relocate Colombo’s mainly Muslim low-income residents suggests all too obvious connections between the current regime, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, and its development project.

The Work of Time

In a recent overview of change in Indian cities, Nandini Gooptu (2011) highlights processes that sound very close to those we have been mapping in Colombo: the clearing of the poor and repurposing of public space for bourgeois use. Gooptu’s point is that similar processes have been at work in cities across the world in recent decades. What, she asks, is distinctive about the Indian experience? The answer would seem to be politics. The Indian version of liberalization has been accompanied by the so-called deepening of Indian democracy, with poor and low-caste groups engaging as never before in electoral politics. This in turn generates a range of contradictions and confrontations that give a specifically Indian cast to the politics of the urban poor.

What, then, of Colombo and the politics of the urban poor? What is specific to our story of dispossession and beautification? How does it differ from the Indian cases reviewed by Gooptu? The obvious answer would seem to be the military and the kind of “postpolitical” project represented by the UDA and the Defence Secretary. The regional comparison in this respect would seem to be Pakistan, where the army has been involved for a long time in urban real estate and, when it suited, urban planning (Siddiqa 2007). The difference in the Sri Lankan case—and clearly there is scope for a much more careful and sustained comparison than can be attempted here—would not be the scale or the ambition of the military but the relative novelty of its engagement in these areas of life. One characteristic of the postwar order is its instability and unpredictability. This, we suggest, can be best understood in terms of two issues.
The first, as in India, is the distinctive form of urban politics (Das and Walton 2015). The second is time and the temporal quality of the postwar moment.

In a valuable survey of the housing of the poor based on work conducted immediately before the MOD takeover of the UDA, Wakely draws attention to two important points. The first is that whatever the complexities of tenurial circumstances, people in “under served settlements” in Colombo feel little imminent threat of eviction (Wakely 2007:2). That was 2007, and the situation now is obviously reversed. The second is the way in which areas of poor housing do not merely serve as political resources for local politicians; in many ways they are constituted through the medium of local politics. “Informal” settlements are characteristically established under the protection of powerful local figures, who might use their own people to establish a settlement and then use their connections to obtain connections to municipal services, before selling the houses on to others who need them (Wakely 2007:21). In this account, the familiar process of “quiet encroachment” (Bayat 2015) in Colombo is an inherently political process. And the higher-level politicians at its heart may include some of the most powerful (and notorious) figures in the government. In contrast, Gotabaya Rajapaksa’s project to bring discipline to the poor is a project that seeks to escape the constraints of local political processes.

As in India, the poor are also voters. As one veteran Colombo politician put it to us, “This beautification only really benefits Colombo 3, 5, and 7 [the main districts of elite housing], but the people in those districts don’t have that many votes, and often they don’t even bother to vote. If you want to win an election, you need the support of Colombo 1 to 15.” Or, as a leading academic critic of the regime explained in an interview in 2011:

The majority of people who use Colombo are constituted by the floating population that comes in the morning and go out of Colombo in the evening. For these people a Colombo city administered by the Ministry of Defence, clean and attractive is something to be desired. It is not attractive to the poor people living within Colombo. For them Colombo is a place where they make a living.17

These comments followed the government’s comprehensive defeat in the local elections in Colombo. After this, there seemed to be a toning down of threats of eviction and little or no evidence of actual evictions taking place (until very recently). Despite widespread perceptions to the contrary, this suggests that the sheer weight of numbers of *wattle*-dwellers—as translated into votes, could put some kind of brake on the ambitions of the MOD. But this slowing down of evictions and demolitions is not accompanied by any kind of public

18. Another difference from the Indian situation (cf. Randeria and Grunder 2011) is the extent to which the possibilities for legal intervention have narrowed as the regime has taken charge of the higher courts. In early 2013 the government successfully instituted an impeachment process to remove the chief justice of the Supreme Court after she failed to support crucial moves to push back earlier constitutional guarantees of devolution. The new chief justice has subsequently made his unwavering support for anything proposed by the government abundantly clear.
sense of security has been built over the years by poor residents of the city.

There is also a future orientation in the UDA project, a vision of a city of clean, open spaces and endless consumption opportunities. But coeval with this vision is the haunting presence of an alternative future, one in which everything that matters—Buddhism, the Sinhala people—is under imminent threat of destruction. This dark alternative, widely propagated in speeches and newspaper articles, is central to the appeal of the new Sinhala Buddhist nationalism of groups like BBS. There are still other futures at stake: the older planners we spoke to, although ostensibly oriented to their own visions of the future, seemed less bothered than might be expected by the apparent disengagement of their plans from any possible implementation even as they pointed out fragments of earlier, abandoned plans that had been picked up and instituted by the current UDA regime. The new layout of Independence Square, for example, had originally been proposed in an otherwise forgotten document from the early 1960s. Rather than a straightforward orientation to the future, those plans seemed to have a curiously allochronic relation to the other social processes we analyzed.

At one level, the “new” Colombo we explored in 2013 looked to be a city made beautiful for a particular constituency, the new, predominantly Sinhala, middle class of the expanding suburbs. “Discipline” and “progress,” among other things, were a useful alibi for the removal of the unsightly poor and the political nullification of the Muslims and Tamils who dominate numerically in the city center. But progress has its prices too. The capital behind the new hotels and malls in the city center is rarely locally controlled; the heritage that is being rediscovered and restored is usually inescapably colonial and therefore also foreign. A government keen to claim the Buddhist high ground for its projects is entirely open to the building of new casinos. One characteristic of the new “securitized” city, if that is what the MOD control of the UDA really is, is a growing sense of cultural insecurity, an insecurity informed by the different visions of the immediate future that circulate with increasing velocity.

Coda 2015: The Autumn of the Patriarch

Two years have passed since we first explored Slave Island, and it is time to return to the temporality of the ethnographers. When we started the field research for this paper, we found ourselves entering a familiar narrative, a teleology in which the poor and the marginal would be dispossessed by a combination of authoritarian politics and speculative capital. But as we moved across the city, speaking to differently positioned people, we found remarkably little evidence of evictions or demolitions having taken place even as we found overwhelming evidence that almost everyone believed they would take place. That alerted us to the performative dimension of the UDA project, the capacity to enact a certain future simply by announcing it as inevitable. The ethical corollary for critical observers would be the cultivation of a certain ethnographic scepticism in the face of claims to inexorability. To some extent the ethnographic perspective, which can either hold firm to a very close inspection of a quite specific moment or enter and reenter what is claimed to be a process—and notice that nothing much seems to have changed—has a corrective potential in the face of claims to have already decided the properties of the urban future. Thus the voice we employed, which emphasizes the specific moment in which we made our observations and constructed our story, and with which we tried to resist the sense of inevitability so carefully cultivated by the regime.

For a time it was harder to cling to this counternarrative we had constructed, with its thin shards of hope. On our last visit to Slave Island, in December 2013, we discovered that some of what was feared was actually taking place. People had been ordered to leave their houses in Java Lane, and already there were empty houses awaiting the demolition crew. But even then, there was a kind of scaling back of the spectacle of arbitrary power: papers had been served, some sort of process had been followed through. Nevertheless, just weeks after we had submitted the first version of this paper for review in February 2014, we discovered that the Java Lane houses had been comprehensively demolished.

But the story has not stopped there. In late 2014, apparently guided by an incompetent astrologer and a sense that the opposition remained in terminal disarray, Mahinda Rajapaksa called a presidential election 2 years ahead of schedule. An unexpected candidate, one of Rajapaksa’s senior ministers, Maithripala Sirisena, was announced as the “common candidate” to stand on behalf of a remarkably diverse range of opposition groups. He was swiftly joined by a number of other powerful figures from Rajapaksa’s party. In a campaign tightly focused on ending the excesses of Rajapaksa’s rule, Sirisena emerged the winner by a slim margin in early January 2015. Although Rajapaksa won majorities in his rural Buddhist heartland, he was heavily outvoted in the Tamil-speaking areas of the north and east and in the urban areas. In Colombo Central, Sirisena won 81% of the vote; Rajapaksa was reduced to 18%. Within days of the new president’s appointment, a new, much reduced, cabinet was announced, with many responsibilities reallocated. The Urban Development Authority was removed from the Ministry of Defence and handed over to the new Minister of Urban Development, Rauf Hakeem, the leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress. Seen in this light, the brief reign of Gotabhaya Rajapaksa’s UDA conjugates up a rather different regional antecedent—Sanjay Gandhi, another man in a hurry, another unelected member of a powerful family, and another man with an authoritarian project of urban transformation.

(Tarlo 2003). And just as Gandhi’s project swiftly met its democratic nemesis, so too with Gotabhaya.

Still absorbing the implications of this radical change in political circumstance, we returned in January 2015 to Slave Island to see what had happened since Spencer’s last visit in May 2013. Gazing at the flattened rubble that had been Java Lane, we noticed a poster advertising our friend’s papara band. We asked a man lounging nearby if he knew what had happened to the priest-cum-bandleader. He was okay, we were told, but had left for a pilgrimage to India. And his shrine with its images of lost President Premadasa! All gone. He looked across at the rubble. “Mosques, temples, churches: they destroyed them all. But look what happened to them!” He brightened. “They will be cursed forever.”

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Correction

After this article was first published electronically on 20 VII 15, we discovered it was not the correct final version. We have replaced it with this correct version, which was posted electronically on 8 X 15.
Sectarianism and the Ambiguities of Welfare in Lebanon

by Melani Cammett

Nonstate providers are often more important in the everyday lives of the poor than outposts of the state. In this essay, I focus on one type of provider, sectarian organizations, which are an integral component of politics and welfare regimes in parts of the Middle East and other developing regions. Focusing on Lebanon, I describe how sectarian welfare providers emerge from and help to constitute political sectarianism while tracing what is at stake for the poor. First, by holding public offices and dominating informal channels that mediate access to public benefits, these actors mediate the experience of accessing the “rights” of citizenship. Second, while they provide benefits and services that might not otherwise be available, the modes of allocating welfare by sectarian parties can be discriminatory, notably along partisan and religious lines. Third, sectarian groups politicize the process of accessing social benefits while undercutting the political voice of the poor by weakening alternative channels of claim making. Finally, the crosscutting effects of sectarian organizations in welfare regimes suggest additional challenges to boosting local participation in development policy: while they are deeply embedded in the communities they serve, they produce and reinforce social inequalities.

Introduction

In the past decade, a growing body of research analyzes the origins and diversity of welfare regimes in the global south. Much of this work focuses on the role of the state in assuring social protection and providing or regulating the provision of social services (Brooks 2009; Haggard and Kaufman 2008; Rudra 2008; Seekings 2002; Tearney 2007). Yet the landscape of providers is far more variegated, and the boundary between state and nonstate actors in the realm of welfare is far more porous than such accounts imply (Cammett and MacLean 2014; Gough and Wood 2004). A wide variety of local actors offer basic services and help people to manage lifecycle risks. These range from more formalized institutions, such as private firms and local NGOs, charities, and faith-based organizations, to more informal arrangements, such as the family and friendship networks, middlemen who broker access to services from third-party providers, and hometown associations, among others. In the context of weak state capacity and uneven state penetration of national territories, nonstate providers are far more important in the everyday lives of many people in the global south than outposts of the state or representatives of public agencies. Providers often straddle the formal boundaries between the public and private spheres, rendering this distinction less meaningful for those who seek and benefit from their services than it appears to social scientists who expressly study the state and public policies.

In this paper I focus on one type of provider, sectarian organizations, which are an integral component of politics and welfare regimes in parts of the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, at a minimum. Based on research in Lebanon (Cammett 2014; Cammett and Issar 2010), I describe how social service providers linked to sectarian groups both emerge from and continually help to constitute political sectarianism and to trace what is at stake for the poor as a result of these groups’ involvement in the welfare regime. I highlight the ambiguities that emerge from their participation in the Lebanese welfare regime and their effects on access to social services. I make four main observations. First, by holding public offices and dominating informal channels that mediate access to public benefits, these actors blur the boundaries between the state and nonstate realms. In this way, they act at the “margins of the state,” setting up other forms of order and regulation that affect the way citizens “secure their survival” (Das and Poole 2004:8) and in so doing mediate the experience of accessing “rights.” Second, sectarian parties at once serve as alleviators and perpetrators of structural violence: while they provide benefits and services that might not otherwise be available, their modes of allocating welfare can be discriminatory, notably along partisan and religious lines. Third, sectarian organizations politicize the process of accessing social benefits. At the same time, however, they un-
The political system in postindependence Lebanon entrenched preexisting patterns of political sectarianism established during the Ottoman and colonial periods (Makdisi 2000). The system stipulates that top government positions are allocated by sect and divides parliamentary and civil service positions according to a preestablished formula, initially with 60% reserved for Christians from diverse sects and 40% reserved for Muslims from distinct sects. After the civil war ended in 1990, this formula was renegotiated to yield an even split between Christians and Muslims. Similarly, the electoral system institutionalizes sectarian identity by allocating seats by sect at the district level according to formulas derived from the sectarian identities of registered voters on their official identity cards. In addition, religious authorities retain control over family law, governing core aspects of social and cultural life such as marriage, burial, and inheritance rules. The role of the state is also circumscribed in the economic realm: the Lebanese economy has long been founded on so-called laissez-faire principles, reflecting the interests of a small group of wealthy Maronite Christian and urban Sunni Muslim families (Gates 1998; Hudson 1968; Leenders 2004; Traboulsi 2007).

The sectarian political system has shaped the postindependence Lebanese welfare regime, which involves minimal state intervention and relies heavily on private, non-state actors. During the administration of President Fu’ad Shihab (1958–1964), some attempts were made to expand the public welfare infrastructure, but not all were successful, and some initiatives were dismantled under the tenures of his successors. The Lebanese Civil war (1975–1990) led to the partial and, for some programs, total breakdown of public social welfare institutions, further weakening state administrative capacity. In part as a response to state failure, various groups from all of Lebanon’s religious communities initiated or expanded their own social welfare programs while domestic and international NGOs proliferated in the domain of social provision (Corm 1991; Hanf 1993; Harik 1994). After the Ta’if Accords formally ended the war in 1989, some social welfare programs initiated by militias evolved into institutionalized welfare agencies with branch offices and networks of social centers. Organizations linked to political parties that either did not have militia wings during the war or did not emerge until the postwar period also launched their own welfare networks.

The political system in postindependence Lebanon penetrates the welfare networks of sectarian parties. Finally, the crosscutting effects of sectarian organizations in welfare regimes suggest additional challenges to boosting local participation in development policy (Fung and Wright 2003; Hickey and Mohan 2004; Rao and Walton 2004). While they are deeply embedded in the communities they serve—and are often staffed by local residents—they produce and reinforce social inequalities.

Throughout the paper I focus on the politics of access to social welfare or struggles over the distribution of resources that enable people to meet their basic needs. A key question at stake here is who benefits from or who feels protected by the welfare programs and goods allocated by sectarian parties, which by definition are rooted in particular subsets of the national political community. With respect to socioeconomic status (SES), those who benefit from or attempt to access the goods and services of sectarian welfare agencies generally fall into poor or low-income categories. But those covered by these programs are not only the most materially deprived. In the context of the Lebanese welfare regime—and, indeed, in many welfare systems in developing countries—people exist in a state of precariousness regardless of whether or not they meet locally appropriate thresholds of poverty based on measures of income or asset ownership. To be sure, those who seek welfare from sectarian organizations are almost never well off, but neither are they necessarily poor in economic terms. Rather, they run the gamut from those who face absolute material hardship, including difficulties in meeting daily caloric needs, to those whose lives are relatively comfortable but who exist in a constant state of uncertainty about whether they can sustain their standards of living. This conceptualization entails a broader notion of the needy and vulnerable, offering a more accurate picture of many of the people who are included in or attempt to penetrate the welfare networks of sectarian parties.

The Welfare Regime in Lebanon

Unlike international NGOs, which are a relatively new actor in world politics and have received extensive attention in research on development (see Bebbington, Hickey, and Mitlin 2008; Edwards and Hulme 1996; Korten 1990; Lewis and Kanji 2009; Salamon and Sokolowski 1999; Smith and Lipsky 1993), sectarian parties emerge out of a long historical tradition of religious charity in the Middle East. However, they are not mere reincarnations of the religions institutions that supplied services under Ottoman or colonial rule (Fawaz 1994; Hanssen 2005; Singer 2008). Rather, they have adapted to and/or emerged out of a new national political context in which an ostensibly independent state is the focal point of power. In this section, I provide a brief overview of the role of sectarian parties in the Lebanese political system and welfare regime as crucial background for the broader points I make in the concluding section of the paper.

1. In 2009, the Lebanese government officially decreed that national identity cards were no longer required to list the sect of the bearer. In practice, most still retain this information, but this may change in the future.

2. Unlike their Sunni, Shi’a, and Druze counterparts, the Christian militias did not immediately transform wartime social institutions into postwar party institutions and welfare agencies largely because of the suppression of Christian leaders by Syria and its allies in Lebanon until the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon in 2005.
Beyond the direct provision of services in their own or affiliated welfare agencies, sectarian parties provide aid for health and educational needs and food and financial assistance, and they act as intermediaries to facilitate access to citizen “entitlements.” For example, citizens with demonstrated need are legally entitled to state coverage of up to 85% of hospitalization costs for the treatment of certain serious conditions. In practice, many cannot access this benefit largely because of soaring budget deficits accruing to the Ministry of Public Health. Thus, party representatives use connections to arrange government payment for the hospitalization costs of supporters.3

Under these circumstances, the provision of social services is highly fragmented and underregulated even while the state takes on the largest role in financing social services. In this context, private actors enjoy ample opportunities to supply welfare and, more importantly, to take credit for state-funded benefits. Sectarian organizations, among others, therefore profit from state programs and financing yet have a vested interest in sustaining the underdevelopment of public welfare functions in the realms of provision and, especially, in the regulation of the system as a whole.

The Politics of Access to Welfare

The nature of the Lebanese welfare regime opens the door to political intermediation to access social benefits and services, including for obtaining public benefits. Even in nonprofit health, educational, and other facilities, social and political connections can enable clients to obtain services at reduced prices. In Lebanon’s patronage-based political system, connections to political organizations and politicians and demonstrated loyalty to a party constitute a vital strategy for gaining access to welfare (Cammett 2010; Chen and Cammett 2012). Some of the major parties, such as the predominantly Shi’a Hezbollah and the mainly Sunni Future Movement, run large networks of health clinics, dispensaries, hospitals, schools, and social assistance programs.4 Although their services are ostensibly open to all, their most ardent supporters receive preferential rates and generous benefits, including schooling for their children or medical care within their own institutions or in the facilities of third-party private providers. For example, like all parties, the Future Movement does not distribute equally to all. For the vast majority of its beneficiaries it provides minimal rewards, such as food boxes or one-time cash payments, that are usually associated with “turnout-buying” efforts during elections. Core activists, who organize and attend meetings and demonstrations and participate in the life of the party, receive the most generous and continuous packages of benefits. A former employee of the Hariri Foundation noted, “For all welfare providers linked to parties, the families of members and supporters always get priority.”5

In other work, I use diverse forms of data and research methods to explore in more depth the ways in which sectarian organizations allocate social benefits, highlighting the political logic behind their distributional patterns (Cammett 2014). To summarize, I argue that a party’s choice of political strategy, among other factors, influences which communities and people it targets with social benefits. When parties participate in formal political institutions and contest elections, they tend to reach out across communal lines and target beneficiaries beyond core supporters.6 When they prioritize forms of politics outside of formal institutional channels, such as orchestrating riots and organizing militias, they favor in-group members and, especially, their cadres and core activists. Thus, among other factors, overtly political decisions infuse the distribution of welfare goods, shaping the modes of access to social assistance.

It is well known in Lebanon that small-scale forms of material assistance, such as food and cash, are routinely deployed for electoral purposes, usually to reward existing supporters through “turnout buying” (Nichter 2008). Political participation, which for most people amounts to casting a ballot in national and local elections, is a virtual prerequisite for access to basic services supplied or facilitated by political parties as well as for the patronage of elected officials. A party representative joked about the exchange of votes for services in Lebanon: “In the United States, [provision] don’t ask whether you are a Democrat or Republican before they give you a service. That’s what they do here.”7 To ensure that vote buying actually works, parties have devised elaborate and highly effective mechanisms for verifying individual and family voting behavior. But the provision of basic services is also used to reward and perhaps even induce other, nonelectoral forms of political behavior, such as participating in protests, riots, and sit-ins, or even serving in militias. Because sectarian organizations are embedded in


4. In recent years, the Future Movement has scaled back some of its programs, officially in order to rationalize and streamline its programs. Rumor has it that the organization has faced serious budget crises as a result of declining support from its historic patron, Saudi Arabia, and because of financial mismanagement.

5. Author interview with a former employee of the Future Movement, Beirut, November 9, 2007.

6. I also argue that the nature of intracommunal politics shapes the welfare outreach of sectarian parties, particularly in power-sharing systems. Lebanon’s political system compels coreligionist parties to outbid each other in an effort to gain monopoly representation over the in-group community. As a result, once a party has attained dominant status within its representative community, it is freer to cater to members of other communities.

the communities where they operate, they are well placed to monitor the political preferences and activities of local residents and to distribute material assistance to supporters on the grassroots level.8

In emphasizing the political logic of service provision, I acknowledge that motivations are difficult if not impossible to discern and are never unidimensional. I take seriously Ferguson’s (1990) caution that “one cannot assume . . . that a structure simply and rationally ‘represents’ or ‘expresses’ a set of ‘objective interests’; one knows that structures are multilayered, polyvalent, and often contradictory, and that economic functions and ‘objective interests’ are always located within other, encompassing structures that may be invisible even to those who inhabit them” (17). Motivations and interests are not self-evident, even to the actors themselves. Although my arguments seem to impute interests to individuals and even to whole organizations, they should not be construed as suggesting that a single set of political goals drives the welfare programs of sectarian organizations. These groups may distribute or facilitate access to social services in order to fulfill altruistic commitments, present themselves as protectors and guarantors of well-being, gain supporters, or consolidate their control over territory and people, among other goals. At a minimum, political organizations calculate that service provision engenders political support, and this calculation factors into their motivations for offering services or arranging benefits. Furthermore, it is worth noting that my core claims are supported by diverse forms of evidence—including the statements of the actors in question—and reflect widespread local interpretations and perceptions of the welfare initiatives of the major sectarian parties. Indeed, a poll conducted in 2001 asked citizens who voted in the previous year’s national elections to list the two most important factors shaping their vote choices. Over 50% of the sample listed the social service activities of the candidate among the two most important reasons for their vote (Chaouli, El-Hajj, and El-Khazen, et al. 2001). Politicians are cognizant of these expectations. In an interview in late 2007, a high-level political strategist for a major Christian political party noted, “We don’t have services now. We’re in the process of developing them…. But we know we need to help our supporters, especially now that we are constituting ourselves into a real political party. We know we have to start organizing ourselves to provide for our supporters.”9

It is important to stress that “buying support” through service provision is not exclusively an economic or material transaction, nor does it necessarily occur through direct exchanges. As in-depth interviews with citizens in Lebanon reveal, the receipt of services by an individual or by her family members or neighbors may compel some citizens to vote for the political party associated with the provider or to participate in demonstrations organized by the party. Even for these interviewees and for others, however, service provision can be interpreted as more than a material transaction. The sense of communal belonging embedded in the social welfare relationship has crucial psychological benefits, particularly in the context of underdeveloped and unstable national state institutions. The provider organization establishes itself as a source of social protection or a guardian of the community, and in so doing, it may garner popular allegiances. In particular, “bricks and mortar” welfare programs (Cammett and Issar 2010), which operate from fixed, physical locations in neighborhoods and villages, help to project the provider as a community guardian because they signal a long-term commitment to a geographic space and its inhabitants. Social service provision from bricks and mortar agencies, then, is distinct from cash payments or one-shot food distribution efforts, which predominate during electoral contests in some countries in the global south (Nichter 2008; Stokes 2005). Even if community members initially view the establishment of a welfare agency by a political party as a calculated move designed to win support, they may adopt a less cynical perspective on the party if the facility is maintained over time.

Welfare programs may also inspire support by individuals and families who have not received services but rather have witnessed or heard about the actions of providers in their communities and beyond. Service provision projects an image of “infrastructural power” (Mann 1984) as well as a commitment to protect that may garner the admiration or respect of observers and not just direct beneficiaries. This is especially valuable for a political organization that aims to build a reputation as a reliable and capable actor—one that is qualified to govern specific subnational territories or communities and ultimately the national state. Social service provision is not the sole means that political parties use to mobilize support, but it plays an important role where alternative sources of social protection are underdeveloped or absent.

Just as the motivations, interests, and goals of providers are multidimensional, beneficiaries too may have complex and not always congruent reasons for seeking and accepting assistance from sectarian organizations. For some, their overarching motive is simple—material need compounded by few and sporadic opportunities to meet their needs. The poor go to providers that offer them the services they need at a price they can afford. But insecurity in “middle-income” Lebanon does not necessarily entail insufficient financial resources; rather, it is to live in a state of tenuousness. Families may have sufficient resources to enjoy some comforts and may even send their children to private schools, but the precariousness of their existence is never far from their

8. Author interview with a member of the Progressive Socialist Party, Beirut, October 24, 2007; a Sunni woman, Hamra, Beirut, November 22, 2007; Sunni women, Sidon, November 24, 2007; Sunni women, Verdun, Beirut, December 2, 2007; and a Sunni woman, Tariq el Jedideh, December 4, 2007.

minds. The limited extent of health insurance coverage and its potential ramifications for household finances and well-being illustrates this point. As in many countries that lack universal health insurance or effective social safety nets, out of pocket health-care expenditures pose a major burden not only for the poor but also for middle-class families in Lebanon. Medical expenses can wipe out savings and force people to forego important needs, whether health related or otherwise. Furthermore, the informal sector accounts for the bulk of employment, which means that the majority of citizens do not benefit from health insurance and other benefits reserved for formal sector workers.

Even if socioeconomic need is the overarching consideration for most Lebanese who seek and accept services from providers linked to sectarian organizations, some emphasize that their relationship with these groups is not simply premised on a material quid pro quo. More fundamentally, the receipt of social assistance and services from sectarian providers may provide a sense of security and order that is missing in their lives. Political instability, ambiguities in laws and their enforcement, and the limited extent of social protection programs put many Lebanese in a state of vulnerability. A relationship with a patron—in this case, a representative of a sectarian party—helps to provide stability in their lives. Of course, this is a relationship of unequal power. Vulnerable families cannot demand entitlements; rather, they must work within existing hierarchies to piece together a way to meet their needs.

In analyzing the power relations embedded in the provider-beneficiary relationship, one might point out that sectarian providers are not obliged to serve all nor are they beholden to the general population. Unlike governments, sectarian organizations do not have a national mandate and have no apparent duty to serve or be accountable to those beyond their target groups, which are usually composed of in-group members and party members and supporters. Despite this, a “humanitarian” imperative appears to shape the discourse of welfare in Lebanon even among nongovernmental communal groups. Most representatives of the major sectarian parties insist that their organizations, unlike others, serve all without regard for religious or political affiliation. An apparent norm of nondiscrimination in service provision has developed, compelling the representatives of party-linked welfare agencies to justify social provision in moral terms. As in the contemporary world of global humanitarianism, a “discourse of affects and values offers a high political return” among the major Lebanese political actors who are in the welfare business (Fassin 2012:23).

Notwithstanding their inclusive rhetoric, the sectarian parties cannot and do not serve all. There is simply too much need for them to serve all in need, particularly outside of circumscribed territories. Data on residential populations in Beirut and Mount Lebanon, the two provinces where more than 50% of the total Lebanese population lives (i.e., “Greater Beirut”), suggest that at least in this part of the country, sectarian parties do not all establish welfare agencies in the neighborhoods and villages with the greatest need (Cammett 2014:106). A comparison of the socioeconomic status of the actual distribution of households with the socioeconomic status of the average distribution of the zones where welfare agencies linked to different parties and charities are located in the two provinces underscores this point.10 An analysis of the average distribution of households across distinct categories of SES in Beirut and Mount Lebanon provinces reveals that the smallest number of households can be classified as high SES while the majority fall in the lower-middle group followed by the upper-middle SES category. Yet there is considerable variation in the degree to which political parties and religious charities target lower-income households. Some parties and charities deviate considerably from the actual distribution of households in the two provinces by disproportionately targeting more upper-income neighborhoods in Greater Beirut. For example, at least within this part of the country, the predominantly Sunni Future Movement as well as Sunni charities differ most dramatically from the actual SES pattern by favoring upper-middle-income communities and serving fewer low-income areas than the regional average. Conversely, the Shi’a Hezbollah appears more responsive to SES within these two provinces, giving less attention to high- and upper-middle-income areas and placing the most emphasis on low-income areas of all groups, exceeding the regional average for this income category by a significant margin. After Hezbollah, the Shi’a Amal Movement appears most responsive to low-income areas. The Christian Kataeb Party favors lower-middle-income communities—even more than do Christian religious charities—but neglects the poorest areas in the Beirut–Mount Lebanon region.

Thus, data on household-level SES provide mixed support for the claim that the welfare outreach of political parties is motivated by socioeconomic need in this core region of the country. Not all the parties favor poor areas over others in the Greater Beirut region. Of course, the limited geographical scope of these data precludes more definitive assessments of the welfare outreach of sectarian parties on a national scale. Furthermore, this descriptive analysis cannot untangle the relationship between SES and sectarian endowments, which undoubtedly affects the results. For example, many predominantly Shi’a communities in Beirut and Mount Lebanon provinces are home to low-income families, which could explain why Shi’a political parties disproportionately target low-income communities in this region.

Sectarian parties also serve distinct types of constituents in different ways. While some benefit from a generous array of services brokers provided by sectarian parties, others who are less integrated in partisan networks find themselves ex-
cluded. Differential experiences of human security result from these hierarchies: those who are inserted in political welfare networks are less vulnerable than those who are left out. This discretionary allocation of social welfare establishes and entrenches boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.

Several vignettes from in-depth, open-ended interviews with Lebanese citizens about their experiences in accessing and attempting to access health care, schooling, and other social benefits from sectarian parties and politicians illustrate what it means to be included or excluded from partisan welfare networks.11 The case of a Sunni woman who lives in Beirut is representative of the experiences of hard-core supporters of the Future Movement, a predominantly Sunni political party. The woman emphasized that she and her family receive extensive benefits from the Hariri Foundation, one of the party’s affiliated welfare institutions, on a regular basis, including medical services as well as cash and food handouts. She reiterated her family’s total commitment to the party and its leaders.12 Another Sunni woman, whose son works for a security agency linked to the Future Movement, also highlighted the benefits her family receives for its visible support for the organization. In return for his service, including his participation in a protomilitia during street clashes in May 2008, he receives a modest monthly salary and regular portions of food assistance.13

For the most ardent supporters of Hezbollah, the stream of welfare benefits is even more generous. The party’s most extensive and continuous social programs have always been reserved for its core cadres and, especially, the families of “martyrs” and those wounded in its struggles with Israel, who make the largest sacrifices for the party. Of all the party officials whom I interviewed, the representatives of Hezbollah were the most forthright in detailing whom they target with their distinct welfare programs. For example, the Martyr’s Program (Mua’assat Al-Shahid), exclusively supports the families of fighters who have died or were injured in conflict with Israel (Al-Ahd [weekly publication of Hezbollah], August 30, 1991; Qassem 2005:60–61).14 Beyond party cadres, supporters receive benefits on preferential terms. Core activists of the party generally receive services in Hezbollah institutions, such as its hospitals, clinics, and schools, rather than programs explicitly reserved for certain eligible categories, such as those for martyrs and the wounded. But individuals and families whose political sympathies for the party are well known and demonstrated through repeated actions receive special treatment.15

Similar patterns are visible in the welfare programs of other sectarian groups, such as the predominantly Shi’a Amal Movement and the major Christian parties. During the civil war, when Christian parties such as the Kataeb and Lebanese forces had far more developed welfare programs than in the postwar period, their first priority was reserved for militia members. Fighters and their families received financial support and free medical services (Al-Maseera [publication of the Lebanese forces], April 17 and December 7, 1982; September 4, 1984). Beyond militia fighters, hard-core activists received the most extensive benefits. Thus, political connections have long been a strategy for coping with conditions of human insecurity and political instability.

Not all needy families, however, are incorporated into stable welfare networks. The testimonies of those who are not, whether by choice or otherwise, reveal the sense of precariousness that people experience under these circumstances. For example, a woman from a town on the outskirts of Sidon in South Lebanon noted that her husband receives free medical treatment in a government hospital for a chronic disease. The hospital staff, however, told him that he had to pay for medications himself, posing an enormous financial burden on the family. Although she expressed her gratitude for the services of public institutions and subsidized nongovernmental clinics, she finds their assistance to be insufficient, especially for chronic cases like that of her husband. She felt that her family’s situation would be more sustainable had she and her husband established a close relationship with local politicians and political groups.

In discussing their attempts to access social benefits from agencies linked to the sectarian parties, interviewees emphasized that a proven track record of partisan support was essential for access to welfare. Lebanese citizens who are not active Hezbollah supporters claimed that they felt excluded from the party’s social programs, whereas ardent supporters receive the assistance they need.16 Similarly, other interviews confirmed that Hezbollah distinguishes among in-group members in predominantly Shi’a areas, favoring core supporters over others. For example, a Shi’a man who resides and votes in Nabatiyyeh, a predominantly Shi’a city in the south that was once a stronghold of Hezbollah’s former rival, the Amal Movement, claimed that he was told to seek aid elsewhere because he did not have a demonstrated history of supporting the party, he previously worked for Amal, and he did not

11. This section draws on interviews conducted by a team of Lebanese graduate students with 135 lower-income Lebanese citizens. The interviewers and interviewees, whose real names and other identifying information are not provided, were matched by ascribed sectarian affiliation (see Cammett 2014).

12. Interview by Zina Sawaf of a Sunni woman, Beirut (Tariq el-Jedideh), October 23, 2007. An interview with another Sunni woman in this neighborhood yielded similar findings (by Zina Sawaf, Beirut [Tariq el-Jedideh], December 12, 2007).


15. Author interviews of the director of the research center, Haret Hreik, January 9, 2008, and an official of Educational Programs, Marbarat, Bir Hassan, January 17, 2008.

present himself as sufficiently pious. According to the interviewee, Hezbollah carefully screens applicants for social assistance and is particularly attentive to the political behavior and allegiances of in-group members.17

The story of Mr. Hassan illustrates in painful detail the pressures and stresses associated with exclusion from partisan and other welfare networks. A man in his late 40s, Mr. Hassan originally comes from Baalbek, a city in the Beqaa region of Lebanon, and now resides in the southern suburbs of Beirut, which is often termed a "Hezbollah stronghold" in the popular press although not all residents are supporters of and activists in the party. Married and a father of four, he has held various jobs in order to make ends meet, and his financial situation is precarious. In an interview to discuss his experiences in accessing social assistance, Mr. Hassan recalled a heartbreaking story about his efforts to find medical care for his gravely ill 1-month-old son when he lived in the Beqaa region of Lebanon.

I want to tell you what we are suffering from in everyday life. . . . I don’t have an education. I worked in Baalbek in construction. My first child was born 2 months premature, and I suffered a lot because of that. I was getting paid 15,000 lira [US$10] per day, and I had to pay for rent and for the baby’s expenses. I sought help from people [and organizations] there in the region—Hezbollah and its Islamic Health Unit—and, at the end of every month, I found myself in debt because my job was sporadic. I worked on farms and in gas stations. Anyway, I had another child, a daughter, and then another son. When my second son was 1 month and 10 days old, he became very ill, but the doctors did not know what was wrong with him. He was struggling between life and death. I finally took him to a hospital in Baalbek. A doctor there went crazy when he saw my son and asked, "Who was treating him?!" I had been treating my son for a month in another hospital, but my son was on the verge of dying. I took him to another hospital that insisted I pay 800,000 lira [US$533], and I only had 20,000 lira [US$13]. My son got worse, and my family took him to a doctor who said that he is as good as dead and that we should take him to the hospital to try to save him, if this were even possible. I went to the hospital and found that they did not start to treat my son because they were waiting for the 800,000 Lira. The doctor would not agree to wait for the money. He told me that I needed to buy him medicine and I only had 15,000 lira [US$10] in my pocket. I went to the pharmacy to buy the medication, and it turned out that it cost 72,000 lira [US$48]. I told the pharmacist that I don’t want the medication—I have my God. I went back to the doctor and told him that I did not have the money, but he told me that I needed to pay before he would treat my son. I went out of the hospital, and I did not know where to go.

I thought that my son was as good as dead. Then I thought to go to the office of Al-Sayyid Fadlallah.18 I walked because I didn’t have the money to hire a taxi, but then, as if Allah were taking care of me, a guy parked nearby told me that he would drive me in his car and that he would give me $100 toward my son’s medical treatment.

Eventually, Mr. Hassan was able to obtain medical care for his baby through the assistance of generous individuals and charities in the Shi’a Muslim community. Although he was fortunate and his son survived, the effort of obtaining medical care was grueling, and he was forced to live with the fear that his child would die because of delayed treatment as a result of his financial situation and the lack of an institutionalized social safety net.

Mr. Hassan’s experience highlights the potential consequences of marginalization from welfare networks in the context of Lebanon’s fragmented welfare regime. Because he was not an activist in the parties that dominated politics in his area, he was not received at their medical institutions and could not rely on their intermediation to arrange immediate care for his son. For those who lack connections or are excluded from partisan networks, the efforts exerted to meet their basic needs take a toll. The information gathering and sheer tenacity required to access medical care and other social services can be physically and psychologically draining. The lack of certainty about whether such efforts will actually pay off is also a persistent source of anxiety. Furthermore, as many interviewees attested, seeking support from charitable institutions and negotiating with bureaucrats to receive social entitlements entail a loss of dignity and gender concerns about social reputation. One woman emphasized that she does not want anyone in her area to know that she goes to institutions for help because her neighbors will speak negatively about her and her daughters. Another woman said that she hesitates to seek social assistance directly from institutions; rather, she feels more comfortable when organizations approach her at her home in order to avoid embarrassment within her community. Perceived mis-treatment at charitable institutions exacerbates this sense of humiliation. For example, a woman claimed that she had to stay in line for hours while a staff member distributing aid shouted at the applicants, making her feel disrespected. She also described similar treatment at a municipal health clinic. While it is impossible to corroborate her account, a perceived loss of dignity in efforts to receive social assistance was a regular theme in these interviews.

Lebanese citizens who are excluded from partisan welfare networks are not, however, helpless victims. Those in need of

18. Ayatollah Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, who died in July 2010, was a prominent Shi’a cleric. His organization, Mabarrat, is a major Shi’a religious charity that runs hospitals, clinics, schools, religious centers, and other social and cultural programs throughout predominantly Shi’a parts of Lebanon.
assistance are resourceful (Bayat 2010) even if they lack the partisan connections that are so valuable in Lebanon’s patronage-based system. Reliance on personal connections is a crucial strategy. For example, a Lebanese woman who lives in the Sabra neighborhood of Beirut, a low-income area in Beirut that houses a large Palestinian camp, emphasized the value of her family’s personal ties to an employee at a well-regarded private hospital in Beirut.

We have a very close friend, a very dear sister—we consider her a sister, we do not consider her a friend. She is a specialized nurse [at the hospital]. This brings a lot of benefits. She helps us a lot. . . . She also helps us a lot with respect to the AUH [American University Hospital]. They all know her, they all like her. It still allows us to go, and she will help us with the treatment, of course, with the exams.

Underscoring the value of personal ties, another woman claimed, “If one has your back, it will do so many things for your situation.”

Welfare, Sectarianism, and the Experience of Urban Poverty in Lebanon

As the preceding accounts imply, welfare provision by sectarian parties can affect the well-being of individuals and families, particularly with regards to access to social services and benefits. Beyond this, this phenomenon also has broader implications for the politics of welfare in the contemporary era in which states are no longer (or never were) major providers of services or guarantors of social protection. First, in the case of Lebanon, social provision by identity-based parties highlights a form of welfare politics operating at the “margins of the state” (Das 2004). In particular, the dual roles of sectarian power brokers as participants in the state and as nonstate providers blur the boundaries of public and private, often purposively. This simultaneous straddling of the state and nonstate realms complicates citizen experiences of accessing their “rights” and meeting their basic needs. For some, especially those who are not firmly recognized as core supporters or activists, attempts to access benefits, even those that are ostensibly the rights of citizenship, can be frustrating, exhausting, and demoralizing. Second, sectarian parties play a contradictory role as alleviator and perpetrator of structural violence. Third, the provision of social services by sectarian parties fuels the hyperpoliticization of welfare but at the same time undercuts forms of collective mobilization that might produce a more equitable system or at least one that is less stratified by sectarian cleavages, which overlap with but are by no means synonymous with socioeconomic class lines. Finally, the patterns of welfare outreach by sectarian organizations construct and/or entrench social inequalities. All of these factors shape the ways in which the poor, as well as the newly poor or downwardly mobile elements of society, navigate the terrain of public, private, and nonstate providers of social welfare. I will briefly elaborate each of these points.

First, the blurriness of the state/nonstate boundary in Lebanon manifests itself in the ways that the poor actually experience the welfare regime. Sectarian organizations operate their own self-funded and administered welfare networks. At the same time, representatives from these same groups occupy political offices from the highest to the lowest level, and all of the major parties have access to public resources to fund aspects of their social programs and mediate access to public entitlements. People wishing to attain their “rights” and those who lack the resources to meet their social needs through private markets must engage with intermediaries who either represent or have connections to the major sectarian parties, the dominant forces in Lebanese politics. Regardless of the laws on the books, political sectarianism shapes their processes of obtaining social services, including ones that are supposed to be public entitlements.29

This manifestation of politics at the margin of the state generates an interesting paradox. On the one hand, Lebanese people know that official laws do not guarantee rights. Obtaining virtually any service or avoiding a duty of citizenship require wasta, or connections with the right officials. Thus, the concept of membership in a community governed by a state with predictable and impartial rules is not a real, lived experience, and therefore, for most it is an abstraction. The phrase mafee dawla (there is no state) is a common refrain in everyday conversation and was repeated by many interviewees. At the same time, citizens express outrage at the failures of the state to deliver, indicating that they retain an ideal standard of stateness in their minds against which they benchmark government performance. Thus, despite the fact that they do not interact with state bureaucracies and institutional representatives in predictable, rule-bound ways, Lebanese citizens articulate high expectations of their state.

Second, the ways in which demonstrated political loyalties mediate access to welfare points to another form of social stratification—partisanship—that interacts with socioeconomic class to produce a form of “structural violence” (Farmer 1996). In the example of welfare provision by identity-based parties, the main protagonists are locally embedded actors rather than states or international organizations operating in the context of global inequalities. As described above, sectarian providers emanate from a long tradition of religious charity in the countries of the former Ottoman Empire and dominate the terrain

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19. Another example beyond the welfare regime concerns the electoral system. In Lebanon, there is no preprinted ballot, enabling parties to supply their own ballots to prospective voters in advance and even right in front of polling stations. This not only helps them to gain more votes but also facilitates the vote-monitoring process, increasing citizen compliance in the vote-buying process. Under current laws, these practices are legal, but effectively they give rise to a large and complex economy of vote buying during electoral cycles (Doumit and Geha 2013).
of nonstate social welfare provision in Lebanon. Whereas in most postcolonial states in the Middle East, newly independent governments established robust public welfare infrastructure, an analogous system never fully emerged in Lebanon, thereby entrenching the role of nonstate actors in social provision far more than in neighboring countries. Sectarian providers therefore represent cultural forms that make “common sense” to people (Rao and Walton 2004:8). But again, norms of stateness have diffused among the Lebanese population as evident in popular discussions of governance and echoed in the rhetoric of politicians who call for more robust state infrastructure even as their actions undercut government effectiveness.

The key role of sectarian parties as welfare providers and brokers recalls critiques of local development and decentralization policy schemes on the grounds that they are subject to elite capture. On the one hand, development policy increasingly calls for the promotion of locally appropriate, community-based development schemes. The most effective development initiatives incorporate attention to local social relations and adopt a “culturally aware approach to public action” (Rao and Walton 2004:8). In order to promote access to social services, this may entail partnering with community-based organizations, which are presumed to be well placed to understand and meet the needs of local residents. On the other hand, local embeddedness does not guarantee equitable and impartial access to basic services. Sectarian organizations, among other providers who are well entrenched in the communities they serve, hold power over those who seek their assistance, as the preceding discussion indicates. Thus, even if they are not “corrupt” and do not funnel resources to their cronies, they construct and perpetuate hierarchical social relations in the politics of welfare access. In theory, “culturally based inequities” can be overcome through social mobilization and the “use of democratic processes to foster debate,” but this process can be fraught with difficulties (Rao and Walton 2004:11). The role of sectarian parties in the political system effectively weakens or preempts grassroots efforts to alter local power hierarchies.

Third, the provision of social welfare by sectarian parties affects the political lives of the poor and needy. On the one hand, the involvement of sectarian parties in the direct provision of services and in brokering access to third-party benefits fuels the hyperpoliticization of welfare. As described above, political criteria, including levels of partisan activism and demonstrated loyalties, are factored into the welfare exchange, affecting both the provider’s allocation of benefits and the choices that people make about where to seek services in the first place. The fact that sectarian parties are the most important vehicles for “democratic” representation and social mobilization ensures that the provision of public goods and social services is especially politicized.

On the other hand, sectarian parties undercut possibilities for political mobilization aimed at nonsectarian visions of the polity through multiple mechanisms. These parties mask or at least commingle overtly political actions, such as efforts to control state institutions and to exert social control, with less overtly political behaviors and even ostensibly “apolitical” charitable and humanitarian motivations. As noted above, representatives of sectarian welfare associations take pains to emphasize the nondiscriminatory eligibility criteria of their programs and frequently invoke humanitarian norms. In part through their control of and influence over state institutions and policies, sectarian organizations perpetuate a welfare regime that compels the poor and downwardly mobile to devote their full attention to meeting their basic needs, further obviating their capacity and perhaps will to engage in efforts to seek social and political transformation of the political and economic systems. The penetration of society through the creation of overlapping associations and interest groups by sectarian parties and their affiliates undercuts the efforts of activists to construct cross-sectarian, class, and interest-based associations (Clark and Salloukh 2013; Hamzeh 2001; Kingston 2013).

Officials from sectarian parties straddling the state/non-state boundary rue the absence of the state in their public pronouncements, but they effectively hinder the capacity of the state to carry out what have come to be seen as its basic functions, including the provision of social services. Profiting from the weakness of state capacities—a phenomenon that they themselves help to perpetuate—sectarian groups establish and reinforce their control over everyday social and political life through the provision of social benefits. Social welfare, then, not only concerns the ways in which people meet their basic social needs; where public welfare functions are underdeveloped and ethnoreligious organizations provide social welfare, service provision both constitutes and reproduces the politics of sectarianism.

Finally, the provision of social welfare by sectarian parties contributes to the construction and consolidation of social inequalities along partisan and ethnoreligious lines and, in so doing, may strengthen social divisions in Lebanon’s divided society. The very act of providing services may help to constitute or at least reinforce identity-based cleavages by establishing who is included in and excluded from social safety nets. Social welfare involves an obvious material exchange in which the beneficiary receives assistance to meet his or her family’s basic needs. But the less obvious immaterial

20. A Lebanese participant at a seminar where I presented some of my work once remarked, “This is just how things are done and always have been done in Lebanon. We turn to our communities for welfare.”

21. Other providers who are less overtly tied to the political system also contribute to the politicization of social welfare in Lebanon. E.g., religious charities are often connected to if not controlled by the major sectarian parties, and, as some interviewees attested, access to their services may be conditional on particular forms of publicly expressed piety.
dimensions of this relationship arguably serve a more profound community-building function. Social welfare provision brings a sense of security and psychological comfort that is especially valuable to beneficiaries of more limited means who, by definition, lead more precarious lives. This is all the more meaningful when states do not offer basic social protection schemes for their populations. By signaling who is a member of a protected group, the provision of basic services is an act of community building. Discriminatory access to welfare goods can therefore create new inequalities or further entrench existing inequalities and can even strain social cohesion. Taken to the extreme, the linkage between political identity and access to basic services has disturbing implications for social justice premised on perhaps idealized notions of equality before the law.

If political affiliation and behavior mediate access to social assistance, people—and particularly low-income families who need it most—may not be able to meet their basic needs when they are not perceived as loyal partisans. This highlights an additional political factor that shapes public well-being, at least in some contexts. In analyzing the determinants of health, for example, the public health literature has traditionally privileged individual demographic factors such as age, education, gender, and socioeconomic status. The broader social and political determinants of health have only recently attracted more attention (Marmot and Wilkinson 2003), and even then they tend to focus on macrolevel, structural factors rather than the “micropolitics” of access to basic services (Chen and Cammett 2012).

That said, social provision by sectarian organizations can also have detrimental effects on a macrolevel. If the provision of social benefits has political payoffs—and evidence shows that it does (Cammett 2014, chap. 6; LCPS 2000)—then political parties have incentives to create their own welfare institutions or to take control of public programs through intermediation and brokerage roles. The creation of multiple networks of social provision linked to a different political organization leads to fragmented welfare regimes. While it is true that nonstate organizations are most likely to launch welfare operations where state programs are undeveloped in the first place, the emergence and consolidation of nonstate providers encourages further fragmentation of the welfare system and hinders longer-term efforts to construct nationally integrated welfare regimes. Furthermore, given the state’s minimal role in the direct provision of services, there are ample opportunities for nongovernmental providers to create their own social institutions that are not well regulated by a central authority and that do not effectively coordinate their activities among each other. In the Lebanese health sector, this has been manifested in inefficiencies in the overall public health regime as well as inequalities in access to medical care, although evidence indicates that the various initiatives by the Ministry of Public Health have mitigated these effects in recent years (Ammar 2009). Inefficiencies and inequalities are also visible in the educational sector. Nonstate providers, including political parties and religious charities, have launched their own school systems with little regard for regional disparities in the distribution of educational facilities.

Control over schooling by ethnic or sectarian parties also has important implications for socialization and the long-term prospects for forging a sense of national political community. In divided societies, the stakes are particularly acute, as such groups may promote distinct understandings of national history and hinder the construction of a coherent national identity in future generations (Anderson 1991; Doumato and Starrett 2006; Freedman et al. 2004; Kaplan 2006; Levy 2004; Podeh 2000). In turn, the fragmentation of political identities and, hence, allegiances can undercut the provision of public goods in the long term, a self-reinforcing process (Habyarmana et al. 2009; Miguel 2004). If a feeling of solidarity based on a shared identity is critical for cooperation and joint action to pursue common goals (Liebman 2003; Singh 2010; Tsai 2007), then the fragmentation of identities within a national territory may inhibit efforts to establish broader, more universalistic public welfare functions.

These micro- and macrolevel consequences, however, should not suggest that the provision of welfare by sectarian parties is uniformly detrimental to public well-being. Rather, it is essential to view the phenomenon in its entirety by adopting a more nuanced and contextualized perspective exposing its internal contradictions. In studying the social welfare programs of sectarian parties—particularly from my own particular vantage point—I have grappled with the question of how to incorporate normative considerations. Depicting the activities of sectarian parties as uniformly “bad” or “good” clearly misses some of the ambiguities of their role in the Lebanese welfare regime. This is most obvious at the individual level. Within sectarian groups running their own welfare agencies, staff members have complex motivations for working at these institutions, whether to serve the poor, to expand their patient load at their own private practices, or to enhance local support for their preferred political party, among other goals. Contingent on the quality and availability of services, beneficiaries can meet their basic needs at relatively low cost, giving them choices that might not otherwise be present in a welfare regime with many gaps.

At the system level, too, the goals and, more importantly, the effects of social provision by these groups are complex. As one representative of a nonsectarian social service organization claimed, “Without these groups, Lebanon would be poorer than India.” His comment reflected the realities of the Lebanese social safety net, which has many holes, and the importance of political and religious providers in addressing social needs. Governments in many developing countries simply lack the capacity to provide for their own populations, whether because of lack of material resources or administrative deficiencies. As many have argued, NGOs of diverse orientations therefore play a key role in providing basic public goods and empowering citizens to meet their basic needs (Brinckerhoff 1999; Brown 1998; Salamon 1995). This
is especially true in postconflict societies such as Lebanon, where the experience of war has further depleted public resources and undercut state institutions. Thus, sectarian groups may fill in gaping holes in the Lebanese welfare regime, although their efforts may perpetuate or perhaps even create these holes in the first place, producing and entrenching larger divisions along sectarian and class lines.

The welfare agencies run by sectarian organizations and the role they play in mediating access to essential services meet the needs of some poor and vulnerable components of society who live tenuous lives and whose ranks are growing as inequality rises and the pressures of the regional humanitarian crisis in neighboring Syria spill over into Lebanon. In so doing, however, they reinforce the status quo because the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion established in their patterns of welfare outreach entrench existing social inequalities. Their welfare activities raise additional issues with long-term implications. While they meet the needs of some poor and vulnerable components of the population, they can also raise questions about the role of NGOs in the governance of social exclusion and inequality.

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Teamey, Kelly. 2007. Whose public action? analysing inter-sectoral collaboration for service delivery: literature review on relationships between government and non-state providers of services. Birmingham, UK: International Development Department, School of Public Policy, University of Birmingham.
In this paper I seek to attend to the paradox of Palestinian refugee poverty in Lebanon, a poverty engineered and deliberately perpetuated through the play of recent state sovereignties, and incorporated in the material and bodily lifeworlds of a majority of Lebanon’s Palestinians. This poverty is not effectuated in the recognizable form of a “political subject of poverty”—a “I, poor”—who would emerge in the interpretative act of establishing a semiotic relationship of some kind between her malnourishment, ill health, or exposure to dampness and dust on the one hand and on the other a field of social belonging in which she would claim inclusion. In order to do so, through three brief ethnographic sketches I draw attention to processes of disclosure of self and world strung together from the everyday run-ins with the world that the lives of the refugee poor entail. If there is a politics of refugee poverty, I argue, its distinctiveness lies in shunning the category of citizenship and the manner in which this category fastens an ethical imaginary of the sovereign self to the sovereignty of the state and to the life of a population.

Hand in the Fire

There is a general sense among the Palestinian men and women I know in the camps of Tyre, South Lebanon, that one simply ought not talk too much about the poverty of refugee life, or if it is talked about, it should only be through words that convey a reticence or inadequacy to bring the raw facts of poverty, and of one’s own poverty in particular, into the sphere of discourse. One example of such words that show but decline to tell is a formula I have often heard in social occasions when “poverty” (al-fuqur) is used in speech, as a polite rejoinder to my interview questions, for instance, or in the flow of friends’ and neighbors’ everyday conversations, inserted as a punctuation mark of sorts signaling that there is only so much one can or should say about one’s destitution or that of other friends and neighbors: “Ele ido bil may mush zey ele ido bil nar,” which, translated literally, means “he who has his hand in the water is not like him who has his hand in the fire.” People use the phrase to point en bloc, as it were, to the material and existential spacing that separates those living within the tight legal strictures distinctive of the refugee regime for Palestinians in Lebanon from those whose place in the world is at least secured through the possession of a recognized citizenship. They use it also, and more often in fact, to point to social spacings internal to refugee life between those who succeeded in assembling a relatively stable, sometimes even almost cozy, living within these strictures and those for whom these combine with ill health, a long ongoing history of political violence, and family upheavals to hold them suddenly or chronically captive at the edge of a kind of abyss.

In context, this formula is of course always a statement about time, about a temporal spacing between two actual or potential partners in a conversation. He who has his hand in the water is not nailed to the present in the same manner as she whose hand is in the fire. Thus the formula is always a pithy reminder that for the poor there is, first and foremost, no such thing as skhole, “free time, freed from the urgencies of the world, that allows a free and liberated relation to those urgencies and to the world” (Bourdieu 2000:1). Its utterance practically serves to expose at the same time as it warns in advance against the presuppositions entailed by the situation of skhole, however flimsy and relative, of the speaker who is not poor in the vicinity of poverty. A bit like in Bourdieu’s critique of the scholastic illusion—that the formula extends, as it were, to the realm of the lay ordinary—a gap or discordance in the temps of life and thought is shown to disjoin and stand between two speakers who do not share an equivalent relationship to poverty.

Being a statement about time, it is also in practice a statement about language, about a chasm that exists between the words, too, of the two speakers broaching the matter of the poverty besetting one of them. In the context of actual camp conversations I attended, the formula often addressed, it seems to me, the words just pronounced, or about to be

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pronounced, by he or she whose hand is not caught in the same furnace: ordinary, hesitant, commiserative comments such as “jalla basita” (take it easy), “I know what it is like,” “inshallah things will get better soon.” Such words and others will have only a limited traction or grip, the proverb’s utterer gently, obliquely, declares ahead of time. At the very least, the burden is put on the speaker who is not poor to look for a breach of his own habitual language games and to reach for a nonlinguistic element or “state of things” into which the poor’s words are anchored. Yet at the same time, this nonlinguistic element seems to be declared elusive of discursive reach, because the proverb also implicitly merges poverty, in such contexts, with a corporeal substance in constant, hurtful transformation and in excess of the viable registers of the senses. Poverty talk will fall on flesh burning and already burned—on bodies being consumed, calloused, and otherwise harmfully changed while discourse was going on.

Such statements and other reserved gestures that Palestinian men and women typically use to disclose, and at once draw a veil over, the presence of poverty in their lives provides elements, I want to suggest in this paper, for an immanent critical social theory of poverty in the refugee context. This might sound like a paradoxical affirmation, at least if we take the statement to make poverty something that only those who are living it can know and talk about. To be sure, a strong claim is being made in this case to a form of separateness: the speaker that social circumstances forced to identify herself as poor only evokes for her interlocutor a raw existential spacing that, she surmises, he fails to appreciate—and she moves on at once. But in the process whereby the interlocutor’s imagination is summoned to recognize and straddle this spacing, poverty is also made sensible for him in a precise way. Or, more accurately perhaps, he is invited to make it sensible for himself under a dual modality: both as a sensorium, a material, bodily lifeworld that can be sensed and itself feels, and as a problematic field of virtual interpretative acts, or ways of saying what kind of thing poverty is and how its production and perpetuation should be apprehended later and perhaps as a category available for self-identification relative to a constituted social field. Taking up my interlocutors’ invitation to attend to the chronic impingements, or “moments of impact” (Stewart 2005:1015), that make up the life of the poor, I will argue that a politics of poverty already opens up, then, with the “ruptures of the configuration of the sensible” (Rancière 1995:53) that such moments of impact precipitate—with the sudden loss of traction of certain discursive registers, for example, or the collapse of taken-for-granted temporal horizons—in the vicinity of a “hand in the fire.”

This mode of analysis is predicated on an ethnographic attention “loosened from any certain prefabricated knowledge of its object” (Stewart 2005:1015)—in this case, “poverty”—and of how exactly it matters to my Palestinian interlocutors. Or perhaps I should say that it is they, in fact, who forced such an approach on me with their apparent lack of interest, extreme reserve, or even explicit disavowals on the topic of refugee poverty. Palestinian men and women I know in Lebanon, and with whose lives mine has in some cases become quite intertwined over the years, expressed some perplexity, for example, when I told them that I had been invited to the conference where this paper originates to talk about Palestinian refugee lives under the rubric of global urban poverty: “Nehna gheyr, for us it is otherwise,” as though their predicament did not belong with those of the poor of South Asia, Egypt, Africa, or Latin America, which I had explained were also to be discussed at the conference. And refugee poverty proved an elusive ethnographic object, an ever-moving target of sorts, during fieldwork I conducted in the last 10 years on ordinary forms of obligations, to others and to the self, in various Palestinian communities in Lebanon (including 2 years during which I lived as member of a dar, or extended family compound, in a refugee camp in Tyre in the south of the country). While it was immediately apparent, for example, that some of the 50 families I originally visited in the camps of Tyre in 2006 to conduct a household census were living in conditions of destitution, my interlocutors’ answers would often become studiously evasive, equivocal, and guarded when we reached the part of the questionnaire aimed at establishing their socioeconomic status. Poverty in the refugee context, I was made to learn in such visits, is plain enough when you see it, so why the indelicacy of probing into its minutiae? Or else it is something made available for others to glimpse rather than see by way of statements such as the one I discussed above or brusque, concise pleas for help from friends that neither they nor I were to ever bring up again. Hardly ever did I sense, however, that poverty constituted for my Palestinian friends and acquaintances a category enclosing a well-defined discursive object ready to be interjected into their discussions of politics or a stable position of enunciation (“I, poor”) into which they were inclined to insert themselves and dwell. Thus, my goal in this paper is also to attend to the paradoxes of Palestinian refugee poverty, a poverty engineered and deliber-

1. I am referring here to the picture of language according to which “[linguistic] signs can never be separated from another kind of nonlinguistic elements, that could be named ‘states of things’” (Deleuze 2003:185); or, to put it otherwise, according to which the meaning of language games depends on their embedment in a form of life (Wittgenstein 2009).
ately perpetuated through the play of recent state sovereignties, incorporated in the material and bodily lifeworlds of a majority of Lebanon’s Palestinians yet not effectuated in the recognizable form of a “political subject of poverty,” let alone in collective strategies of mobilization such as those discussed by other authors in this special issue of *Current Anthropology*.

I also take my cue in this paper from other anthropologists and critical social theorists who have argued that poverty should be conceptualized as a specific way of being in (or being encountered by) the world and for considering carefully what this entails for politics. Arjun Appadurai (2002:26–30), for example, wrote of the “tyranny of emergency” besetting pavement and slum dwellers in turn-of-the-century Mumbai, to which local urban poverty activists sought to respond with a distinct style of politics. Because the everyday of Mumbai’s poor, Appadurai argues, involves “a barrage of real threats to life and space” and is “dominated by ever-present forms of risks” (demolition, expulsion, torrential rains, ill health, etc.), it encloses them in a perpetually intrusive, futureless present. For the grassroots activists Appadurai worked with, a politics of poverty, in this context, entails first and foremost a delicate “politics of patience,” the reintroduction of futurity through the cultivation of an imaginary of and a disposition toward a long-term temporal horizon of slowly built capacities at odds with the short-term logics of the development “project” (Appadurai 2002:30).² For Pierre Bourdieu (2000), too, writing of the “subproletarians” in the context of late colonial Algeria, the very poor, “living at the mercy of what each day brings,” are *des hommes sans avenir* (people without a future; 221–223). This is so, according to Bourdieu, because the most deprived meet an unstructured world that does not allow for the structuration of a habitus and the practical reference to a forthcoming it encases. The very poor, whose “life [has been] turned into a ‘game of chance’” (Bourdieu 2000:221), cannot grow into beings of habits, and for Bourdieu—in agreement, on this point, with American pragmatist C. S. Peirce (see Povinelli 2012:469)—only beings of habits have futurity. Unlike Appadurai, Bourdieu (2000) never seems to have put much stock in the political valence of procuring patience in this context, but he writes, interestingly, of “virtues” (223) immanent in the first place to a social localization that reveals “the economic and social conditions which make possible the ordinary order of practices” (221). In other words, the experience of the very poor—a “limiting-case” (Bourdieu 2000:223) where Bourdieu’s central theoretical hinge, the habitus, seems to come apart at the seams—opens up a space for the most far-reaching form of critique and, one might add, for a sort of ethi-

². In a beautiful paper, Valeria Procupez (2015) fleshes out what “patience” may come to mean for those of whom it is demanded in a similar context of a struggle for access to stable housing in Argentina and carefully discusses the appeal of the moral language of patience in relation to politics of the urban poor.

³. It is significant that the category of the “people without a future”—which makes a brief but crucial appearance in what constitutes Bourdieu’s final, synthetical account of his own critical social theory (Bourdieu 2000)—can be traced back, in fact, to his earliest works (see the studies written in the early 1960s and collected in Bourdieu 1977), but that it otherwise does not appear, as far as I am aware, in the works he published in the interval, including *The Logic of Practice* (Bourdieu 1990).
social spacings of life and death are perpetuated or expanded. Povinelli warns at this turn of a creeping “division within ethical work” that tends to open between those on the one hand who point out the virtues for critical social theory of the off-kilter experience of the poor and those on the other hand confronted with the actual challenge of enduring poverty’s disjointedness and of assembling alternate techniques and disciplines of the self from within its recesses (Povinelli 2011:110). We saw how Bourdieu (2000), for example, readily abides by such a division as he makes of the experience of the very poor a world-shattering, transformative “analyser” (221) of the ordinary order of practices while rendering their very practices and voices as (mostly) the noise of gamblers and daydreamers. At the other end of the spectrum, we would find authors who celebrate unintegrated social spaces and experiences for fostering alternative worlds without interrogating the conditions of physical, psychic, and social endurance on which such a promise depends. Both approaches fail to confront the paradox that it is precisely when the hiatuses of the which such a promise depends.4 Both approaches fail to con-
tate futures, can grow out of a present interrupted at every turn? Can the cumulated effects of such interruptions ever “produce anything that anyone could or would want to live within” (Povinelli 2006:85)? And how to know when the sounds let off by those who “have their hand in the fire” are noise, phonos, devoid of the grip that brings new worlds into being, and when they have the potential to transform the background assumptions of logos, public rationality, and to claim intelligibility for other ways of being in the world (Povinelli 2011:50; Rancière 1995)?

The reminder of this paper consists in two brief ethnographic sketches of Palestinian refugee poverty in which I draw attention to processes of disclosure of self and world strung together from everyday run-ins with the world. One argument I pursue through these descriptions is that for a large segment of the Palestinians in Lebanon, life does resemble a permanent state of noise, at least as it entails “living at the mercy of what each day brings” (Bourdieu 2000:221) in a manner that hardly favors the formation of a habitus attuned to and socially absorbable in the political “configuration of the sensible” (Rancière 1995:52–53) upheld by late-modern Arab states. Indeed, the continual effects of the refugee poor’s life do not even precipitate a political subject of poverty—a “I, poor”—who would emerge in the interpretative act of establishing a semiotic relationship of some kind between her malnourishment, ill health, or exposure to dampness and dust on the one hand and a field of social belonging in which she would claim inclusion on the other. Many recent formulations of “the politics of poverty” (e.g., Holston 2009) take for granted, it seems to me, at the same time as they depend for their possibility on this operation whereby sensible elements of a lifeworld have become indexes of one’s assignation to an inequitable location and share relative to a larger field of social belonging. Such a semiotic feat continues to hinge, in the world as it is currently organized, on the availability of the legal and discursive category of citizenship and on the specific manner in which it fastens an ethical imaginary of the sovereign self to the sovereignty of the state (Arendt 1958; Berlant 2007). Perhaps it should be no surprise, then, that we do not find a recognizable politics of poverty among stateless refugees whose poverty, far from being experientially mediated by the category of citizenship, instead is the substantive, material, and continuing effect of the intractable contradictions set in motion by the politics of empire, nationhood, and sovereignty in the eastern Mediterranean in the last century. This does not make, however, what we find in the Palestinian camps of Lebanon a “bare life” separated, by the sovereign ban, from any kind of cohering form and voided of the potential to coordinate its own emergent context (Agamben 2000). Rather, the politics of refugee poverty lie, I argue, in specific processes of political semiosis at the end of which stand—however unsteadily—refugee selves sovereign on their own, alternate set of terms.

Poverty, Sovereignty, Potentiality

An estimated 300,000 Palestinian refugees are currently living in Lebanon. Most of these refugees’ origins lie in the Galilee (al-Jalil) and the areas surrounding and including the northern coastal cities (Ḥayfa and ’Akka) captured by Israel in 1948 at the end of the British Mandate on Palestine. Since its inception, the state of Israel has adamantly opposed their return on the grounds that it would alter its Jewish character. On similar grounds of biopolitical arithmetic, the Lebanese state forcefully opposes their “implantation” (al-lawtīn) in Lebanon. For the Lebanese state, the naturalization of the refugees—an overwhelmingly Sunni population that makes up about 10% of the country’s inhabitants—would not only jeopardize the right, guaranteed by international law and UN resolutions, of refugees to return to their home, it would also alter Lebanon’s fragile national fabric and its constitutional regime, inherited from French colonial governance and built on a fetishized “sectarian balance” of Maronite, Orthodox, Shia, Sunni, Druze, and other constituencies. It is also widely assumed that their settlement in the overpopulated and truncated areas of the territory once projected for the Palestinian state (in the ever more chimerical framework of a “two-state solution”) would further compromise its already dubious social and political viability.

A vast majority of these refugees (62%) live in 12 overcrowded camps under the nominal responsibility of the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA), created in 1949 as a temporary measure to alleviate the refugee crisis. The
greater part of the rest reside in a number of smaller, unofficial, and often illegal squatter settlements locally referred to as tajammu‘at, or “gatherings.” The latest data made available through a survey conducted jointly by UNRWA and the American University of Beirut (AUB) in 2010 (Chaaban et al. 2010) indicate that in these areas two-thirds (66.4%) of Palestinian men and women lived below the poverty line, here defined as the US$6 necessary per person per day to cover basic food and nonfood requirements (transport, utilities, rent) in Lebanon at the time. It also revealed, using the same money metric indicator, that poverty incidence among Palestinian refugees was 89% higher than that of Lebanese nationals (35.1%) and that Palestinian men and women were four times more likely to be extremely poor (US$2.17 or less a day) than the citizens of Lebanon. Since this survey was conducted, the ongoing war in neighboring Syria has driven an additional tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees from the camps of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and other Syrian cities to seek refuge in the camps of Lebanon. Accounts from a number of NGO sources and my own recent conversations in the camps of Tyre (South Lebanon) indicate that this sudden, steady influx of “Syrians”—most of whom also happen to be in-laws and cousins—is putting a considerable economic strain on camp society and threatens to upset in a catastrophic fashion the fragile livings that the previous figures covered.

It is not the place here for a thorough historical account of the political and economical making of Palestinian refugee poverty in contemporary Lebanon (for some elements of this history, see Asad 1975). In its broad outlines, such an account would have to cover at least five developments or moments in the last century and a half: (1) the dismantlement of the musha‘a, or village-based, collective land-tenure system in Palestine at the end of the nineteenth century by an Ottoman administration burdened with debts toward Western great powers and bent on maximizing tax revenue for this reason; (2) the ensuing growing debt of individual Palestinian farmers during the British Mandate (1920–1948), leading in many cases to the sale of their lands to affluent land owners based in distant urban centers, including Beirut, who in turn sold some of these lands to the Jewish Agency; (3) the campaign of ethnic cleansing that accompanied the Arab-Jewish war and the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948 and brought about the loss of livelihoods in the form of cultivated fields, olive and citrus trees, cattle and pastures, businesses, or positions in the embryonic state administration put into place by the mandatory power; (4) the institution by the Lebanese state, from 1949 onward and with a renewed vigor in the late 1990s, of a legal and administrative apparatus geared toward maintaining Palestinian refugees in a situation of perpetual social and economic disenfranchisement in the host country, including laws and decrees excluding Palestinians from extensive segments of the labor market and legal employment more generally, limiting their access to education and health care, and prohibiting them from securing home ownership outside of the camps; and (5) massive human and material losses sustained by refugee communities in local and regional conflicts from the late 1960s up to the mid-2000s, most dramatically during Lebanon’s war (1975–1990) and the Israeli invasions and subsequent occupation of parts of Lebanon (1978–2000) involving the destruction and plunder of a number of camps and gatherings at the changing hands of the Israeli military, the Lebanese army, and various Lebanese militias and a death and disability toll peculiarly high among males of working age.

The accumulative effects of this history brought forth a distinct social and material world with complex variations from one camp to the other and within the same camps. Cramped, stacked-up homes partially connected to a partially working infrastructure sometimes harbor the attainment of at least some lower-middle-class aspirations (a nice TV, a reception room for visitors, a fully automatic washing machine), more often (especially in the camps of Tyre) only the barest form of household equipment. Adult bodies move around at different paces, some vitalized by modest success stories (e.g., securing employment in UNRWA or operating a mechanics or carpentry workshop on the edge of the camp), many slowed down by poorly treated illness, the fatigue of habituated joblessness, or memories of war one cannot learn to live with. Young teenagers quarrel with their parents who struggle to make sure that they attend UNRWA schools in light of the knowledge that most education achievements will be out of kilter with their chances for employment. For most of the families I have come to know well in the camps of Tyre, making do in this environment at the current historical juncture implies keeping together, on a collective basis, an ever unsteady assemblage that combines various fragments of income: mostly, the wages of at least some family members from what the UNRWA-AUB survey calls “low, precarious and casual” forms of employment; in some cases, occasional remittances from relatives who settled abroad in the Gulf countries or northern Europe; and paltry, always-to-be-rekindled bits of humanitarian aid, in nature or in cash, directed to eligible members—such as seniors, widows, the disabled, or the suddenly sick—from a number of sources including UNRWA, the PLO social services, local and international NGOs, and, for widows and orphans, Islamic charities. The collective basis of these fragile assemblages entails that you are very vulnerable if there is no position for you to secure in even a small network of close relatives or if you lose such a position for an alleged failure to comply with the disciplines that underlie them.

Dense but succinct acts of interpretation routinely emerge from this social and material world, contributing in essential ways to its distinct texture and temporality. Thus, I have
heard over the years various Palestinian women and men describe such everyday events or particulars as a leaking wall, failing heart arteries, or even a sluggish husband in conversations woven in their vicinity as not just what they are but also at the same time tokens through which something else, a “political something” (shi syassi), is made sensible and to which they relate, in the manner of indexicals, as smoke relates to fire. They, however, rarely named or described this “political something” much further in everyday conversations I attended. And while it is tempting, and it can be apposite, to fill up this silence with elaborations on the topology of the sovereign ban (Agamben 1998) or of the two poles (making live/letting die) that distribute the operations of biopower in modernity (Foucault 1978), it is also critical, I believe, to attend ethnographically and theoretically to the fact that the refugee poor themselves, when moved to make larger sense of the actual ramifications of poverty in their lives, initiate interpretative moves that they abstain from bringing to too-well-rounded a resolution.

Speaking of a crumbling home, of a sick body, or of a demotivated child as also, or at least partly, shi syassi, something political, is certainly a way in which to underline that refugee poverty was organized and is being perpetuated through a deliberate use of modern law as opposed to those hardships that are assumed to be in the order of things for being predicated on a presumption of universal access to legal forms of self-subsistence, health, and security. Fundamentally, it is to register, I believe, and as it were vocally inscribe onto the world that the ordinary calculus of a damp sleeping room that will give children asthma or of a worried father’s heart exhausted before its time could so evidently in this case have not been, that it is cruel and contingent, cruel because contingent on a bundle of political technologies, historically set into action by the politics of empire, nationhood, and sovereignty in the eastern Mediterranean in the twentieth century. A failing heart is shi syassi because it directs attention to specific arts of governance that brought its sickness into being. Its corporeality is of a kind to elicit an interpretative process by way of which a dubious economy of ethical goods becomes visible and available for critique along with the political-ethical imaginary that sustains it: the economy and imaginary that the Israeli and Lebanese states invoke and enact when they maintain that laws banning the return (Israel) or emancipation (Lebanon) of Palestinian refugees are necessary and legitimate because their inclusion would compromise some essential character of a citizen’s body, and through it the practical-individual sovereignty (the freedom) of each and every current and future Israeli or Lebanese citizen.

But naming the manifestations of one’s own poverty “something political” is not always, or not just, registering bitterness or rage at the gratuitousness of something that could have not been. The use of this label also participates in another interpretative course, one equally habitual, I believe, to my Palestinian interlocutors, although certainly at an angle from the one I just exposed. Along this second line of interpretation, the same trials under which poverty materializes and embodies itself in their lives elicit perceptual judgments whose ultimate objects are their own embodied capacity for patient endurance, sabr, and, through it, a dimension of the future. Poverty-related hardship strikes one as something that one must and can endure; one’s own potential for endurance is the something else (than what at first sight there only is) that is made immediately sensible in putting up with a fatigued body, a broken-down home, sudden or chronic worries about food and clothing, or young brains absorbing too early that only so much will ever be ready to hand. To be sure, this second interpretative course revolves in part on the central place sabr occupies among the dispositions the Islamic tradition commands to cultivate on the path to the righteous self and salvation (Wensinck 1936). But this tradition does not explain, by itself, my Palestinian interlocutors’ sense of evidence (however fleeting and compact) that a political (as opposed to simply ethical) something, pertaining to the future, discloses itself in the course of enduring embodied poverty. The visceral apprehension of a political potency in one’s own capacity to encounter and suffer poverty constitutes, I believe, a complex act of interpretation that interdigitates in this case elements of practical comportment grounded in Islamic ethics and an understanding of how the living body itself functions as a potent sign in the age of modern (or biopolitical) sovereignty. According to this understanding, refugee poverty, precisely because it is organized by laws that enact and secure the sovereignty of others, also indexes by default in its many concrete instantiations the formal absence of Palestinian sovereignty. Pace Giorgio Agamben, this does not, however, make Palestinian refugee lives “bare life” (or only in an overly formal way that would have little purchase, I believe, with the experience of my interlocutors). Rather, it makes enduring refugee poverty an ascès or practice of bearing witness (shahada) to a claim to self-rule. A body fatigued by poverty points physically along such lines to “a place in the world which makes opinion significant and actions effective”—in the words Hannah Arendt (1958:296) used to speak of that which the refugee is deprived of—located in a indefinite, but this-worldly, future.

To be clear, the previous account does not pretend to correspond to a fully articulated discourse by my Palestinian friends on refugee poverty. Rather, it is an attempt to piece together the background conditions of intuitive moments of interpretation folded in, and hardly isolable from, the self-conscious encounters with the world that refugee poverty appears to foster and precipitate. Nor should the two interpretative courses or moments I have briefly delineated be taken to constitute successive stages of a dialectic. The aggravations of day-to-day living may lose some of their edges if they sustain and make quasi sensible in the present a future where Palestinians will have been recognized as subjects deserving justice and self-determination. But the sense that there is such a temporal horizon may also founder altogether at times in the face of the sheer horror of, say, one’s incapacity to provide a sick parent or child with the health care she needs. Perhaps this constant oscillation explains the guarded indifference, in vast segments of the refugee community, to recent activist efforts aimed at resceding the legal
apparatus excluding Palestinians from full participation in Lebanon’s social and economic life. Since the early 2000s, a campaign has been waged to this effect by local and international NGOs, which achieved some modest results with the creation in 2005 of an interministerial “Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee” tasked with “achieving progress . . . to enhance the living conditions of Palestinian refugees” and the passing of legislation in 2010 that facilitates the extension of work permits to refugees.” I do not know any Palestinian man or woman who downright opposes the continuation of these efforts, but I know many who look at them with skepticism not only because of their very low prospect of success in the face of rampant Lebanese opposition (not to mention increased local and regional instability) but also because of a hunch that success, if it were to be achieved on this plane, might catalyze the liquidation of ethical goods (i.e., elements of the life worth living) they also strive to lay claim to and that concern another part of their being. But then, what other part of one’s being could be concerned, others retort to these skeptics, for those whose hand is in the fire? And poverty remains in this manner an odd quotidian encounter with something else than what it is—a flickering, ambiguous “political something.”

Being Poor but Not Feeling It

Consider a remark made by T., a Palestinian woman I know well, in order to explain her own uncertainty, loss of words even, about how to answer my queries on growing up poor in the social world of the refugee camps in the 1970s. A young child at the time, T. was living with her mother and five older siblings in Borj al-Barajne camp on the outskirts of Beirut. She has no recollections of her father, who died from a mysterious misdiagnosed ailment when she was two. For her mother, the tragedy of finding herself in her early thirties a widow with six children aged 2 to 13 was compounded by the family’s untypical isolation. T.’s only paternal uncle was barely fending for his own family in the distant camps of Tyre, where he had relocated from Borj al-Barajne a few years into exile. The single daughter of the first wife in a polygynous marriage back in Palestine, T.’s mother had no siblings of her own in Lebanon and too much self-respect (al-karame) to seek support from her unsympathetic relatives through her father’s second marriage in the host country. Part of the family income in this period came from renting for a small fee the shelter next to their own—that vacated by T.’s uncle when he moved to the south—to short-term tenants, usually war-displaced Lebanese villagers from the south. The other, greater part was generated collectively in the form of homemade paper bags that T.’s mother would then sell to shopkeepers she knew in the small town adjacent to the camp. Starting at the age of five, T. would, like her older siblings, sit on the ground and fold and glue reams of kraft paper upon coming back from school. Each family member had a daily quota of bags to achieve depending on age and dexterity.

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Asked about these early years in her life, T. says: “We were poor, but we did not feel that we were poor” (kenna fuqara, bas ma kenna nhes enna fuqara). She says it with a mix of amusement and wonder, directed at herself and her two siblings closest to her in age, for missing at the time this aspect of the family’s situation. In the context of our conversation, the statement is primarily meant as a manner of excuse. T. acknowledges that, at least applying camp criteria then and now, the family certainly counted among the ranks of the poor. But not “feeling” poverty in those years, a part of her struggles to entertain the possibility in hindsight that it was indeed the case, and my questions fill her with embarrassment. If one did not feel that one was poor, this cannot have been poverty, and she is not qualified to answer my questions.

The mood or tone that T. conjures up in her recollections of her childhood in Borj al-Barajne in the 1970s is consonant with my impressions of the manner in which my young neighbors in al-Bass camp in Tyre in the mid-2000s (some of whom, especially in the Palestinian Bedouin gathering of Jal al-Bahar immediately adjacent to the camp, hailed from households local and international NGOs consider the poorest of the refugee poor) seemed to go about their lives. It raises the intriguing question of the place of children in and of their contribution to the politics of poverty, understood here as socially coordinated processes of self-disclosure and public identification. Taking our cue from T.’s paradoxical formulation, we should not assume that refugee children find within the embodied lifeworld of refugee poverty itself what poverty is as a recognizable kind of obstacle or disadvantage in relation to which to understand and live their lives. Something that, like poverty in T.’s evocation of her childhood, “is” but is not “felt”—is not (yet) the object of some experience—corresponds to the definition of what C. S. Peirce (1934), in his classification of the categories or structures of being and consciousness, calls a First. For it to become the object of some experience, a First must, according to Peirce (1958), take on the quality of “active oppugnancy” (202), or impinging force that demarcates existents or phenomena from one another, and that makes it a Second. This the object does not in all but only in some “respect or capacity” (what Peirce calls “the ground” of the experience of something) relative to an emergent perceptual-interpretive field or “interpretant.” Being always already partially organized, the

7. http://www.lpdc.gov.lb. This law, however, continues to treat Palestinians as foreigners falling under the Ministry of Labor’s regulations for nonnationals, and as such it excludes them from an array of professions either subject to the reciprocity clause (e.g., medical doctor, engineer, nurse, teacher, etc.) or restricted to Lebanese citizens (e.g., law, journalism, hairdresser, taxi driver, etc.).

8. For the importance of the notion of “ground,” see, e.g., one of Peirce’s (1932) famous triadic definitions of the sign: “A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant or the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object.
interpretant moves the object of the encounter into a more expansive realm of existential coordination and intelligibility, or Thirdness. This is what happens, for example, when some aspect of human existence, say, sexual desire, is transformed from an object of experience into a topic of knowledge or an object of ethical conduct.

How to understand, along those lines, the paradox that one could be poor but that refugee poverty is not the object of one’s “feeling” or experience? To be sure, such a claim by itself still entails the prior disclosure “in some respect of capacity” of what it means to be poor. T. mentions a specific set of educational scenes when asked how the young child whom she was started to grasp the meaning of poverty. She speaks of seeing her older brothers and her mother hardly containing emotions frightful to her while politely declining gifts of clothes, money, or meat neighbors and acquaintances would present to the family during Ramadan and the ‘Eid. She recounts disputes at home between the same family members when one such gift was occasionally found out to have been accepted by one of them with no consultation with the others. She remembers being scolded by her mother for going out in a rundown pair of shoes to be used only in the inner yard or to the UNRWA school in a dirty uniform. She also speaks of learning nuances of sociality and from whom, when, and why it was in fact permissible to accept certain kinds of goods offered in the appropriate, subdued manner. For example, it was allowable to receive even secondhand clothes from Husayn, the best friend of her older brother who hailed from the more prosperous camp of Nahr al-Bared in the North and who was intimate enough to sleep in their house while in Beirut. T. was definitely not as sure of what to do regarding the playful routine of another friend of the boys who on his regular visits to their house would place a coin behind her ear and pretend that the coin was calling her ("T! Take me, take me!"); up to this day she remembers anxiously interrogating the faces of her mother and older siblings for a cue that was not forthcoming.

In all such scenes, refugee poverty moves from Firstness (something that there, and one, "is," but one does not "feel") to Secondness (an oppugnant something that interrupts a field of consciousness) so that a peculiar thinness of poverty is formed. But it does so through the mediation and by virtue of the inner momentum of a specific set of ordinary signs that bring together a variety of cascading interpretants. In the first type of episode mentioned, which T. remembers today as the most effective and determinant, it is a tension in the face, body, and voice of primary others as they decline charity that impinges on the child. Of course, this tension of face, posture, and tone is by itself a moment of interpretation—what Peirce would call an affective/energetic interpreting (Povinelli 2011:87–88)—relative to yet other moments of interpretation—a sense of pity, perhaps, on the part of neighbors for the widow and orphans next door or a more self-centered reflective judgment as to who would qualify as a right beneficiary for one’s performance of zakat to be felicitous. In other words, the facial, bodily, and vocal tension of a mother or older sibling opens up the child to and projects her into a "spirling matrix of interpretation" (Povinelli 2011:87–88) that interdigitates various orders and grounds, including but not limited to textually based accounts internal to the discursive tradition of Islam as to the part of poverty in the affairs of this world and the next, the micropolitics attendant to a shared neighborhood history in the context of exile, the force and momentum of affect within the relationality of kinship, and a practical ethics of the conduct to demonstrate when dealt with as poor.

The global significate effect of this semiotic matrix, or sum total of its interpretants, culminates in a practical-ethical understanding that sets “feeling poor” against the being of what Palestinians call al-raheem, or sphere of those most intimate “ties of the womb” that join parents and children, siblings and siblings, spouse and spouse. For the sensate ground on which the child makes out the meaning of “feeling poor” is not, in T.’s account, the pinch of hunger or cold in her own body but the trembling of older primary others upon being presented with acts of charity. Of course the child’s receptiveness to others’ affects in this case hinges on what M. Sahlins (2013:ix) felicitously calls kinship’s “mutuality of being”—on the world’s having already been disclosed to her in such a manner that “relatives . . . live each other’s lives and die each other’s death.” In other words, it is not, in T.’s precise account of her education into poverty, the future possible state of obligation incurred if charity was accepted that appears immediately to the child. Rather, or even before that, what is made sensible to her is her actual participation in the others’ trembling and an ensuing obligation to abide by the performative refusal of charity through which this trembling is absorbed. The disclosure of poverty, in such scenes, thus becomes an occasion for the intensification of the “transbodily being” (Sahlins 2013:2) of al-raheem rather than for its dissolution into individualized units of bare life. As she grew up, T. would later learn concepts, such as al-karame (“dignity”), under which camp Palestinians thematize the social imaginary of joint practical sovereignty and self-nurturance enacted in such scenes of instruction.

Of course, the semiotic feat of “being poor but not feeling it” depends, in this context, on the child’s being fed, sheltered, and healthy enough. Thus it hinges, for one thing, on a volatile calculus on the adults’ part of who can bear what and where the line passes between harnessing frugality to intensify the “mutuality of being” and just being callous to some family members’ needs and stress. And it also depends on there being an infrastructure in place that makes this calculous possible in the first place: the resources, however deficient, provided by (and acceptable from) UNRWA and other refugee relief organizations; the interstices, however tight, that state regulations leave open, in law or in practice, for Palestinian households to provide a something of some kind for their members. Does it make the process of self-disclosure, whereby one can be poor yet not feel it, and the other reserved gestures that

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It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen” (135, italics in original).
Palestinian men and women, to reveal and at once draw a veil over the presence of poverty in their lives, too suspect, too compromised with impoverishment as a form of refugee governmentality, to constitute anything resembling an effective politics of poverty?

Surely it is not easy to say what other world such semiotic habits can bring into being and whether one would want to be but leave this otherness unspeciﬁed, they speak in a manner that stymies the system of reference on which the possibility to speak of poverty on a descriptive, compassionate, or activist mode largely depends. Indeed, their refusal to say “I, poor” seems to stymie the possibility of social justice itself, if, that is, we take social justice to require acquiescence to a prior operation whereby one is assigned a location and role relative to a ﬁeld of social belonging deﬁned from elsewhere. But one can also be attentive, with Gilles Deleuze (1997), to the radical “democratic contribution” intrinsic to a type of utterances disruptive of the “logic of presuppositions” that makes it possible for a boss to give a command and be obeyed, for a “kind friend” to offer commiseration and advice and be listened to, and even for a rebel to be recognized as such when he deﬁes an order. For Deleuze (1997), the emergence of such a speech genre in the writings of Melville, Musil, Kafka, and others participated of a “morality of life” diagonal to the “morality of salvation and charity” and called into being a “new community, whose members are capable of trust or ‘conﬁdence,’ that is, of a belief in themselves, in the world and in becoming” (88). It is not the least paradox that sabr, this heaven-bound patient endurance that Palestinian women and men say they end in the embodied lifeworld of refugee poverty, might also be one name for just such a belief in the world.

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Raw Life and Respectability

Poverty and Everyday Life in a Postapartheid Community

by Fiona C. Ross

Through close ethnographic attention to modes of world making among people living in a very impoverished community in Cape Town, South Africa, in this paper I explore the histories of two key concepts—rouheid and ordendlikheid (Afrikaans; rawness and respectability)—and the social practices they enjoin. These distinctions and the modalities of living they generate produce relations between living and dying that complicate the prevailing theoretical picture of power over life and death, particularly that posited by Giorgio Agamben’s (1998) distinction between bare and qualified life. They also foreground the ways in which gender is implicated in practices of world making that James Holston (2008) describes as “insurgent” and “differentiated” citizenship. Exploring the ways that people seek to craft lives in contexts that undermine many possibilities, I demonstrate ethnographically both the forms of exposure that poverty produces and the ways that these are countered. I propose a genealogy of bareness that, contra Agamben’s emphasis on sovereign power, is deeply embedded in local ways of understanding persons, relationships, history’s effects, and life’s possibilities.

James Holston’s (2008) account of struggles for urban land rights in São Paulo, Brazil, offers a historically nuanced argument about how peripheries are settled and potentially secured through the indeterminacies of legal processes. Demonstrating the entanglements of “differentiated” and “insurgent” citi- zenships, his account is persuasive in demanding attention to the historical processes that have given rise to the particular production of social life in Brazil and elsewhere. Drawing from Agamben (1998), he suggests that the ancient Greek distinction between polis and oikos is reformulated in the demands of formerly rural populations to “a daily life in the city worthy of a citizen’s dignity” (Holston 2008:313). His account suggests that it is in the everyday, and particularly in its entanglements with law, that politics takes form. Here I extend this notion by exploring how, in the making of everyday life, norms are formed and reformed, complicating our picture of resistance and entanglement.

Apartheid’s exclusions, building on those of the colonial and Union periods, meant that people’s modes of life making as they inhabited the urban periphery were overtly a struggle against the classificatory power and effects of law. In Cape Town, the city in which I live and about which I write, it was also a profoundly gendered process, an encroachment—of land, law, classifications—performed in what I would call “the domestic mode.” Here I offer an account of this mode to demonstrate that the terms in which people envisage everyday life’s possibilities themselves are shaped by historical processes and give rise to particular ethical horizons and forms of life. The account thus extends and challenges Holston’s argument, demanding that we situate the politics of the urban poor through an understanding not only of law and its exigencies, or of historical processes alone, but also of the ways that norms settle into accepted understandings of what it means to make urban life.

Under colonialism and increasingly under apartheid, the domestic realm was the site of much state control. By the mid-1980s, politics was enacted through law’s hold over the household and its relations, and the law was brought cruelly to bear on the possibilities of social life. Before the implementation of the Group Areas Act of 1950, Cape Town (South Africa’s oldest colonial city) was also one of the most integrated in the country (Besteman 2008; Western 1981). Admittedly, that is not saying a great deal given the prevailing class and race

1. This is an important point of difference between political orders founded on the separation of household and politics as described by Agamben (1998) and those of Britain’s southern African colonies and their subsequent political structures (see below). For example, apartheid’s Separate Development was predicated on ethnicity and race (the latter defined by the Population Registration Act of 1950 in terms of descent for whites, Africans, and Indians; Colouredness, until the 1970s, predicated on assumptions about miscegenation [Adhikari 2008], was defined on exclusions—being not obviously white or black—and associational ties). Other acts, such as the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act and the Immorality Act, were designed specifically to address questions of racial purity in the family.
ideologies of the time, but it is worth remembering in the era we problematically denote as “postapartheid,” when Cape Town remains the most segregated and racialized of all South African cities. In addition to the gamut of apartheid laws that applied in South Africa, a number of special regulations were specific to the Cape Province, including those pertaining to the Coloured Labour Preference Area (which provided for racially based job reservation) and stringently enforced influx control measures. Much of the struggle of urban residence in Cape Town was made in the name of the African family (Cole 1987; Wells 1993), the coherence of which had been sundered by long colonial histories of land alienation and dispossession, migration, and the separation of families.

Simultaneously, long-standing state and religious concerns over the “dysfunctional Coloured family” saw the apartheid state intervening in family life in numerous ways, including social support grants and housing allowances made largely to women. This enabled women classified “Coloured” to take responsibility as homeowners, respectable mothers, and leaders in their communities (Salo 2004), a pattern that is shifting in the postapartheid democratizing context (Versfeld 2012). The struggle for residence in the city was thus not only racially differentiated, as many commentators have pointed out, but powerfully gendered.

Women’s roles in patiently and courageously (re)settling the outskirts of the city or navigating state ideologies of the family suggest that it is important to think through the shifts in relations between urban residence and gender over time and the forms of life to which this gives rise. I examine these matters through close attention to everyday life in The Village, a former shanty settlement on the outer perimeter of Cape Town (F. Ross 2010). Established in the last years of apartheid, the settlement consisted of a mixed population of “Coloured” and “African” residents with different residential histories and claims to city and rural lives. Residents of the poor, largely Afrikaans-speaking community frequently use a powerful metaphor of bareness to describe their everyday lives. The term rou is variously translated as “raw,” “rough,” “crude,” “indecent,” “vulgar,” “incomplete” or “iformed,” and “inexperienced.” It stands in contrast to an ideal of cultured, developed, respectable. In common usage, rou denotes a form of exposure to life’s violence and pain. People juxtapose rou with ordentlik, a term connoting decency, respectability, reasonability, and proper conformity to the social norms of the elite. Its connotations of gentility and restraint offer a version of life markedly different from the stuttering rhythms and everyday inconstancies that often characterize everyday life in extremely poor contexts. Local usage of rouheid (rawness) and ordentlikheid echo the Levi-Straussian distinction between raw and cooked; people described as rou are considered uncultured, undisciplined, not fully incorporated into appropriate modes of comportment and behavior. Raw circumstances are said to produce raw lives. In what follows, I pay attention to the ways that these distinctions and the modalities of living they enjoin produce relations between living and dying that complicate the prevailing theoretical picture of power over life and death, particularly that posited by Giorgio Agamben’s (1998) distinction between bare and qualified life.

**Rowness and Respectability**

Historically, the idea of respectability was an important mode of structuring unequal social relations in African colonial worlds (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; R. Ross 1999). It carried—and continues to carry—particular weight in the Cape (Jensen 2008; F. Ross 2005, 2010; R. Ross 1999; Salo 2004), where, as Robert Ross (1999) describes it, under both Dutch and British colonial regimes it became a central structuring principle in demarcating social status and shaping interpersonal relations. Its underpinning racial dynamic, partly predicated on the distinction between slave and free, shifted and solidified over the nineteenth century as religion (particularly Christianity) became a core element in the definition of respectability, backgrounding other criteria (R. Ross 1999; see also Jensen 2008). While the content of what counted as respectability altered over time, the term and the actions instituted in its name—such as temperance societies and legislation curtailing indolence, drunkenness, and amoral relations, among others—established its opposite, which was heavily predicated on appearances, public behavior (particularly drinking and licentiousness), and destitution (especially among whites; see R. Ross 1999:158). It is in this matrix that rou and ordentlik emerge as one another’s others.

In some uses, respectability implies an ethical stance in the world. Manifesting as reliability in the conduct of social relations, it involves caring for appearances (respectability) and caring for persons (decency), molding relationships so that

2. How this segregation came about is largely the familiar story of the production of racially based class structures in South Africa and the creation of distant ethnic “homelands” for Africans and their exclusion from “common South Africa” under any but the most exigent of conditions until the repeal in 1986 of the infamous pass laws that governed African access to cities. These processes gave rise to the production of an African laboring class concentrated in labor reserves (Wolpe 1972) and, as Mahmoud Mamdani (1996) notes, a differentiation between “citizens” and “subjects.” That distinction was complicated in the case of those classified Coloured, who, post-1983, were afforded some citizenship rights while still enduring the subject status Mamdani describes. In Cape Town, the Group Areas Act of 1950 was emphatically imposed, quickly giving rise to a city stratified by class and race—a legacy that, 20 years into a democratic political regime, it has scarcely undone (Besteman 2008). The Coloured Labour Preference Area (1954, repealed 1985) further limited African influx to the city by securing the area south of the “Eiselin Line” for people classified Coloured. Notwithstanding these pressures of exclusion, people classified African continued to come to the city, establishing what were then called “squatter camps” along the city’s periphery (Cole 1987; Dewar, Rosmarin, and Watson 1991; James and Simons 1999).

people will be considered moral beings. The creation of proper personhood is thus part of the stakes of ordentlikheid. And, as Elaine Salo (2004) notes, ordentlikheid marks the critical mode that separates people from the wilderness of “the bush”: 1 “Ordentlikheid refers to the intense, lifelong social and physical work that women have to do to keep the natural order of the bos or the wilderness at bay” (172).

On the face of it, ordentlikheid offers positive imaginative horizons; a way of escaping or at least envisaging an alternative to the harshness of everyday worlds of poor people in South Africa and the structural violence that shapes them. Recent work (Jensen 2008; Salo 2004) sees in it a means through which moral worlds can be forged from the scurilous conditions of everyday life in poor areas; through ordentlikheid, people—particularly women—are able to make proper persons in immoral conditions. And yet, ordentlikheid is overdetermined and contradictory. The binary between decency and rawness, which appears as a moral statement about social standing, belies the political-economic relations that produced it in the first place. It references a pernicious evolutionary ranking system set in place early in the colonial encounter and consolidated in the Victorian era (see R. Ross 1999) that differentiated the “civilizable native” (subject to recognizable laws) from “bushmen.” 2

Ordentlike mense (decent people) “know their place.” That injunction so firmly embedded in colonial society is an instruction to adhere to the implicit “law of the proper” (de Certeau 1988:103)—the rules of hierarchy that express and maintain power relations—including those of class, gender, and age. It involves conformity to gendered ideals in which women are subservient while at the same time masking the central role that they play in the maintenance of households. It also insists on forms of respect that border on subservience to those in authority—real or imagined. In other words, respect practices themselves are shaped by other modalities of stratification—class, race, gender, and age. For some people, the forms of appropriate behavior glossed as ordentlikheid are learned through bitter experience. One man, explaining to me how to behave with propriety and to recognize respectability in others, commented that he had learned proper form at the end of a sjambok (a rawhide whip) wielded by the farmer on whose wine farm his father was employed. The sjambok here represents the hard edges of decency: he had been beaten for failing to show the appropriate forms of “respect” (read: subservience) to the farmer. Children are often beaten for not showing appropriate respect. Drawing on models that have their historic roots in slavery and exploitation, ordentlikheid is shot through with traces of violence and injustice.

Working in both middle- and working-class contexts in Cape Town, Stefan Jensen has described ordentlikheid as an empty signifier (2008:147), its forms and referents unstable over time and in different contexts. Never firmly anchored or finally accomplished, it has to be “fought over and . . . performed again and again” (Jensen 2008:147). And, for many with whom I worked, life and work on the Cape’s commercial farms, with their symbolic associations with baaskap (mastery) and the bush, is counterpoised to a form of life characterized as ordententlik. Thus, while people behave as though the terms rou and ordentlik are objective indicators of social status, they are the materialization of terrible histories of oppression and subjugation, exclusion, and marginalization.

The Bush, The Park, The Village

These distinctions and the world-making practices they involve came strongly to the fore in the late 1990s and early 2000s as residents of a shantytown, The Bush (later called The Park), readied themselves to move from their organically formed shack community, slowly built over the preceding decade, into a residential estate, The Village, funded through a public-private partnership. The estate offered the approximately 1,000 residents of The Park formal accommodation in a planned suburb, with simple houses and basic amenities (tarred roads, indoor sanitation, electricity, and running water). In the lead-up to the move, residents were excited about the possibilities this offered not just to live more comfortably, protected from the elements, but to live modes of life that others would recognize as decent.

The Park had been established by bosslapers (literally, bush sleepers; the homeless, vagrants) 3 in the late 1980s. At night the small group built small shelters among the trees, demolishing them by day. Several had come to Cape Town from the central interior, the desert lands of the Karoo; others soon joined them from Cape Town and surrounds. The diminution of influx control in the late 1980s and the increasing inability of the state to provide housing for Coloureds as well as Africans meant that the settlement quickly consolidated into a small “squatter camp,” home to several hundred people, most of whom the apartheid state classified Coloured, with a small number of isiXhosa-speaking Africans. Defined by local authorities as an illegal settlement (what would now be called a “land invasion”), by the time that I began living and working there in 1991, the settlement had already been razed

4. Ironically, the settlement was made on the edges of a farm called “Die Bos” (the bush), and when I first lived there, that was how residents knew it. Later they decided to change its name to The Park precisely to avoid the previous name’s connotations.

5. Indeed, during the early period of Dutch and later British and German colonization in Southern Africa, indigenous peoples, particularly the San, were considered vermin, subject to indiscriminate killing. Killers could be prosecuted but were leniently treated (Gordon 1986). The hierarchical racial model has become deeply embedded in everyday social relations such that recent Khoisan cultural resurgences notwithstanding, it is considered a great insult to call someone n boesman (a bushman).

6. Residents use the term rather than the more common pejorative term bergies—see discussion below.
several times by agents of the state and was again under threat from local landlords.

To describe life there as precarious is an understatement. African people’s lives in nonhomeland cities had already been rendered precarious by legalized exclusions; section 21 rights, pass laws and influx control regulations, the Eiselin Line, state violence, detention without trial, and so on; the full range of apartheid’s legal accoutrements of exclusion along with extralegal practices of terror. The everyday lives of poor people classified Coloured, too, was unstable, albeit in different ways, and despite the relative protections of state grants and housing subsidies offered by the apartheid state, many—including those resident in The Park—fell outside its interventions.

In 1991, the Human Sciences Research Council recommended the formation of a “transit camp” to consolidate “homeless people” in the Hottentot’s Holland into one large camp before their removal to a designated informal settlement. The female leadership of The Park resisted attempts at evictions by a variety of means, mobilizing church groups, journalists, civic associations and rights NGOs, and human rights lawyers. A leadership NGO offered legal training and support for the leadership. A community committee was established, consisting largely of women, that negotiated with landlords and the council when the new postapartheid state policy regarding provision of housing to the poor was made. Negotiations included what they called “blackmailing” the council by refusing to leave the site designated for a high-end gated residential estate until housing nearby was secured. Eventually, with strong support from the then-minister of the state’s Reconstruction and Development Programme, they were able to win rights to residence and to move “as a community” into The Village at the turn of the millennium. A story of refusals, resistances, and accommodations made in community’s name, the process produced access to houses and sanitation for most residents of The Park and with it incorporation into new forms of subject life as rates-responsible citizens of the metropolis. Within a few months, most people were in arrears with the city, owing amounts for water, refuse collection, and sanitation provision that have quickly compounded, rebates notwithstanding. Interestingly, despite campaigns to Do the Right Thing, indebtedness to the state seems not to be considered a relation of indebtedness per se, and the obligation to pay these bills seems not to carry the same moral weight as settling one’s local obligations.

The residents were very poor. Few had regular work, relying on “piece work” (odd jobs), casual work, seasonal work, extended networks of often fraught relations of debt and reciprocity within the settlement, and state grants. As elsewhere in the Cape, women’s employment (usually as domestic work-ers), while bringing in less income than men’s, was more reliable, and women were generally the core around which households formed. Many people were ill and, especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s when antiretrovirals (ARVs) were not available, died young. (In this sense, one might argue that the South African state was biopolitical in the ways that Agamben [1998] describes.) Drugs and alcohol, as in earlier eras (see R. Ross 1999) were important means through which people escaped everyday trials. Interpersonal violence, especially domestic violence, was common. Everyday rhythms and routines were hard won and fragile. Striving to develop and remain in meaningful relationships in conditions of material want that militated against them, people, particularly women, generated widespread networks of care and dependence that crosscut conventional household or family units and linked residents into relationships that secured the basic means of survival. One might characterize these as processes of con-viviality. Hyphenated here to emphasize the relation, it is an ethic that seeks to secure life, both life itself and “good life” as it is made through relationships. Used in this sense, con-viviality anticipates that being alive is at stake in social worlds and that it is accomplished alongside and through others. It does not necessarily anticipate peaceableness in or enjoyment of everyday relations as much of the literature on the topic (Illich 1976; Overing and Passes 2000) suggests. Rather, it extends a notion of alertness and liveliness to life’s contingency. Con-viviality thus includes awareness of the limits of life making, including violence of many kinds—interpersonal, symbolic and structural. In these conditions, residents strove to accomplish decent lives, to be (seen as) decent and respectable, to be responsible to and responsible for others in contexts that erode life’s possibilities. In this way, despite terrible hardships and death’s closeness, people crafted social life in the organic “messiness” of an illegal shantytown, struggled for and won residential rights, and moved to state-sponsored formal houses. They anticipated that “proper” housing would render them legible to respectable others in terms that would materialize their own decency and affirm their dignity.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme, the early blueprint for the postapartheid state, recognizes housing as a basic need. The model for recent housing provision has been informed by Hernando de Soto’s (2000) ideas about providing the poor with capital for development. Given the broadly neoliberal context into which South Africa transitioned, it is not surprising that such ideas have been powerful, but they are contentious, not least for their emphasis on capital and individual property ownership (see Cousins et al. 2005; P&D 2007). In 2000, the state was found to have a constitutional obligation to provide adequate shelter on precisely the grounds of dignity, itself the first founding value of the

7. An imaginary line that secured the Western part of the Cape Province for “Coloured” labor.
8. South Africa has an extensive grant program that currently supports some 16 million people. In December 2013, almost 11,500,000 grants were disbursed in various forms of child assistance, mostly the Child Care Grant of R300 (ca. US$30; Children Count-Abantuwa Babalulekile 2014).
constitution.” In residents’ imaginations, as in that of the court and the state, housing was central to creating individual dignity and reconstructing society.

Representation and Life

For residents, ordentlikheid thus offered both a critique of the erosions of dignity in everyday life in The Park and an aspirational horizon. Leaders took ordentlikheid seriously: it offered a means to secure a sense of dignity in the face of disparagement by those who lived outside the community, often including their own families. As one leader, Sandra, put it, “People will see that we are not our houses [i.e., shacks].”

The difference between representation and life that Sandra describes exercised many people. Conversations often circled around it, and the trope of decency became a central model with which people imagined their futures as respectable and accepted members of society. (That their status as such was even in question is indicative of the ways that they had internalized the negative judgments of others.) The difference took concrete form when they completed application forms for state subsidies that would secure their place in The Village. Household formation in impoverished contexts is, as I have suggested above, often contingent, with households forming around available resources rather than, as the middle-class “common sense” that informs planning policy would have it, around kinship or affinal relationships in the first instance. People are absorbed into one another’s households in multiple ways—as lovers, laborers, boarders, and fictive kin, among others. Children may be absorbed informally or formally. Formal absorption involves the state, either through practices of state-sanctioned fosterage (in which foster parents are legally appointed and receive a state grant of R800 [approximately US $80] per month, revisited every 2 years until the child is 18) or adoption (in which case guardians are unassisted). There are also many informal ways in which children are completely or partially absorbed into other households. From early on, children weave complex networks that cross-stitch institutions and relationships. They might receive food in one household while sleeping in another; their schooling costs might be met by one set of people in a network while others attend to different needs. These networks are fluid. They are not necessarily reliable over time. They do not necessarily overlap with those of others in their homes; children borne of the same mother (the key facet in how people recognize kinship) and residing in the same household might have quite different networks. Sometimes children may be completely absorbed into a household for many years, becoming in effect kin and treated as such. At other times, older children, particularly teens, might work their networks, shifting constantly.

These strategies are not uncontentious. Conditions are fraught, means limited, and often tempers fray. But the fact of their existence suggests that there is tremendous social investment in “making live” and that investment does not rest solely in kinship or the state. This was clearly demonstrated in The Village in mid-2010, when a new social worker began to implement measures to remove children from homes where they were exposed to neglectful or abusive situations. The in situ state-backed organization Oog op die Kind (Eye on the child), run by two female volunteers resident in the community, had identified several children as being “at risk.” They were responsible for monitoring such children, providing backup social and emotional resources and a place of safety, and referring them to the state’s social development workers. However, direct intervention by social workers and the removal of several children from their homes to state facilities or “better” homes elsewhere had led to accusations that the children were part of a personal vendetta by the volunteers against specific mothers, and the entire organization was at risk as a result of the emergent distrust.

Community leaders were worried. They agreed that children should not remain in situations in which they were at risk, but they were concerned that the children were being removed from their community and social networks. Their complete removal also meant that more stable households in the community could not obtain foster grants to care for the children—grants that sustained their own social networks. Unlike in the models of the nuclear and extended family that continue to inspire social work practice in South Africa, community leaders knew that children develop wide-ranging social relationships that link them across households. Operating with a tangible sense of the survival skills of young people, leaders were clear about the responsibilities and failings of parents and guardians and were also alert to the experimental modes through which children facilitated their access to and were absorbed into social networks. They were concerned that children should retain at least some contact with caregivers, especially mothers (even where they acknowledged neglect and abuse), in the name of love and belonging, and at the same time secure children’s well-being as full members of the community; as its citizens. They held that children should remain in “the community” if those responsible for them failed them, thus holding relatively intact their social networks while mitigating neglect or abuse. To their way of thinking, it was in the best interests of the child to bolster rather than sever local caring relationships and to hold children within the community rather than render them to the state. The ensuing anxieties, debates, and discussions demonstrate the extent to which survival and well-being are envisaged as

9. In Government of the Republic of South Africa v. Irene Grootboom and others, CCT 11/00 (decision, October 2000), premising its deliberations on the value of human dignity, the court found that the complainants had a right to adequate shelter and that the state was obligated to provide such in its absence. It was a landmark case, the first time that the state’s obligation to second- and third-generation human rights received validation in the Constitutional Court, and it instituted the relationship between rights and dignity (Sachs 2009).

10. Foster care grants are awarded to more than 500,000 people, 20% of whom are over the age of 60.
community activities and responsibilities, not merely those of individual parents or guardians or of the state alone.

The question of responsibility for making live and letting die became even clearer in relation to care for the dying. At a time when ARVs were not available, rates of death, already high among the poor, rose dramatically, putting the question of care squarely on the table. In one terrible instance, one of my assistants, Robyn, was called to a house in which lay a man, Billy, suffering terminal cancer. He had been sent home from the hospital to die. His family was revolted by his illness. Slowly they withdrew their care, eventually leaving him alone and unattended. When Robyn found him, he had not been cared for or cleaned for many hours. He was alone, soiled, scarcely coherent, and in great pain. She called for assistance from Janine, another assistant, and some neighbors, and they began to clean him. He died an agonized death some days later. Many were incensed at how his family had treated him, abandoning him to death. “Where were the people who were supposed to look after him? It was their duty to look after him…. If you are going to leave that person to perish, then he’ll die for sure” was how one neighbor put it. Neighbors were furious and embarrassed that strangers—Robyn and Janine—had to take on the burden of care. Members of his family were avoided when news of their failure emerged. His wife (who died a few years later) and stepdaughter (who left The Village under duress) were both alcohol dependent. This was common in the settlement, but the fact that they were drinking in a shebeen (an informal tavern) while Billy was dying in the private space of the home infuriated neighbors in its flagrant disregard for ideals of care, of gendered comportment, of the proper division of public and private and the gendered activities associated with each. The women of Billy’s family were widely disparaged for their failure to care for him, and many considered them indecent, rou, or, as one woman put it, “unfit to live in a house.”

Being “fit to live in a house” involves the conversion of life’s rawness and the “messiness” of living “in the bush” to modes of proper appearances and sociabilities. It is strongly gendered work, and, as I have shown above, it involves practices of care that extend beyond biological relatedness (which people consider to be the ideal basis of obligation even though it frequently fails as such). People’s emotional, social, and economic relationships thus tied them into social networks that extended beyond the ostensible household boundaries that were the measure for the allocation of “housing units.” Nevertheless, residents had to fix the flows of life in and out of households and render them schematically in order to qualify for housing subsidies and thus the opportunity to materialize their dreams of living respectable lives in proper houses. Doing so required creative ways of working with the flexibility of their circumstances and relationships to represent arrangements that were legible to the state. These have enduring legal consequences. The stakes of the paperwork were high. People who did not qualify for housing subsidies were literally rendered homeless in the process because the shantytown was razed when the move was effected.12

Enormously complicated sets of social relations that were both melded and fractured by people’s prior histories of relationship and need were reformulated by the demand to be legible to the state in order to enable them to live a desirable form of life. These processes have caused their own difficulties in property’s afterward: as people die or terminate their relationships, the question of what to do with and about formal property relations is complicated by prior, sometimes socially inadmissible, histories and complex social forms that are not recognized by the state in ways that residents hold to be moral.13

An example demonstrates all of the issues described above. Meidjie was one of the two girls to whom Raw Life, New Hope (F. Ross 2010) is dedicated. Small and fragile, I suspect she had foetal alcohol syndrome,14 a common affliction in a population that has lived and worked on the Cape’s wine farms—a legacy of the dop system. Her father had left her and her mother, Susan, when she was small. Susan had moved in with an older man, Price, whom Meidjie came to call “Pa” (Dad). Susan and Price separated, and Susan left the settlement, leaving Meidjie in Price’s sister Baby’s care. Baby, upset that Meidjie might become a weggoookkind (throwaway child, abandoned child), took her in, and Meidjie’s status changed to grootraakkind—someone “grown big” by the efforts of non-kin, here, Baby, whom she called “Ouma” (Granny; note the differentiation—Price and Baby are siblings, yet socially they appear to Meidjie as of a different generation). Price lived alone. Meidjie lived with Baby.

When it became clear that people from The Park were to move to The Village, Price and Baby, both of whom were two of the original boslapers who had established the site, having come there from Aberdeen in the Karoo, found themselves at risk of dispossession. They did not qualify for housing subsidies because—technically—neither had dependents. Baby’s children were grown and had households of their own, and Price lived alone. Community leaders solved the problem creatively by listing Meidjie as Price’s dependent

11. In 2000, average life expectancy at birth was estimated at 52% for men and 54% for women (Bradshaw et al. 2003).

12. Note the contradiction here: the process of providing shelter and dignity and producing a population “fit to live in a house” generated homelessness as its remainder. People who did not receive subsidies had limited alternative options, and several of them ended up living and working on “Busy Street”; i.e., they became “vagrants.”

13. For example, a woman’s current partner may not necessarily know about children born from her earlier relationships, especially if they were born when she was still attending school. The latter are often raised by the birth mother’s mother as though they were her own offspring. It can cause considerable social and emotional complexity when these relationships are revealed.

14. The Western Cape has one of the highest rates of alcohol use and foetal alcohol syndrome in the world.
(though she bears no formal relation to him and was not residing with him) and naming one of Baby’s grandchildren as Baby’s dependent. Both received houses. Meidjie moved with Baby; Price moved into his own home and was soon joined by his new lover, a woman widely regarded as being ordeentlik.

Meidjie meanwhile, by now teenaged, “became wild.” She left school, “liked good things,” and was “stubborn”—a common complaint about youth in the settlement and often a signal that adults will no longer take responsibility for them. Within a short time, she stopped living at Baby’s full time and began sex work on a stretch of road some distance away, returning intermittently.

When Price died not long after the move to the new houses, Meidjie came home. The community was split over her rights: legally as his “dependent,” she was entitled to the house Price had shared with his lover. The latter, however, was a “decent woman,” and Meidjie’s actions were considered shameful. Community leaders sided with Price’s lover in her struggle to remain in the house and to inherit.

At the same time, Meidjie’s father Michael was released from jail after serving a term for gang-related murder. He came to the settlement and demanded access to Price’s house on the grounds that Meidjie was yet too young to inherit despite the fact that he had played no active role in Meidjie’s life and indeed had been absent from most of it.

Meidjie left The Village, and some years later she was found having been raped and gruesomely murdered; an object in a gang war. Michael identified her body and arranged for a burial, cruelly denying Baby any opportunity to attend a funeral and grieve. In retaliation, community leaders denied Michael access to the house and “reallocated” it—for a fee—to Price’s lady friend, on condition that she offer assistance to the dying.

Abandonment and Care

That Meidjie was absorbed into Baby’s household and care network is indicative of the efforts people make to care and of the deep anxieties that surround the possibility of being weggooimense; abandoned, discarded people, a stereotype that quickly attaches to those living in informal housing.

Weggooi indexes deep social fears shaped by personal and historical experiences of the nearness of exposed living despite, at least in the case of “Coloured” people, the interventions of the apartheid state in the relational spheres of work and family. Under apartheid, as Laurine Platzky and Cheryl Walker (1985) have shown, the imbrication of racial classification and capitalism produced “surplus people,” the cheap labor source on which South Africa’s economy was (and remains) built (Wolpe 1972). Many of the people about whom I write had intimate experience with being categorized and produced in this way. The small percentage of isiXhosa speakers resident in The Park had come from former homelands during the last years of apartheid, seeking better opportunities in the city. In so doing, they were already struggling against apartheid’s definitions of the urban, entitlement, and belonging. Afrikaans speakers, defined as Coloured in terms of the Population Registration Act of 1950 and entitled by the provisions of the Coloured Labour Preference Area Policy of 1955 to first priority in work opportunities in the Cape Province, were nevertheless subject both to forced removals in terms of the Group Areas Act of 1954 and to loss of security on the commercial farms in the fruit-growing region of the cape or the sheep-rearing dry interior regions in addition to discriminatory regulations. Women in particular had bitter experiences of expulsion from farms. It was common practice only to employ men permanently and to use women and children as casual laborers during the harvest. When men died or left farms, women and their children often lost access to the houses that were part of men’s employment contracts. Some women also found themselves expelled from social networks when they became pregnant too early. For all of these residents, the experience of being weggooi thus rested on highly gendered social processes.

Many of the residents had already fallen through the (often exceedingly thin) social networks of family and state support and, with limited employment opportunities, were perilously close to a form of life by which an elite would mark them as weggooi. A few had lived on the streets, or more accurately, alongside the city’s storm drains and in bush areas, surviving on occasional handouts and skarelling (of which, more below). Highly stigmatized, street life is the negative pole on decency’s scale, a physical reminder of the closeness of routheid. In Cape Town, people who live on streets are generally defined as homeless even where they have resided in an area for a long time. They are commonly called bergies (shortened from bergbewoner, mountain dwellers), a disparaging reference to their apparent lack of settled accommodation and their reliance on whatever the environment affords. They eschew this term, referring to themselves rather as “drifters.” A mode of urban life one might characterize as experimental, even the very poor abjure it, seeing it as morally degenerate. The assessment has deep historical roots. South Africa, as other colonies, has long seen homelessness and lack of formal employment as a problem to be solved (see Iliffe 1987). Indeed, in terms of the Caledon Code of 1809, implemented to counter native indolence and trekboer barbarity toward slaves and Khoi (Dooling 2005:53), Khoi people were required to have a fixed abode and carry a pass showing their employment should they move. The code was one of the precursors to the various acts that culminated in apartheid’s infamous influx control mechanisms. Those in breach were classified as vagrants and could be set to work (see Dooling 2005). In effect, the code made some forms of mobility crimes and rendered additional labor for the colonial regime. As Dooling (2005) notes, beyond this, the code marked the final step in the transformation from an inde-
pendent peoples into 'Hottentots'; that is, subjugated Khoi-khoi in the permanent and servile employ of white settlers” (53). While Ordinance 50 of 1828 abolished the code for the free and the Khoi, it nevertheless allowed colonial authorities to put “vagrants” (including Khoi) to work. Thus, the link between homelessness, respectability, and work has a long and violent history in colonial governance. This endures in stereotypes that anticipate that radical material deprivation hosts the social deprivities of idleness, addiction, and lust and that overwrite both the complex relations and dependen-
cies that drifters create in their seminomadic urban lives and the historical processes that have produced this form of life.

Abjuration may also serve as a mode of distancing. For many of the residents of The Village, the ultimate degradation is to end up as a bergie—someone they characterize as unable to care for themselves, whose primary dependence is thought to be on alcohol or drugs rather than on people, and whose mode of life brings “the bush” too close. While sometimes accurate, these are incomplete accounts. Nevertheless, res-
idents describe this as having life but not fully living. In other words, a life worthy of the name is created by being depend-
ent, albeit precariously, on others. Such dependence must be nurtured through extremes of passions and circumstances. Maintaining relationships is central to survival, to a sense of oneself as a person, and to one’s sense of belonging. People thus exert considerable effort to conform to hegemonic so-
cial ideals of propriety, attempting to mark their distance from destitution. This was so even where doing so undercut their own well-being, as, for example, when employed women married and left their jobs in order to conform to a highly valued model of respectable wifehood (F. Ross 2010:114–115; Versfeld 2012; Waldman 2007:199). Whereas an elite would characterize such behavior as a foolish waste of resources and possibilities, the women saw themselves as crafting dignified social worlds for themselves and, by extension, their kin and affines (see also Bank 2011).

Destitution and Dependency

Despite wide-ranging poverty and the diverse forms of state assistance offered by the postapartheid state, overt expres-
sions of destitution were experienced as humiliating, asso-
ciated as they were with a disparaged mode of life. Given this symbolic context, the hand-to-mouth nature of everyday life was something to be managed and disguised if possible. The failure to do so is read as a failing of decency, as the following example demonstrates.

Sakeena came into the community center despondent. A 27-year-old mother to five children, including 5-month-old twins, neither she nor the children’s father, Jonathan, is em-
ployed. Jonathan works as a casual laborer, intermittently find-
ing “piece jobs” that bring in about R300 per week if he is lucky. They live in a “wendy-house” (colloquialism for a small wooden house in a backyard) in Jonathan’s grandmother’s yard. Five other wendy-houses fill all the available yard space, a different household in each. Sakeena pays R300 per month in rental and estimates her water and electricity usage to cost about R200 per week. She receives a state child grant of R300 each for the three older children but has not yet registered the twins. She has tried to breast-feed the babies but strug-
gles. New state policy on exclusive breast-feeding means that she can no longer access free formula from the clinic. Both she and Jonathan, like many others in the area, are habit-
ual alcohol users, although Sakeena is trying to stop drink-
ning. For the preceding few days there had been no food in the house, and Jonathan had had no work. Their oldest chil-
dren, two boys, attend primary school, and in the afternoons and evenings they visit friends and neighbors who give them food. Their 5-year-old daughter and the twins stay with her throughout the day. Their sixth child died of kwashiorkor 5 years ago. Sakeena is well known to the clinic staff, center staff, and social workers.

On the day in question, she said, the twins were hungry, and as she only had water and weak tea to give them, they were querulous and she was tired, hungry, and anxious—
semuweekaatig (nervous, jumpy), as it is locally known. She had been around the neighborhood looking for “a char” (dom-
tic work) for which she would be paid about R100. She had
had no luck. In the past, she had run “a credit” at the little shop her husband’s cousin ran from a shelter at the main house, but they had become overindebted, and the facility was closed. She felt she could not ask her immediate neigh-
16. A means through which social opprobrium operates to limit de-
pendence, gossip is a terrible leveler. It undermines personhood and may even produce violence when people take others’ words at face value and react accordingly (F. Ross 2010:160–163).
Although in common use among poor Afrikaans speakers, skarrel retains its rough edge, a term that cuts not because it indexes poverty per se but because it is a marker that one is no longer properly able to maintain the webs of relationships on which everyday care, and indeed survival, depend in such conditions. A clear indicator that one is “on the edge,” desperate, one’s welcomes worn thin and relationships eroded, skarrelng puts one’s personhood into question. Undertaken by women, it brings one—and by implication, one’s family—close to rouheid, a state understood to be an attribute of the person, not a consequence of a cruel political economy that shapes social circumstances. Violence is compounded when women are abused for having “failed” to live up to social expectations.

Personhood is central to the management of debt and dependence. Dependence on the state (e.g., for social grants and indigence assistance) and indebtedness to it (e.g., rates arraers, school fees, hospital bills, etc.) are differently weighted to dependence on and indebtedness to one’s neighbors. It is tempting to assume that this is simply a function of proximity: face-to-face versus more distant relations. And indeed, this does seem to be part of the picture, but it is not all of it. Questions of personhood are central to securing life. People attempt to manage carefully their relations so as to differentiate “borrowing” from “being in debt.” Borrowing and lending involve judicious assessments of the quality of social relationship and the likelihood of repayment. A borrowing relationship, even if persistently one sided, assumes that the partners are at least potentially equals. Overborrowing produces indebtedness, a relation to be eschewed because it both sets up a formal hierarchy of obligation and erodes the possibilities of restoring a more equal relationship over time. Extended indebtedness to neighbors is considered humiliating and shameful.

Where one is unable to establish or maintain borrowing relations, recourse is limited. Many use their state grants as surety for loans offered by local loan sharks (often linked to gang structures) that, despite the National Credit Act’s regulation of interest rates,17 may attract very high rates of interest, often enforced by (the threat of) violence.

James Ferguson (2013) argues that given radical inequality, where limited work opportunities undercut possibilities of crafting valued forms of social personhood, there is a need to rethink the liberal discomfort with dependence. He suggests that as men’s labor becomes less central to the economy and their roles in social reproduction become increasingly insecure, an alarming “in-dependence” (Ferguson 2013:230) is produced along with radical transformations in gender and generational roles, the latter facilitated in part by access to state grants. While I broadly agree with the thesis, the data I present above suggest that we need to think about dependence and indebtedness and the possibilities and constraints they offer as people craft life from state and household resources.

Raw Life, Bare Life

In conditions of dire poverty such as those that characterized The Village, physical and social deaths are close. Hunger and want shape bodies, capabilities, relationships, and possibilities. Poverty and desire rub against one another, producing inflammatory and corrosive contexts in which life itself is at stake. Giorgio Agamben’s analysis of power, in particular, his understanding of the distinction between “zoe” (bare life) and “bios” (qualified life), offers one way to think through the ethnographic particulars described here, especially as there seems on the surface to be a correspondence between the modalities of life people describe as “raw” and Agamben’s “bare” life. In the model of power Agamben describes, living and its limits are less by human life cycle and relations of dependency than by biopolitical practice.

As Rabinow and Rose (2006) point out, his argument has been taken up in a wide range of ways in the literature in recent years. However, as they also argue, it tends to exclude the range of biopower’s effects that Foucault identifies and to overestimate both the prevalence and centrality of bare life and governmentality in modernity. This is not to say that the notion of bare life is necessarily lacking in analytic value. João Biehl (2005) has argued that practices of what he calls “social triage”—both formal and informal—in Brazil do render some lives more valuable than others and do produce an “excess population” that is relegated to the margins, abandoned to a form of life that, he suggests, carries no political or indeed social meaning; lives to which no rights attach. Drawing on Agamben’s notion of “zones of indistinction,” he describes one such site, Vita, as a “zone of abandonment.” Inhabitants of Vita are those whom society cannot absorb, abandoned at the outskirts, left to live through and with the limited possibilities available in contexts where one’s body, relationships, and language—and therefore the meanings one can make and that are made about one—are unreliable. Vita is a horrifying demonstration of the processes and effects of social triage, in which human relationships, histories, and connections are rendered bare and exempt from ordinary patterns of care. Carefully tracing this process as it materialized in the life of his interlocutor, Caterina, Biehl shows how these processes render her life utterly precarious. Indeed, with trepidation and horror, he identifies both her and those similarly relegated as “ex-humans.”

Many of the people with whom I have worked have experienced similar forms of social triage, but there is one considerable difference between their experiences and those of the residents of Vita. In the cases I have described, people sought to expand their repertoires of care and to absorb loss and suffering in relation to a concept of “community” operationalized through the ideal of respectability set in distinc-

17. There are 10.3 million registered taxpayers in South Africa and 20 million recorded credit-active consumers, almost half of whom have impaired credit records (NCR 2013:S: 1.5 million people are blacklisted).
tion to raw life. In the context of postapartheid reforms, this has enabled them to attract and receive state care, especially in the form of state-sponsored housing grants and more recently in access to life-saving medicines such as ARVs. In other words, the material suggests that the simple binary between bare life (zoe) and political life (bios) needs revision, particularly in former colonies, where politics was founded on control over the domestic rather than on the exclusion of the domestic from politics as in the model Agamben describes.

Indeed, as Veena Das (2006) notes, the apparent bareness of life represented by the writ of habeas corpus that Agamben claims as the basis of governmentality and the politics it produces is called into question in the colonial context, where “taken-for-granted notions of nature and culture had to be explicitly articulated in the context of subjects whose integration into the law was mediated by the notion of custom, as well as for citizens who were domiciled away from metropolitan centers” (96). Reading cases of habeas corpus from the Indian colonial archive, she shows that legal decisions by colonial authorities did not rest on a notion of the body as pure bare life but on an idea of an already fully social being: the body called forth by habeas corpus was a gendered and aged person embedded in and produced by social relations rather than a body per se. She argues, “even when the law is demanding a body to be produced before it, this body is already constituted as a socio-legal subject rather than a natural body” (Das 2006:95). In other words, her argument offers a means to think beyond the totalizing framing of power that Agamben offers to the particularities of actual cases as they appeared before the law.

Drawing inspiration from Das’s careful rendition of historical cases, I have paid attention here to the specifics of ordinary lives as they are enabled and rendered in recent South African history. The link between the two possible forms of life—rawness and decency—that shaped social imaginaries in the period I examine lies in the continuities of capitalism as historically racialized and now framed in the ideology and practices of what Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) identifies as “late liberalism.” The modes of living that are invoked are not solely a product of sovereign power’s distinction between qualified and bare life, as Agamben’s argument suggests, but are products of and effectuated through everyday practices of relationship as these materialize the raw/decent distinction. This suggests a genealogy of bareness that is deeply embedded in local ways of understanding persons, relationships, history’s effects, and life’s possibilities. In other words, rawness and decency are fully social modes of being, produced and lived in the ordinariness of everyday worlds as they are shaped under the press of different political regimes, historical processes, cultural models, and the everyday social interactions they make possible.

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Poverty beyond Disaster in Postinvasion Iraq

Ethics and the “Rough Ground” of the Everyday

by Hayder Al-Mohammad

Focusing on two ethnographic vignettes, I draw attention to the lives of Iraqis in poverty as not merely caught in the forms and structures of tribal obligations and sectarianism and the violence and destruction of terror but also in the “rough ground” of mundane affairs and encounters. I argue that in the overlappings and relations of lives and intentionalities resides an intercorporeal ethics of the rough ground of the everyday. An ethics of the rough ground of the everyday is one understood in terms of the ways in which life is not only open to the pain, suffering, joy, and ennui of others but also how in the entanglements and relations of lives with other lives in the everyday, lines of care and concern emerge, are fostered, and are also frayed. Such relations, I suggest, form the background of different forms of sociality and politics much ignored in the social and political sciences.

I was the first of my family to return to Iraq since we left during the early skirmishes of the Iran-Iraq War in 1982.1 It was the summer of 2005, and I entered Iraq via Kuwait because my intended destination was Basra, only an hour or so by car from the border. I was meant to stay with my uncle on my mother’s side and his family. However, it was the height of summer, when the heat exceeds 45°C almost daily, and the women of the family would be required to cover up in my presence. I could not bear the idea of making a family barely knew even more uncomfortable in that intolerable heat, nor did I want to impose on a household I knew to be struggling financially.

Instead of staying with my uncle, I decided to stay in a hotel near the center of Basra. Friends and family knew I was coming to Iraq, but none were told the date of my arrival, as my plans were constantly changing. When I arrived at the center of Basra, I searched briefly till I found a hotel and checked in. As soon as I was in my room, I called my father in London to tell him of my safe arrival and where I was staying. He thought I had done the right thing going to a hotel and not staying with my uncle, saying it was “best to stay away....They have too many problems.” I put the phone down and began to unpack. I had joked with a few of the hotel workers as I was checking in and already felt somewhat at ease in my new environment. I turned on the small television in my room to watch the news as I unpacked. “A series of explosions have rocked the center of Baghdad. . . . Battles ongoing in Najaf. . . . A spate of kidnappings in Nassiyah.” The news was always the same in those days.

After a brief period of time, my mobile phone rang. I looked at the number and, to my surprise, it was a local one. Who could have my number? I answered with trepidation, “Hello?” and the response was, “Hayder? I’m downstairs.”

That was the call. I had no idea who it was and must admit to being confused and slightly worried at the time. I took the stairs from the first floor to the ground floor hoping to catch a glimpse of who the caller might be. I did not recognize anyone out of the two or three people who sat in the lobby. From behind a pillar a middle-aged man jumped out at me, almost screaming: “Hayder?! . . . Give your uncle a kiss. What are you, English? Your father is a great man. . . . Your mother, she was too good for that man. . . . You’re fat . . . too fat. . . . What’s the matter with you?”

That was Abu-Hibba. He was 60 years old or so when I first met him. I found out later that my father had called Abu-Hibba immediately after speaking to me and sent him to check to see how I was, what the hotel was like, and the response was, “What is Basra like? What is the matter with you?”

Abu-Hibba immediately after speaking to me and sent him to check to see how I was, what the hotel was like, and the response was, “What is Basra like? What is the matter with you?”

Abu-Hibba had a shop opposite the one my father ran from the late 1960s till 1979. Abu-Hibba and my father were friends; they had not seen or heard from each other since 1979, when my father left Basra to live in Baghdad and eventually flee the country, till a week before I arrived in Basra. My father had managed to acquire Abu-Hibba’s family had owned a shop opposite the one my father ran from the late 1960s till 1979. Abu-Hibba and my father were friends; they had not seen or heard from each other since 1979, when my father left Basra to live in Baghdad and eventually flee the country, till a week before I arrived in Basra. My father had managed to acquire Abu-Hibba’s and several others of his friends’ telephone numbers from Basrans living in London in order to tell them of my arrival. As soon as my father spoke to Abu-Hibba and told him I was in Basra, he arrived at my hotel.

1. I have been conducting fieldwork in Iraq since the summer of 2005.
Abu-Hibba took great care of me during those initial weeks when I first visited Basra. He checked on me daily by coming to visit me under almost any circumstance, even when rival gangs and militias were doing battle near the hotel. He opened his home and family to me; his family problems became my problems, and when good news came to them, I was one of the first they called to tell.

A few weeks after our initial encounter, I was walking with Abu-Hibba, eating ice cream in the evening, and thanked him for his kindness and generosity. He responded with irritation in his voice: “You need to understand one thing: you’re one of us. You’re part of our family. Anything you want we will do for you, even if we can’t, we’ll try. Your father and I grew up together. We were beaten up together. We fought and argued with each other. When your father left, a part of Basra went with him. None of us ever forgot him. We shared a life your father and I. We fell in love and got married to our wives at the same time and shared in each other’s lives and happiness; that never gets forgotten, no matter how many years you and your father have been away. Your life is connected [marboot] with ours...so don’t thank...ever.”

It has been in such conversations and moments that I have increasingly come to feel there is an account to be given of how in the overlappings and relations of lives and intentionalities resides an ethics of care in the “rough ground” of the everyday. Such an ethics repeats Wittgenstein’s critique of the philosophy of language of his time in which the rarefied conceptual clarity of works by figures such as Frege and Russell and the Vienna Circle unmoored language from the everyday. In Wittgenstein’s words, “We have got onto slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal; but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk; so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!” (2007 [1953]: §107; emphasis in original). Hence, if in the philosophy of language we have to return language to where it is used and made intelligible, then an ethics of the rough ground of the everyday would be one in which ethics is neither judged nor understood against an ideal of the Good, or extracontextual, imperatives. Rather, an ethics of the rough ground of the everyday is one understood in terms of the ways in which life is not only open to the pain, suffering, joy, and ennui of others but also to how, in the entanglements and relations of our lives with other lives in the everyday, lines of care and concern emerge, are fostered, and also fray. Such an ethics—which resides in living-in-action, that is, as phenomenologically, experientially, and sensibly grounded—points to an obscure and dynamic understanding of social life in the south of Iraq whose horizon is not determined or limited by categories such as kinship, tribalism, Islam, and sectarianism.

Much research on Iraq since the invasion of 2003 has focused on the implications of the collapse of the Ba’athist regime (Barakat 2005; Bensahel 2008; Ismael and Ismael 2005), the incoherence of the strategic ambitions of the occupying forces (Allawi 2007; Boyle 2009; Katzman 2009), the rise of gender inequality and violence (Al-Ali 2005; Al-Jawaheri 2008; Cardosa 2007), the destructiveness of terrorist attacks, and the emergence and rise of militia and gang violence within Iraq (Al-Mohammad 2011a). Academic and journalistic accounts that have insisted on highlighting the breakdowns, suffering, and destruction of the country have often ignored the much more complex imbrications of violence, struggles, poverty, life, and the everyday that are not necessarily exposed or do not become manifest in the devastation of terrorist attacks or battles between militias and gangs. Borrowing from Wittgenstein the notion of the rough ground of the everyday (2007 [1953]: §107), in this paper I do not merely attempt to provide a corrective to some of the rather overblown rhetoric found in accounts of life in Iraq, nor do I merely turn to everyday life in Basra to give an account of some of the multiple ethical forms of coping and care that reside in everyday interactions (cf. Kwon 2010; Lambek 2010). Rather, I turn to the everyday as itself, where lives come together in complex ways and in which care and also neglect and violence ravel and unravel the entanglements of lives with other lives. Thus, I push ethnographically and theoretically for a broader understanding of ethics beyond one that happens to reside within the everyday or is merely an aspect of the everyday, and I also attempt to move beyond the dominant paradigm of an ethics of the self, or self-cultivation (cf. Al-Mohammad 2010b: 434–440).2

Turning to Iraq’s recent history below, I outline the context in which discourses about the social and moral breakdown of Iraq can be located in the political-economic shifts of the country and the rise of a volatile multitude of Iraq’s

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2. In the works of Saba Mahmood (2005) and Charles Hirschkind (2006), the important move was made to insist that ethics is not some anonymous imposition of body techniques that blindly form ethical beings in consonance with social norms of how one should carry oneself, act, and behave. Rather, ethical selves are actively made and cultivated by persons themselves; furthermore, a whole set of technologies, apparatuses, and discourses are in play in this active formation of an ethical self. However, one area that seems to have received little interest from anthropologists researching ethics is how one can think of an ethics of the “relationship” or the “with” of social life (cf. Al-Mohammad 2010b). The etymology of “ethics” is in sympathy with the focus on “selfhood,” particularly if one turns to the ancient Greek ἐθική, which is based on ἔθος, a person’s nature or disposition (Oxford English Dictionary). What is odd, however, is our ability as anthropologists to commit to a notion of human being as ex-centric (i.e., outside itself), or in the parlance of postmodernism, “de-centered,” spatially and temporally, interinvolved and intersubjective, yet our notion of ethics tends invariably toward and is centered on an ethics of the “self” or an ethics tied only to a specific institution (e.g., Cook 2010). Michael Lambek’s (2010) edited volume Ordinary Ethics is one of the more recent attempts to develop an ethics beyond social norms and rules and the ethics of the self. However, most of the essays in the volume do not engage with what an ethics of the “ordinary” itself might look like, focusing instead on aspects of the everyday to be engaged with in ethical terms.
poor (Boyle 2009). This focus on the breakdown and unraveling of life in Iraq is shown to limit our understanding of what problems and difficulties Iraqis have faced since the invasion of 2003, particularly those in financially precarious circumstances. In the subsequent two sections I turn to minor events and encounters between several Iraqis in their everyday lives that highlight some of the ethicality and openness of life to the lives of struggling others (Al-Mohammad 2012). These ethnographic vignettes develop a picture of life in postinvasion Iraq not caught solely in violence, the desperation of sectarian attacks, and poverty but in the complex imbrications and frictions of everyday lives making their way in the world. I end by briefly engaging with Erving Goffman’s (2010) study of how individual pedestrians are able to successfully maneuver their way in the city without bumping into others. Taking some of the critiques of Goffman’s privileging of sight over the body’s practical sense, I push for an understanding of the way in which people in Iraq make their way in the world as an intercorporeal and also an ethical experience.

The Unraveling of Life in Iraq?

On March 20, 2003, American forces stormed across the Kuwai ti border and began their race from the south of Iraq to Baghdad, having the day before employed Kuwaiti border and began their race from the south of Iraq making their way in the world. I end by briefly engaging with Erving Goffman’s (2010) study of how individual pedestrians are able to successfully maneuver their way in the city without bumping into others. Taking some of the critiques of Goffman’s privileging of sight over the body’s practical sense, I push for an understanding of the way in which people in Iraq make their way in the world as an intercorporeal and also an ethical experience.

The Unraveling of Life in Iraq?

On March 20, 2003, American forces stormed across the Kuwaiti border and began their race from the south of Iraq to Baghdad, having the day before employed “surgical air-strikes” on the suspected locations of Saddam Hussein and senior government officials. The bulk of the British forces were committed to securing the major strategic sites in the Basra governorate, such as Iraq’s only seaport, Umm Qasr, and the Rumaila oil field (one of the largest oil fields in the world), to prevent any major damage to oil reserves or infrastructure. Once secured, several brigades closed the two major road links from Basra to Baghdad to seal off the city from any organized threat from the Iraqi Army and then moved to capture the city as well (cf. Gordon and Trainor 2007:74–92). At the time there was an expectation that the heavily Shi’ite Basra would repeat in some form or another the 1991 post–Gulf War’s active and armed resistance against the Ba’athist regime (Cordesman and Davies 2008:93–98; Synnott 2008:106–109).

There are at least two reasons why such an outpouring of violence against the regime did not occur at the time of the invasion. First, Iraqis were not to repeat the costly mistake of the intifada of 1991, in which an army weary from the recently concluded 8-year war with Iran and returning home from the devastating defeat of the First Gulf War rose up against the Ba’ath regime emboldened by the soft rhetoric coming from Western governments, particularly the United States. Basra was the first city, on March 1, 1991, to challenge the Ba’ath regime. Karbala, Hilla, Nasiriyah, Amarah, Samawa, Kut, and Diwaniya also joined in, with the north of Iraq also staging its own uprising (Goldstein and Whitley 1992:29–65). That tens of thousands were brutally killed as the international community watched on was a chastening experience, and it indicated to many Iraqis that the British and Americans were not to be trusted (Davis 2005:231–233). However, even if Basrans and Iraqis more generally were able to trust their supposed emancipators, the Iraq of 2003 was not the Iraq of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Weeks after the end of the First Gulf War, a special UN mission to Iraq wrote a report stating the following: It should, however, be said at once that nothing that we had seen or read had quite prepared us for the particular form of devastation which has now befallen the country. The recent conflict had wrought near-apocalyptic results upon what had been, until January 1991, a rather highly urbanized and mechanized society. Now, most means of modern life support have been destroyed or rendered tenuous. Iraq has, for some time to come, been relegated to a pre-industrial age, but with the disabilities of post-industrial dependency on an intensive use of energy and technology.

Second, many Iraqis were not sure in those initial days that the Saddam government had been toppled and the Ba’athists neutralized. The Ba’athist regime had managed to inveigle its way into almost every aspect of life in the country—the privacy of home life included—and as weak and limited as the Ba’athists may have seemed to the international media and its consumers, Iraqis had granted Saddam an almost omnipotent-like quality (cf. Makiya 1989:270–275). Living under the totalitarianism of Ba’athism since 1968 and within the bubble and desperation of the war and sanction years, Iraqi friends and acquaintances of mine have described how they did not know what it was they wanted after Saddam had gone because many had given up hope that he and his family would ever leave power.

What did occur as soon as British forces had secured the city of Basra was the beginning of what became a national phenomenon: looting. Saddam had called the war of 2003 the “Harb Al-Hawasim” (i.e., the Final War); once the looting began, Iraqis immediately renamed the looted goods and those who stole and illegally built temporary homes on private or government land “al-hawasim.” Patrick Cockburn writes

force their dictatorial leader to step aside” (Dannreuther 1992:63). Exactly one month later, on March 1, 1991, the uprisings broke out with many Iraqis thinking they would receive financial and military support from the United States that ultimately they did not.

3. See Bisset (2003) for a conceptual and empirical debunking of the discourses of “surgical airstrikes” and “precision guided” weapons.

4. In his speech on February 1, 1991, President George H. W. Bush declared that the “Iraqis need to take matters into their own hands and
that the initial phase of the looting contained “a social revolutionary ferocity in the robbery and destruction that now swept the country” (2009:161). Along similar lines, criminologists Green and Ward (2009) have claimed that impoverished Iraqi looters targeted the homes of Ba’athist leaders both in acts of political revenge but also to satisfy long accumulated material needs. If there was an initial “revolutionary force” behind the criminality, it soon dissipated as organized gangs took over the thievery. Not to be left out, sectarian and political groups also joined the free-for-all, especially Muqtada Sadr’s own private militia, the Sadrists. By early May 2003 Muqtada Sadr (who publicly decried sectarian killings) issued the “al-hawasim” fatwah, decreeing that looters could retain their stolen property as long as they made a contribution of 20% of the value of the looted goods (khums) to their local Sadrist office. Many of the wealthier and more powerful Shi’ites drew the conclusion that al-Sadr was little more than a gang boss, and distinguishing between the “political” actions of the Sadrists and those of ordinary criminal gangs was not always easy.

Coming out of the horrendous experience of sanctions and the bombardment of the 2003 invasion, many Iraqis felt that the experience of widespread looting, the explosion in the number of murders and violence that seemed to have no explicit political aim, and the anti-Ba’athist vengeful focus that was being claimed by many journalists and commentators pointed to a moral corruption within Iraq itself. Statements such as “How else does someone like Saddam stay in power for so long if we aren’t somehow to blame as well?” became commonplace within the country, which pointed to either an inherent corruption within Iraqi social life itself or at least to a wide complicity of Iraqis themselves to sustain the brutality of Ba’athist violence. In more theological terms, friends would remark, “Who killed the Hussein?” referring to the fact that the Imam Hussein, the Prophet Mohammad’s grandson, was martyred in Iraq, signaling the long history of violence within the country and also the refusal to stand with “good” against “evil” by its citizens.

It is against the backdrop of the violence of militias, gangs, and terrorists and stories of the breakdown of the social in Iraq that I first arrived in Basra on that summer’s day in 2005. The heading of this section, “The Unraveling of Life in Iraq?” is taken from journalist Farnaz Fassihi’s (2009) book in which she recounts personal accounts of everyday life in the country at the peak of the violence. Stressing the violence, the breakdown in the sociopolitical apparatuses of everyday life, and the suffering that Iraqis have endured for decades, Fassihi, like many who have written on Iraq, gives a compelling account of how lives have unraveled under such pressures. But life has not stopped in Iraq; Iraqis do not make their way in the everyday as simply victims or dependent souls. More complex and nuanced stories are required of how life was still possible in Iraq after the invasion and how Iraqis and those outside the country contributed not only to the devastation but also to the conditions of life within the country.

Hence, beyond the stories of collapse, devastation, and moral uncertainty in Iraq’s recent history there are tales of connections, relations, and the entanglements of lives which are named in forms such as friendship and family, and modes of comporting to others such as care, attention, and even love, which have yet to become part of how one thinks and writes about life after the invasion. There are other relations and entanglements—which we have no satisfactory language for as anthropologists—that exist in our haphazard and contingent engagements in the hurly-burly of the everyday (Wittgenstein 1967:§567). It is this picture of the lives of Iraqis, as not caught in the forms and structures of tribal obligations and sectarianism and the violence and destruction of terror but in the rough ground of mundane affairs and encounters, that clears a space to think of the care and ethics of daily life in Iraq. Such a narrative, however, does not do away with the politics, suffering, and history of the country; it indicates, rather, the thinness of thinking only of the unraveling of life in Iraq without also accounting for its ravelings as well—ravelings that are not merely counterpoised with violence and suffering but that emerge from, through, and even against them.

It is important to clarify that the everyday here is not opposed to the eventful and the outbursts of violence and destruction. An ethics of everyday life seeks to move past the disjunction of events/moments and the everyday to allow for an appreciation of the everyday itself as eventful (Das 2007:6–9; Stewart 2007:16–19, 48, 98–99). Instead of life as such unraveling in postinvasion Iraq, specific forms of life, or complexes of entanglements, were certainly undone or became looser in those periods, particularly as tribal and sectarian and nonsectarian groups and gangs mobilized during the period of the collapse of the Saddam regime to gain power (cf. Al-Mohammad 2010a, 2011b; Dawod 2003). The rise and proliferation of Shi’ite, Sunni, and other political organizations and militias in Iraq after 2003 in no meaningful way translated into attempts to take on the vital work of securing basic forms of health care, security, or even basic provisions for the poorest in the country. Allied forces constituted reconstruction teams to aide with the transition to Iraqi self-determination and governance with mixed success and much controversy (Barakat 2005; Cardosa 2007; Ismael and Ismael 2005). However, if one turns to the everyday in Iraq, one can find small gestures, moments of kindness and care, that are not simply positive tales contained within the destruction of postinvasion Iraq but are the very grounds by which many Iraqis have been able to survive and live through the terror and uncertainty of the last decade.

It is this world of gestures, moments of recognition, small acts of generosity, and the slow intertwining of lives with other lives in the everyday that I now consider. The series of events and exchanges recounted below, which took place over several years, point to the precariousness and faintness of the ethics and care of everyday life that are not located in one
Lives Entangled and Ethics

One evening in the spring of 2009, Abu-Hibba chose not to join our group of friends for dinner. He rarely came with us to this particular restaurant even though the food is usually very good and we all know the owner and had become friends with the staff. Abu-Hibba had driven us in his old car to the restaurant and suddenly made his excuses to leave. We mocked him as we got out of his car for being too old at the age of 65 to stay out late in the evening. He ignored our comments and drove away. We had become used to Abu-Hibba not staying for dinner when we ate at this restaurant, so we quickly moved on to talk about the rise in the numbers of killings and crime in the city. Eventually, I got up to talk with the cook who stood over the grill to tell him of our order and to have a chat with him. We usually share a few jokes with one another and discuss the well-being of mutual friends in Basra. This evening was somewhat different. The cook, Abu-Sabar, asked to speak to me privately. We went round the back where nobody could hear us. “I need to see you tomorrow, it’s very important.” I asked what the matter was, but Abu-Sabar insisted it wait till tomorrow.

The next day I met Abu-Sabar at a friend’s shop. Immediately he took out a wad of Iraqi dinars and gave it to me. “I’ve seen you with Abu-Hibba all over Basra, I know you are very close to one another. A year or two ago I could not afford to pay my rent, and the landlord wanted to kick me and my family out onto the street. We lost whatever money we had . . . what could I do?” I interrupted Sabar asking what this had to do with me and Abu-Hibba. “I don’t know how Abu-Hibba heard about the problem, but he went and paid my rent behind my back. He did it for three months. It took me a long time to find out who did it . . . but it was him.” I was somewhat incredulous because I was aware of how little money Abu-Hibba had and how paltry the sum of money he received bimonthly for his pension was. I asked Abu-Sabar whether he knew Abu-Hibba well or was related to him. “No. We worked together in the Fertilizer Company for years . . . spoke to one another regularly. I knew him, of course . . . but we had no relationship outside work other than saying hello to one another if we bumped into each other in the market or at a wedding.”

That same day I went to Abu-Hibba’s home to give him his money. He looked at me and asked what the money was for. “It’s from a friend . . . Abu-Sabar.” Abu-Hibba shook his head: “He shouldn’t have given you this.” I joked with Abu-Hibba that if he had so much money to pay other people’s rent, maybe he could give me a few hundred dollars. Abu-Hibba has never been much for talking, but on this occasion he wanted me to know about what happened. A distant cousin of his whom I had met on several occasions was Abu-Sabar’s landlord. He had contacted Abu-Hibba to ask whether he knew of any possible tenants looking for a house to rent near old Basra because he was soon to evict Abu-Sabar and his family for not paying their rent. “When I talked to my wife and daughters, we all saw ourselves in their position. We just couldn’t eat knowing that they would be on the streets or hiding in a small shack—how could you expect us to let that happen? I’m not religious, Hayder . . . I’ve never prayed and I drink [alcohol] . . . But these people we’ve grown-up and lived with, we have to try to take care of each other as much as we can.”

In living with and sharing a life in the everyday of work, lines of care and interest emerge almost unrecognized. Abu-Hibba and Abu-Sabar came to know of each other through glances, or brief moments of interaction only, but in these meetings and encounters the slow entangling of their lives takes place. This entangling of lives—which manifests through interest, attention, or small gestures of politeness and which has no formal account as an ethics of the everyday within the social sciences—indicates movements, understandings, and encounters of lives that exist beyond the monopoly that Islam, sectarian and religious identities, or social forms and structures such as tribalism enjoy within studies of the Middle East. Not only is life something that cannot be merely encompassed by social and cultural institutions, ethics itself, as the inclination of life toward others, exists both before and beyond the forms of existence and the rationalizations of institutions (Baracchi 2008:7–9; Benson and O’Neill 2007). Levinas writes that at first philosophy, “ethics cannot itself legislate for society or produce rules of conduct whereby society might be revolutionized or transformed. . . . [Ethics] hardens its skin as soon as we move into the political world of the impersonal ‘third’—the world of government, institutions, tribunals, schools, committees, and so on” (Levinas and Kearney 1986:29–30). In the anthropology of ethics, which has raised to such prominence the institutional discourses and practices of self-formation, the everyday of life in Basra is one where violence and the struggles of militias and gangs also intersect with the movements of everyday life—care and interest, joy and monotony, and also the proximal frictions and tensions between friends, family members, and acquaintances.

Months later I was sitting and talking with Abu-Hibba and several friends about visiting the family of an acquaintance who had died the previous day. Abu-Talal, a middle-aged man who runs a small shop in Basra that sells stationery, talked of the wajab (duty) one had of paying respect to the deceased and his family. I recalled at the time Wilfred Sellars’s (1963) felicitous phrase “fraught with ‘ought’”—in social action and discourse, does there come a silent claim on the other?—but I remained quiet throughout the conversation, caught as I was briefly by my mental wanderings back to the academy. Abu-Hibba broke the late-afternoon torpor with a set of challenges: “Don’t any of you come to my funeral out of wajab. You’re absolved of that. I’ve buried a sister who raised me . . . showed me love. I buried two of my nephews whom I protected with my own life when our
house was under attack. I buried friends who were more important than any brother ever could be to me. I went to their funerals because they are all we have. What is my life without all of you here?” Almost correcting himself, Abu-Talal jumped in. He spoke of his heart disease, the fear he had of dying, but also that his death would be one that people dear to him would come to his funeral to grieve and remember him: “On this dirt and under this sky we’ve lived all our lives. . . . We suffered for decades, but also we cared for each other.”

The conversation moved on to how each person’s life relies on the faint and barely perceptible gestures, actions, and moves made to open possibilities for others or to shield loved ones and acquaintances from threat. But more than that, and much more difficult to locate, is the sense that their lives are caught up in the hopes, ambitions, and thoughts of others. A small gesture common among my Basran friends was to buy a bag of fruit or sweets and simply drop them off at someone’s house. One might say to a friend, “the apples looked good today, and we couldn’t enjoy them if you did not eat them as well.” It would be easy to think of the fruits or sweets as symbols or externalizations of the care one has for others; beyond such an understanding there is an indication that joy and pleasure do not merely reside within our own skin but are caught in the experiences of others intimate to us as well.6 This is one of the ways to understand Zygmunt Bauman’s (1989) theoretical framing when he suggests that “moral behaviour is conceivable only in the context of coexistence, of ‘being with others,’ that is, a social context” (180). That is, the claim of life being caught in the lives of others is not simply a metaphysical claim but more basically a claim of the ethicality of everyday sociality.

The Ethics and Intercorporeality of Everyday Life Trajectories

In his recent book, Edward Casey (2007) dedicates a chapter to the ethics of the glance as a way into thinking precisely about what an ethics of everyday life might be grounded in. Casey highlights the dynamics and responsiveness of everyday ethical life by, for instance, the way one’s attention is drawn by the sound of someone screaming or seeing someone unbalanced and about to fall. Such experiences can sometimes draw us outside of ourselves into states of affairs, situations, or to persons we might be able to help. Pretheoretically, the possibility of someone in need of help makes a claim on me; it asks, or maybe even demands, a response from me. Casey also draws attention to another ethical world usually hidden that passes us by in our everyday lives; not merely the world of interior psychological life, but the visible yet barely recognized movements and gestures of care, love, attention, and all the other faint inclinations of life toward the lives of others. Take, for instance, the example of someone holding the door open for another person, or the briefest of smiles as someone walks past another.

One of the ways to expand on Casey’s important intuitions about the ethicality of everyday life is through Erving Goffman’s (2010) acute analyses in Relations in Public. In his account of the rules and modes of conduct that govern pedestrians walking down a busy street, Goffman tries to locate the implicit norms and modes by which pedestrians avoid continually bumping into one another. Goffman argues pedestrians are, through varying forms, in continual communication with other pedestrians: they glance, move a shoulder, or avert their eyes if they simply want to maintain their own path. The body is used as a medium of expression to allow others on the street to see where one body wants to go (what Goffman calls “body gloss”; 2010:11) so that other bodies can modulate and respond to both avoid a collision and still maintain their own progression down the street.

Nick Crossley (1995) and Tim Ingold (2004) both give different expositions of Goffman’s failure to recognize the practical sense (sens practique) the body has of other bodies, achieved not through sight alone but an embodied, corporeal know-how. Thus, both Crossley and Ingold push for an understanding of social relations not as intersubjective but as intercorporeal. The intercorporeal understanding of the sociality of walking down the street also moves the story from rules and codes to bodily dispositions and inclinations that expose that there is a direct interrelation between my body and the other’s body. As important as these critiques are, we can go further. It is not simply the case that we do not often bump into other bodies when walking down the street simply because of the social rules, norms, or practical sense we have of other bodies. More basically, the failure to move out of the way of a person making their way in the world is an ethical failure to recognize the other and grant them the tiny space they require to pass through. These acts of moving one’s body to allow someone through or the slowing of one’s gait to create an opening for a passerby are more often than not done with little attention or thought; prereflexively, the fluctuations of rhythms and tempos of one’s

6. Agamben, writing on the ontology of friendship within Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, picks out the ethicality of the entwinement of beings and sensation when he writes that there is a “sensation, specifically a human one, that takes the form of a joint sensation, or a consent (synaisthanein) with the existence of the friend. Friendship is the instance of this ‘con-sentiment’ of the existence of the friend within the sentiment of existence itself. But this means that friendship has an ontological and political status. The sensation of being is, in fact, always already both divided and ‘con-divided’ (con-divisa, shared) and friendship is the name of this ‘con-division.’ This sharing has nothing whatsoever to do with the modern chimera of intersubjectivity, the relationship between subjects. Rather, being itself is divided here, it is nonidentical to itself, and so the I and the friend are the two faces, or the two poles, of this con-division or sharing” (Agamben 2009:34; emphasis in original). Through Aristotle’s and Agamben’s words, we get a sense of the metaphysical and also corporeal and sensual intertwining of lives with other lives.
...and the continual adjustments of one’s body in relation to the bodies and lives of others, ground the possibility of others being able to make their way in the world. It is the complex weaving of intentionalities, bodies, and lives through the lives of others in the everyday that must be thought of in much more ethical terms.

These theoretical elaborations are ones that respond to my own experiences in Iraq, where I was continually drawn to how, through their everyday practices, behaviors, and the paths they took to get to various places, the lives of persons who seemingly have little or no relation to one another are entangled with others precisely through these barely perceptible gestures and movements. If I turn to my first few days in Basra, I remember one occasion wandering around the edges of the center looking to buy some fruit to share with the hotel workers later that evening. I found a fruit and vegetable stall on my way that seemed to be run by a relatively young woman no older than in her midtwenties. As I was looking at the fruit deciding what to buy, the stall owner screamed, shouted, and then started to insult me. I was mortified. I felt embarrassed and angry at this public humiliation. I was new to Iraq and did not know how to react. I walked away hurriedly as if I had done something wrong.

Weeks later I was walking with Abu-Hibba. Even in those early days it felt as if we were close friends, so I would walk with him whenever he had a chore. On this occasion Abu-Hibba wanted to buy some sweets for his children. As we were walking and talking, I could see we were nearing the stall where I was shouted at. I asked Abu-Hibba where we were going. He pointed to the stall. I told him of what had happened to me; surely he would not shop from a place that had been so horrible to me? Abu-Hibba ignored me and told me to wait nearby and he would return in a few moments.

I was irritated by Abu-Hibba ignoring my protestations—what sort of friend was he to ignore my humiliation at the hand of the person working on the stall? I had worked myself into quite a state by the time Abu-Hibba had returned. I unleashed an initial volley of indignation hoping to arouse some contrition. Abu-Hibba told me to stop being so silly. I was stunned. After a brief moment of awkward silence he leaned toward me and told me to look closely at the stall. I saw the same woman who had shouted at me; I also noticed some young children. Abu-Hibba told me to look closer. I made out an old man who sat on a low stool or crate behind the stall, almost hidden against the wall that the stall rested on to its side. That was her father. Abu-Hibba told me the young woman looks after her whole family. He told me of how her father had been beaten badly years previously and had suffered brain damage, and how her mother had died when she was still a teenager. For more than a decade the young woman was both provider and caregiver. I found out later that the young children working on the stall were orphans and children living on the streets. The woman who ran the stall took as many of the children as she could and would feed, clothe, and house them.

I had not noticed any of this. Abu-Hibba went on: “We have lived through the years of her troubles, and what she has done for her family. We have seen how many young lives depend on her. So, whenever I, or others like me, can, we try to buy something from her stall. She shouts at all of us. She’s tired. People try to rob and cheat her daily. Years ago she was shot at to intimidate her in the hope she would give up the profitable stall.” It was not only Abu-Hibba but many others whose daily grocery shopping or meandering through the streets happened to take them to that particular stall and indulgently buy some fruit or sweets for the household or some friends or neighbors.

Moreover, it was not just this one stall but many that Basrans frequented in a small gesture to keep a family in business or to stand with them against intimidation. Outside a formalized system of caring for others, Basrans in their everyday trajectories responded as much as they were able or inclined to the suffering and needs of others—sometimes even anonymous others. However, to return to the Goffmanian picture of lives making their way amid the lives of others, it should not be overlooked that Iraqis do bump into others in the everyday, sometimes through neglect and indifference, at other times because of acts of petty violence, and sometimes even through outright violence. Abu-Hibba and other Iraqis are not mythical or heroic figures; many help the people they can, but also, at times, they can be indifferent to the pain and suffering of others. Nevertheless, in not marking off the ethical as a separate or partial domain but as intrinsic to the ways in which lives make their way through, against, and with others, an ethics of the rough ground is one that is not a moral perfectionism but is grounded in the ambiguous, complex, and vacillating inclinations of life toward the lives of others (cf. Das 2012).

Conclusion

The ability of Iraqis to survive the two recent gulf wars, the crippling 12 years of sanctions, and the violence and deprivation of life after the invasion points to some of the courage, relentless battling, and “talent for life” (Scheper-Hughes 2008) it has taken to maintain one’s own life and the lives of those one cares for and looks after. It is these complex entanglements and threading of lives through the lives of others that I have tried to think through in much more ethical terms.

At the heart of this article is an attempt to move accounts about life in postinvasion Iraq beyond destruction and collapse to understandings of the ways in which Iraqis in their everyday forms of dwelling are not only making and remaking a world for themselves but also each other amid tremendous daily pressures and struggles. This continual weaving and reweaving of the lines of life through the lines of others comes with no guarantees. Many Iraqis have died needlessly when even the most basic of provisions or help could have saved them. An understanding of ethics proposed in this article does...
not exclude some of the callousness, violence, and indifference of everyday life, hence the rough ground of the ethics described throughout. Nor does violence and terror, however, threaten the very fabric of the ethics and forms of dwelling discussed. Rather, an ethics of the rough ground is one that does not oppose violence with the mundane or the ethical with “evil”; instead, it focuses on the complex corporeality and vacillations of the inclinations and movements of lives toward others.

As outlined in Goffman’s analysis of pedestrians, the possibility of others making their way in the world in some small way is contingent on one’s ability and even willingness to grant the other some of the space one inhabits with a faint gesture or a change of gait or posture. What I have insisted throughout is that it must not be overlooked how the possibilities and limitations of life itself are distributed among the lives of others. Furthermore, the distribution of and overlappings of lives must be taken as a provocation to think of life and its everyday forms as an ongoing and precarious ethical struggle.

Acknowledgments

At the time of submission of this piece (February 2015), the United States of America had launched almost 3,000 attacks on Iraq since the summer of 2014. Two former friends of mine, while fighting against ISIS with the Iraqi army, were killed in December 2015 by American “friendly fire.” Hundreds more Iraqis have been killed by the indiscriminate and vicious attacks by the American military on towns and cities that ISIS claims to have controlled. My thoughts and heart go to the Iraqis, once again, as they find themselves under the same F-16s and bombers they first truly came to know in 1990.

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Ordinary Ethics and the Emergence of Plebeian Democracy across the Global South

Buenos Aires’s La Salada Market

by Carlos A. Forment

This study of La Salada, renamed by Cuartel’s residents as the “poor people’s shopping mall,” was founded in the early 1990s, at the height of neoliberalism, by several dozen undocumented Bolivian immigrants and Argentine street hawkers in Cuartel, a pauperized, stigmatized, and disenfranchised district near the city of Buenos Aires. By the early 2000s, La Salada occupied a central place in public life in Cuartel and beyond and was described by the European Union as “emblematic of counterfeit markets” and among the 10 worst of its kind. In studying this market and the network of satellite “Saladitas” that have proliferated in hundreds of neighborhoods across the country, my aim is to analyze the way the “structural poor” and the recently impoverished middle class—in the course of practicing noninstitutional politics, socioeconomic informality, and a-legality—transformed themselves into plebeian citizens. These practices have contributed to the emergence of a new form of life: plebeian democracy. In order to make sense of it, I have highlighted the ordinary ethics that accompanied these practices. In dialogue with James Holston’s study of “insurgent citizenship,” my study of plebeian citizenship provides an alternative account of the development of democratic life across the global south.

Cuartel IX (270,000 residents) is an economically pauperized, socially stigmatized, and politically disenfranchised district roughly 30 km from the elegant boulevards, soaring skyscrapers, and sophisticated urbanity that characterize the city of Buenos Aires. In the early 1990s, Cuartel was among the first and largest peri-urban districts in the province of Buenos Aires to experience the full force of neoliberalism. The majority of its poor and working families were transformed almost overnight into jobless indigents (Auyero 2001). As the new hunter-gatherers of late capitalism, they were now forced to spend their day roaming the streets scavenging for plastic, cardboard, and other recyclable materials.

Nearly two decades after Cuartel had become a market-centered society, La Nación, Argentina’s leading daily and a longtime champion of neoliberalism, published a front-page article on this district titled “A Trip to Argentina’s Last Century”; its author went on to describe Cuartel as the “reversal of progress” (La Nación 2008). However, instead of introducing us to a failed modernity, Cuartel is an ideal perch, similar to Tocqueville’s nineteenth-century New England townships, from which to glimpse the “future of democracy” across the global south rooted in what I call plebeian citizenship.

This study of La Salada, renamed by Cuartel’s residents as the “poor people’s shopping mall,” was founded in 1992 by several dozen undocumented Bolivian immigrants and Argentine street hawkers. By the early 2000s, La Salada occupied a central place in public life in Cuartel and beyond. The European Union described it as “emblematic of counterfeit markets” and ranked La Salada among the 10 worst of its kind (European Union 2006). In studying this market and the network of satellite “Saladitas” that have proliferated in hundreds of pauperized and degraded middle-class neighborhoods across the country, my aim is to analyze the way the “structural poor” and recently impoverished middle class—in the course of engaging in noninstitutional politics, socioeconomic informality, and a-legality—refashioned themselves into plebeian citizens. These practices surfaced at different moments from divergent socioinstitutional sites and took three decades to acquire contoured shape and textured

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1. There are no scholarly books on La Salada. Two dissertations study it as an example of informality: Pogliabhi (2008) and Savini (2011). Journalistic accounts by Girón (2011) and Hacher (2011) focus on the market’s early years and underscore its violent, criminal, and illegal aspects. For a scholarly version of this type of miserabilism, see Dewey (2014). Gago (2012) provides an apocalyptic account of the market. See Pabst and Dewey (2014) for a series of photographs of the market.

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plebeian citizenship from "insurgent citizenship” as developed by James Holston (2008), whose work has been influential among English-speaking anthropologists. The next section provides an overview of La Salada and Cuartel, the socioinstitutional context from which plebeianism emerged. In section three, I study the sociolegal and political disputes that occurred in daily life between La Salada and its critics among public officials and textile firms, with most of the discussion focused on what I term “mimetic branding” and “mimetic consumption.” The fourth section discusses a neighborhood movement that was led by La Salada and Cuartel’s residents in support of municipal autonomy. The discussion continues with an analysis of undocumented immigrants in “clandestine sweatshops” and “family workshops” that produce for La Salada and Saladita markets who demanded to be recognized as “self-exploited workers” and who rebelled against human rights groups who sought to represent them as victims of “slave labor.” In my closing remarks, I list the ethical practices that have contributed to the formation of plebeian citizenship as a distinctive form of life.

Plebeian versus Insurgent Citizenship

Before, during, and following the end of military dictatorship in 1985 and Brazil’s gradual “transition to democracy,” which extended for another two decades, home-owning workers in the formal sector of the economy who lived in São Paulo’s peripheral neighborhoods of Lars National (3,000 residents) and Jardim das Camelias (15,000) developed a new form of “insurgent citizenship”: “The urban poor gained political rights, became property-owners, made law an asset, and achieved a greater sense of competence through their urban practices. Moreover, as residents formulated alternative projects of citizenship, they changed the development of the state and its relation with citizens (Holston 2008:199).” This radical type of citizenship, based on Holston’s account, spread from the “local to the national,” bringing about the democratization of public life, including the Brazilian constitution, which is now one of the world’s most egalitarian and participatory charters.

My conception of plebeian citizenship differs from Holston’s insurgent citizenship in several ways, although I will limit myself to the following three. First, plebeianism in Argentina surfaced under conditions of neoliberalism from pau-

2. For a survey of ordinary ethics, see Lambek (2010). Despite the power-centered account of ethical practices by many of his followers, the mature Foucault (1993:203) noted: “When I was studying asylums, prisons and so on, I perhaps insisted too much on the techniques of domination at the expense of techniques of the self. . . . I think we have to get rid of this idea of an analytical or necessary link between ethics and other social or economic or political structures.”

3. On further reflection, Holston’s conception of insurgent citizenship seems inspired by the plight of working-class communities across the definancialized north.

4. Holston’s limited evidence of these interactions indicates that they were fueled in part by political rivalry. For example, the Workers’ Party and the Christian Base Communities competed for control of Jardim and Lars in order to expand their base of support. This generated factionalism among local residents and caused the two groups to sever ties.

5. Holston (2008:17–219, 234–236, 297) indicates that the attorney who represented the Friends of the Neighborhood instructed members to “never enter into any polemic or fight with any official who appears at your door; send him to the society to talk.” The society’s lawyers
Buenos Aires’s plebeian citizens refused to allow any other group, including middle-class professionals, to represent them in public life. Plebeians used their own vernacular to describe themselves and to put forward their own heterodox vision of the common good, enabling them to challenge the rentier, populist, and human rights visions of selfishness and public life that were closely identified with privileged elites, middle-class groups, and government officials.

Third, Holston describes the rule of law in Brazil as a stratagem by the “privileged few” to disempower the “dispossessed many.” If this is indeed the case, Holston would need to account for the fact that the overwhelming majority of home-owning, working-class families in Lars and Jardim, despite decades of legal maneuverings by real estate developers, swindlers, and state officials, have not been evicted (Budd, Teixera, and SEHAB 2005; Earle 2012). Perhaps there is a less sinister explanation for this.

Across the global south, the national and subnational “state,” whether authoritarian, democratic, or neoliberal, has great difficulty in designing coherent policies and implementing them consistently. In other words, they lack the capacity to “see like a state,” in James Scott’s sense. Why might this be so? In this part of the world, a significant number of citizens have generated a bewildering variety of heterogeneous practices and forms of life that are difficult to decipher. Moreover, as these groups shuttle back and forth between the “informal” and “formal” sector, this makes them all the more elusive and illegible to the cyclops state and its myopic officials.

In the course of negotiating with state officials at the national and subnational level in daily life, plebeian citizens in the province of Buenos Aires and elsewhere contributed, paradoxically, to making each other increasingly legible. This had the effect of discouraging corruption among the former and encouraging the latter to pay their taxes. The remaining sections of the essay are in implicit dialogue with Holston’s work and introduce a great many other issues that are constitutive of plebeian citizenship.

Socioinstitutional Landscape

Beginning in the 1990s, Argentine officials implemented a series of wide-ranging and radical marketization policies that provoked hundreds of factories to close, disorganized the labor movement and local unions, and pauperized large and small working-class neighborhoods across the province of Buenos Aires. In contrast to other areas that experienced “disaffiliation,” in Robert Castel’s (2002) sense, a great many of Cuartel’s now jobless workers and poor and indigent families refashioned themselves into plebeian citizens (Merklen 2010).

Stretching over an area the size of 12 football fields, La Salada is a conglomeration of three markets: Urkupina (1991), Mogote (1994), and Ocean (1995). In 2009 La Salada, which at the time housed 4,900 stalls, earned US$15 million, nearly twice as much as the eight largest shopping malls in the city of Buenos Aires (Barral 2011; Dewey 2014). This is all the more noteworthy because La Salada opens only on Tuesday, Thursday, and Sunday between the hours of 9:00 p.m. and 9:00 a.m. On any given weekday, 100,000 shoppers flock to the market; twice as many visit it on Sunday; and on Christmas the crowds swell to half a million (Girón 2011). Every 2 weeks, no fewer than 36,000 wholesalers from Saladitas across the country organize “shopping tours” to Cuartel to purchase merchandise and restock their stores (CAME 2013).

La Salada provides stable employment and a living wage to almost 110,000 residents from Cuartel and surrounding areas. The majority of them work in the market as vendors, janitors, security guards, parking-lot attendants, and haulers who accompany shoppers and carry their merchandise. According to the most reliable estimates, there are 12,000 workshops and sweatshops in Cuartel and within a 30-km radius of La Salada that provide stable jobs to an additional 50,000 undocumented immigrants from Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru as well as Argentine-born workers. Many of these workshops and sweatshops rent or own a stall in La Salada or Saladita market from which they sell a significant portion of their output (Peralta and Novillo 2006). This socioeconomic boom activity has increased real estate prices in Cuartel. A square meter of property in La Salada now costs between US$25,000 and US$50,000, four times more than in Puerto Madero, the most globalized and expensive area in the city of Buenos Aires (Sainz 2009).

Cuartel has become the epicenter of plebeian cosmopolitanism. Sixty percent of those who work in La Salada are undocumented Bolivians, another 30% are Argentine-born citizens, and the remaining 10% are either Peruvian or Paraguayan immigrants (Monjonnier 2010). On market days, Andean and Argentine bands entertain passersby; rotund matrons serve indigenous and creole dishes; and thieves in hoodies and prostitutes in tight-fitting dresses from every nationality abound. Twice a year thousands of immigrants and Argentines descend on La Salada to render homage to the Bolivian Virgins of “Urkupina” and “Copacabana” and “Gauchito Gil,” an Argentine folk saint. During these celebrations, market vendors in their drunken stupor take turns visiting the Riachuelo River, among the worlds’ most toxic, across the street from the market, and hurl large wads of US$100 bills made of play money into the water to thank and request another year of prosperity from the virgins and saint.
During the heyday of neoliberalism in the 1990s, the municipal government (of Lomas de Zamora) lacked the funds to provide Cuartel’s residents with adequate public services. In response to this debacle, La Salada’s vendors organized themselves into the Asociación de Vendedores, Professionals, and Industrialists (hereafter “Association”) and used a portion of its funds to pay for public security, street maintenance, garbage removal, and supplying the local public hospital with bed linens and towels. In addition, the Association financed a walk-in clinic and offered health insurance to 400 local families, a soup kitchen, a dozen associations (including Mothers against Crack) and a technical school that offered courses in sewing, clothes design, and business management (Ossona 2010; Saccio and Rodriguez 2011).6 La Salada was authorized recently by the Ministry of Justice and Human Rights to expand its “reentry program” to enable inmates to secure salaried jobs in the market (Diario Crónica 2012).

Plebeian Citizenship as a Form of Life

Plebeian citizenship emerged from the ethicopolitical practices that surfaced in La Salada and Cuartel in the 1990s during President Carlos Menem’s government. Jorge Castillo, the garrulous shoemaker and administrator of Mogote market, recalled, “under Carlos Menem we lost our livelihood, our culture of work and our national industry; it was easier to buy imported goods and machinery than our own products (Copy Left 2007). “We are the darkies [mozochos, a sociocultural term rather than a racial epithet] who in the 1990s were left without a job. La Salada enabled us to crawl out from the very bottom of the pit” (d’Angiolillo 2010).

La Salada continued to flourish during the “progressive” governments of presidents Nestor Kirchner and Cristina Fernández after Argentina began to recover from the decision to default on its sovereign debt. By 2005, the market was a fixture on the horizon: “Our market is a place of economic dynamism, social inclusion and honorable work; it provides a large and diverse sector of society an opportunity to learn new skills” (El Día 2011:3).

La Salada has flourished in both good and bad times and cannot be understood as simply a by-product of Cuartel’s changing “opportunity structure.” In addition to providing a sense of personal dignity, social justice, and a new “skill set” based on self-help productivism, La Salada incited Cuartel’s residents to break with populist, rentier, and human rights conceptions of selfhood that remained dominant across public life.

A-Legality: Between the Lawful and the Unlawful

Under neoliberalism La Salada and the thousands of workshops and sweatshops in Cuartel were important sources of income for the city government (which still had to pay salaries) and a major provider of public services and jobs for local residents. Municipal authorities now relied on the market to maintain social order and preserve their own legitimacy. The vice mayor, a Peronist, recalls, “The market was the result of an absent state; for the next 10 years it operated with the complicity of many state agencies” (Girón 2011). La Salada and the workshops and sweatshops that produced for it paid bribes to city inspectors and members of the police force, who now rely on these “tips” to supplement their slashed salaries.

This situation remained more or less unchanged until the second half of the 1990s, when La Salada and Cuartel’s workshops and sweatshops were reaping huge profits. Local officials demanded an increase in their tips. La Salada’s vendors and workers organized a meeting and decided to reject their demands. They organized a series of marches and demonstrations in front of the municipality and police station and contacted major dailies, radio stations, and television stations in order to publicize their cause and win the support of middle-class citizens and public officials outside of Cuartel.

Soon after defaulting on its sovereign debt to the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, President Kirchner’s government, in an attempt to reassert its institutional authority, began pumping monies into city governments, especially those in poor neighborhoods. The president also instructed the governor of the province of Buenos Aires, where a third of the country’s taxpayers live, to launch a campaign to pressure citizens to “render unto Caesar.” Under the leadership of Santiago Montoya, director of the state’s revenue service (Agencia de Recaudación de la Provincia de Buenos Aires [ARBA]), his staff downloaded hundreds of satellite images from Google Maps and cross-checked them with the tax returns warehoused in their databank (La Nación 2007). Montoya was unrelenting in his pursuit of tax evaders, wealthy and poor alike. He went after transnational and Argentine-owned petrochemical and agro-industrial firms, affluent gated communities, and high-end shopping malls as well as La Salada and Saladita markets (La Nación 2007).

Between February and July 2007, Montoya led 250 agents on six raids against the market, enabling them to interview a total of 9,000 vendors. Before these raids, 90% of La Salada’s vendors did not have a tax number; several months after ARBA’s last raid, 77% of them were registered, leading Montoya to remark, “tax evasion is now higher in gated communities than in La Salada” (En Blanco 2007; Perfil 2009). These raids enabled Cuartel’s residents to become aware of the relation between taxation and the common good that had been difficult for them to discern when the municipality had not provided them with public services.

Following these raids, ARBA created a new tax category, the “special regime for gross income” (regimen especial de ingresos brutos), to enable La Salada’s vendors to obtain a tax number. In return, La Salada agreed to pay its taxes; however, because it did not have a bookkeeping department, the market was unable to comply with ARBA’s requirements.

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6. As of 2013, most of these social programs no longer exist.
Several years later, in 2009 Argentina’s national revenue service (Administración Federal de Ingresos Públicos [AFIP]) established the information regime (Regimen de información) that was tailored to meet La Salada’s needs (Cronista Comercial 2011). Under the regime, Urkupina, Ocean, and Mogote’s administrators were required to submit monthly reports to AFIP with detailed data on each vendor. This made it possible for tax officials to rely on the information presented by each administrator and vendor to cross-check and verify its veracity. These and other measures encouraged plebeian citizens to become legible to the state.

Vendors and administrators complained bitterly, not because they were required to pay taxes and contribute to the common good but because state officials, they claimed, were violating their property rights.

Those of us who are administrators have been transformed into state tax collectors. Every month we are required to file a report on our vendors’ commercial activity and the sales tax they paid. We see no reason why we should work for the state; this is not what we get paid to do. The state should assume its responsibility and have its agents do all this work; we even offered to provide them with an office in the market. (Copy Left, n.d.)

From the perspective of La Salada, the state was stealing labor power from them. This dispute remains unsettled. In any case, plebeianism developed its own heterodox account of the mutual duties and obligations that citizens and state officials owed each other.

Wageless versus Informal Life: Workshops and Sweatshops

In the mid-1990s President Carlos Menem liberalized the economy and allowed foreign imports to flood the market, sending the textile sector into a downward spiral (Sánchez and Butler 2010). Hundreds of firms went bankrupt. Those that remained allot did so by downsizing, replacing “formal” with “informal” workers, and by outsourcing the production of garments to family workshops and clandestine sweatshops, including the 12,000 or so that had been established in Cuartel and nearby neighborhoods (De Vincenzi and Torres 2008).

Workshops and sweatshops are similar in some ways. In addition to employing a large number of undocumented immigrants and operating without a license, they are in violation of one or another building and zoning code (their electrical, plumbing, and ventilation systems are a hazard to those who labor in these workshops and sweatshops as well as to their neighbors).

Workshops and sweatshops differ in a fundamental way. A workshop owner describes daily life in his plebeian atelier: “My family does all the work. We work 8 hours daily and stop to eat, but sometimes we work 10 or more hours when we need to increase our output. After all, we are the owners. We sell all our clothes in our stall [at La Salada]; they are of very good quality. We use the same fabric [as brand-name designers] (La Razón 2012).” In contrast, clandestine sweatshops engage in “human trafficking” and “slave labor.” Their employees are forced to work 15 hours daily and to socialize, eat, and rest in the same cramped, unhygienic room where they work all day. Sweatshop owners routinely confiscate the passport of their workers in order to discourage them from fleeing.

Scholars who maintain a state-centered understanding of public life and believe that any social problem can be solved by designing appropriate policies are reluctant to recognize, much less discuss, the subterranean connections between sweatshops and workshops. After laboring in sweatshops for a year or so, immigrants have acquired the technical skills and have learned the “trade secrets” of the designers, firms, and brands that subcontracted them to produce their garments. By the time they leave these sweatshops and are able to establish their own workshops, these workers are able to produce garments strikingly similar to the “original” ones they had previously produced for the designers, firms, and brands that had contracted them.

Bolivian anthropologist Silvia Rivera Cusiquanqui, founder of the Subaltern Studies Collective in La Paz, is the only scholar who has explored, from the perspective of Buenos Aires’s undocumented workers, the ties between sweatshops and workshops.

They willingly subject themselves to exploitation knowing that they are saving money in order to establish a micro-enterprise that will better the life of their offspring. I would argue against those who claim that life in these sweatshops is based on slave labor. (Rivera Cusiquanqui 2011:14)

In contrast to Maussian gift giving based on face-to-face exchanges among members of the same network, Andean “deferred solidarity” is a multigenerational “virtual” agreement among the dead, the living, and those yet to be born. Rivera Cusiquanqui’s account is troubling; however, it cannot be ignored or dismissed. In any case, whether state officials are able to design policies that undermine sweatshops without harming workshops remains to be seen (Montero 2011). This dilemma defies any simple solution, so I have refrained from providing one.

Mimetic Branding and Consumer Mimicry versus Counterfeits and Consumerism

In addition to self-help productivism, plebeianism is based on mimetic branding and mimetic consumption. The dis-

7. Guaraschi Mamani, Tito y otros, Juzgado Federal, Secretaría 7, Capital Federal, Causa 26.083-10733 (November 20, 2007). In a well-known case against a sweatshop accused of slave labor, Judge Norberto Oyarbide twisted Rivera Cusiquanqui’s account by arguing that “working and living together” is an “ancestral custom” among Bolivian workers.

8. “The ‘Center for Clothes’ in the neighborhood of Barracas in the city of Buenos Aires is a promising alternative. It houses a dozen textile cooperatives that employ ex-sweatshop workers.
cussion begins with branding as it occurs inside workshops and sweatshops during the production process and ends with mimetic consumption as it occurs among shoppers.

Under neoliberalism, the process of making clothes, as I noted above, had fragmented into three parts: (1) design, (2) production, and (3) commercialization. Textile firms and brands retained control of the first and third phase, outsourcing the second to workshops and sweatshops. This is where mimetic branding took place. The facts are compelling. Before 2005 roughly 90% of “counterfeit” garments in Argentina were imported from China, Paraguay, and other countries. Five years later, with the sudden growth in the number of workshops and sweatshops in Cuartel and elsewhere, 80% of “knockoffs” were made in the country (Sainz 2010; Soler 2009). Plebeianism had developed its own version of “import substitution” similar to the model used by the populist-developmental state in Argentina and other third world countries during the postwar period to promote industrialization.

What is the difference between a mimetic and original garment? After all, both of them are usually produced by the same set of workers who labor in the same workshops and sweatshops with similar sewing machines, tools, and fabrics of comparable quality that were purchased from the same small pool of suppliers. In formal legal terms, the difference between a mimetic and original garment resides in the label itself. Because the practice of branding is embedded in production and commercialization and remains unarticulated, I will now make them explicit.

I have discerned four types of branding practice. The following two are part of the production process and occur inside workshops and sweatshops: (1) “do it yourself,” in which producers create homemade tags using their own names or the name of a relative (Belen, Filmo), and (2) “adulterated logos,” in which producers take a well-known brand—for instance, Nike, with its swoosh logo—and redesign it while retaining a close resemblance to the original. Many of the sports clothes and caps that are sold in La Salada carry upside-down swoosh logos.

The next two branding practices occur in the commercialization phase inside La Salada and Saladita markets. (3) “Unbranded” clothes without logos cost less, enabling Saladita store owners to buy larger quantities of merchandise from their supplier in La Salada. Before selling a garment to their clients, the Saladita store owners tag them in order to fetch a higher price. Finally, there is the practice of using a (4) “generic label”; a large number of vendors tag their garments with “Replica” to prevent the police from confiscating them.

I have portrayed these branding practices as static and isolated “acts.” However, recall that a typical workshop or sweatshop laborer toils 13 hours daily, 6 days a week, and puts out a garment every half an hour or so.

Let us now examine the demand side of consumer mimicry. Roberto Piazza, an accomplished designer and the director of the Institute for Advanced Study of Design, Fashion and Beauty in the city of Buenos Aires, explains the meaning of consumer mimicry: “Globalization has made us even more brand fetishists [marquero] than before, unleashing in us a limitless desire to consume and to be admired. This has heightened our own sense of narcissism and vanity” (Barral 2011:12).

Consumer mimicry satisfied the yearning of plebeians for autostimulation, instant gratification, and public self-display. For many of them, this was the first time that they could afford to dress like middle-class citizens, thereby enabling them to roam freely and visit sociosexmatically forbidden areas of the city such as malls, movie houses, restaurants, discotheques, and other places from which they had been previously ostracized. Consumer mimicry made it possible for plebeians also to upgrade their wardrobe, making it easier for them to secure employment in private firms and state agencies that before would have discriminated against them.

Plebeians were drilled in the ethicopolitical meaning of consumer mimicry. La Salada and Saladita markets launched a countrywide campaign against the rentier model of public life that, they claimed, was promoted by textile firms, designers, boutiques, malls, and other middle-class institutions. La Salada accused all of them of violating the social and property rights of plebeians.

The problem is with the middlemen, who charge exorbitant prices for the clothes that are sold in shopping malls and retail stores; they have abused us beyond all reasonable limits. They live stealing from us. The same garment that in the United States costs US$33 dollars here costs US$206 dollars. . . . How can this be? . . . [La Salada] has enabled producers and consumers to bypass the middlemen and deal directly with each other. Designers and retail store owners are just as responsible for the problem; they spend huge sums in branding, marketing, and advertising and then make us pay for it. La Salada has exposed all of them for what they really are. (Selén 2011)

La Salada and Saladita markets across the country encouraged plebeians to buy mimetically branded clothes and to boycott brand-name garments and footwear.

La Salada and Saladita markets and all those who produced for it refused to be described as part of the informal sector, which is how textile firms and designers represented them. Instead, plebeianism identified itself as part of a new moral economy:

La Salada is where people without money come at the end of the month in order to make ends meet. Although “brands” portray us as a center for the sale of counterfeits, the market is a social institution. After the “brands” destroyed our economy and robbed us of our jobs, it was La Salada that enabled
La Salada and the network of Saladitas that have now surfaced across the country encourage their supporters to act and talk as plebeian citizens. Cuartel was the epicenter of plebeianism; however, all those who had direct and indirect ties to La Salada, including Saladita’s vendors and customers, disseminated its ethico-political practices across the country. According to the Argentine Confederation of Medium Firms (Confederación Argentina de la Mediana Empresa [CAME]), the number of Saladitas has increased from 180 to 500 (278%) between 2008 and 2013 (CAME 2013). These markets, along with La Salada, have made it possible for the recently impoverished middle class (“new poor”) to develop an affinity with undocumented immigrants, the working poor, and other similar groups in their rejection of a rentier model of public life that was supported by international brands, textile firms, and shopping malls.

Secessionist Networks and Municipal Autonomy
La Salada’s merchants and Cuartel’s residents led a campaign to secede from the municipality of Lomas de Zamora and to establish their own city government. Cuartel’s secessionists developed informal ties to different political parties and coalitions while remaining autonomous from all of them. Secessionists encouraged local residents to break with “ideological” and “party-centered” notions of politics and adopt a “postideological” and “issue-centered” stance. The secessionists replaced the venerable figure of the “Peronist militant” and his “loyal client” with that of the “nonpartisan operator.” Plebeianism was construed as a radical alternative to traditional populism.

In March 2010, La Salada’s association organized a series of meetings with half a dozen church groups and voluntary associations from Cuartel in order to discuss a plan of action. The association outlined the reasons for seceding from Loma.

The municipality ignores us; our streets remain unpaved, and our public hospital remains dysfunctional. Lomas de Zamora’s municipality does not care about Cuartel IX. . . . If we have a municipal government, we would be able to use our taxes to improve public security and our streets. . . . Each year Mogote pays AR$4 million pesos in taxes; this accounts for half of Lomas’s income. Nevertheless, it does not provide Cuartel with any services. . . . The only public works that have been done in Cuartel IX were paid with private funds from La Salada. (Contexto 2010:6)

A longtime local supporter of secession, Ruben Cabanas, president of the Cuartel IX association, characterized La Salada’s role in the movement as “fundamental.” In addition to financial clout, the members of the market had the administrative experience that would be needed to manage municipal life.

The association led a grassroots campaign calling for a plebiscite so that Cuartel’s residents would be able to secede from Lomas and establish their own municipality. In response to this demand, the governor of Buenos Aires, Lomas’s officials, and Peronist Party leaders closed ranks and blocked the plebiscite from taking place (Lucesole 2004). If it had succeeded, this would have made it difficult for public officials and party militants to maintain their patronage networks and influence Cuartel’s electorate.

Following the failed plebiscite, Cuartel’s secessionists devised a new strategy and decided to make alliances with any political actor who agreed to advance their cause.

We still seek autonomy; we don’t want to have to beg anymore. We want to be able to resolve our own problems. This is how it should be. This is the reason that we are now inviting Peronists, radicals, and people on the left to join our cause. We do not care what party you are in; we are only interested in improving our neighborhoods. (Contexto 2010:7)

Cuartel’s secessionists forged alliances with whichever political party or coalition benefited them. Despite its loose structure and nonpartisan character, these alliances placed enormous ethico-political demands on Cuartel’s secessionists, requiring them to forego the material and symbolic benefits (public employment, welfare relief) they had enjoyed as clients of the Peronist party and one or another populist official.

For the 2009 senatorial elections, Cuartel’s secessionists organized the association Militancia y Trabajo, which had its headquarters in Urkupina. In order to generate support among local residents, Militancia’s members visited Cuartel’s neighborhoods, held public forums, and organized religio-political gatherings in La Salada. Militancia’s activism paid off. Its candidate, Quique Antequera, who now had broad support in Cuartel, was invited by the Peronist Party to join its slate. Though a political “outsider,” Antequera came in second place in the elections.

Following these elections, Cuartel’s secessionists broke with the Peronist Party and allied themselves with the social democratic Coalicion Civica (Copy Left 2009). This alliance made it possible for the Coalicion to make inroads and broaden its electoral base in Cuartel and other poor neighborhoods while offering the secessionists an opportunity to gain support among middle-class voters in the city of Buenos Aires (Rosemberg 2009). In the closing weeks of the campaign, Coalicion’s candidate, Alfonso Prat-Gay, ex-minister of economics, published an editorial in support of plebeian citizenship in the influential daily Clarin: “It is impossible to favor microenterprises yet continue to oppose La Salada. Just because it is an informal market does not make it illegal. We are criminalizing the poor who work in this market. . . . Someone has to defend them” (Prat-Gay 2009).

CAME published a scathing, page-long reply in Clarin, La Nación, and other leading dailies accusing Prat-Gay of con-
doning illegality and demanding that the courts disqualify his candidacy (CAME 2009). His sympathetic portrayal of plebeianism altered the way that Buenos Aires’s middle-class “progressives” now viewed it.

In September 2012, 200,000 Buenos Aires “indignados” filled the Plaza de Mayo to protest against President Fernández’s government (Rosenberg 2012). They carried banners denouncing corruption and crime and in defense of the national constitution that the government wanted to reform to enable the president to run for a third term. The government assigned Lomas’s senator, a Peronist militant, the task of discrediting the protestors. He caricatured them by depicting the protestors as “well-dressed members of the middle class who are worried about the dollars that they need in order to go abroad on summer holidays” (Página 12 2012:5). The coalition’s leader, Lilita Carrio, admitted that the protestors at the rally were by and large well-dressed persons. This is because La Salada has made it possible for the [Argentine-born] poor to dress well. They participated in the march along with many Bolivian and Peruvian immigrants. Our politicians act as if they have custody over all of them. . . . Those who live in shantytowns protested like the rest of us. (A Dos Voces 2012:2)

Plebeianism had become a recognizable and respectable political actor among middle-class “progressive” families, many of whom now shopped in their neighborhood Saladita market.

Self-Exploited Workers and Human Rights

Undocumented Bolivian immigrants in workshops and sweatshops with ties to La Salada now demanded to represent themselves as self-exploited workers rather than slave labor; this is how human rights groups construed them. This dispute provided another layer of ethicopolitical meaning to plebeianism.

On March 26, 2006, a fire broke out in a textile sweatshop in Caballito, a middle-class neighborhood in the city of Buenos Aires, taking the life of six Bolivian immigrants. In the weeks that followed, city inspectors and police, under pressure from middle-class citizens from all walks of life, raided 365 sweatshops and accused 138 of them of engaging in slave labor (Lipcovich 2006; Santiago and Krell 2006). These citizens also organized street marches and public forums to discuss the situation of undocumented immigrants and other aspects of the continued informalization and deregulation of everyday life.

Two views predominated. La Alameda, a human rights organization, accused La Salada and Saladita markets of engaging in slave labor, maintaining ties to sweatshops, undermining the rights of workers, and contributing to the spread of the informal economy. In contrast, the Asociación Civil Federativa Boliviana (ACIFBOL), the unofficial representative of immigrants in Buenos Aires, argued that the thousands of family workshops that produce for La Salada and Saladita markets provide their paisanos with dignified work in a city that remains exploitative, exclusionary, and racist.

ACIFBOL and the 30 or so radio station networks that are linked to it provide immigrant families, the majority of whom live in shantytowns, with a variety of services (Caggiano 2013). In the words of ACIFBOL’s president, Alfredo Ayala, they visit our radio station when they need assistance to bury their dead, give birth, undergo surgery, or feel threatened; in these cases we then organize demonstrations. We are organized and have the support of many brothers (and sisters) in the community. If the Bolivian consulate performed his job and fulfilled his duties, then we would not have to take them on ourselves. (Rivera Cusiquanchi 2011:53)

Constelacion, Metropolitana, Favorita, and the other stations exert an enormous influence on immigrants, especially those who spend most of the day hunched over a sewing machine inside their workshops. In addition to late-breaking news, musical programs, and information on employment and housing opportunities, these radio stations contribute to the ethicopolitical cohesion of the community over issues such as police brutality, racism, and human rights (Cantor 2013: 197–234).

ACIFBOL and its network of radio stations derive legitimacy from defending immigrants against police brutality and raids against their home-based workshops. In December 2009, ACIFBOL led a funeral march from Cuartel to the Plaza de Mayo, symbolic center of the human rights movement, in honor of a Bolivian immigrant who had worked in La Salada and had been shot by a “trigger-happy” policeman. When the marchers reached the plaza, they heckled and interrupted a televised gathering of the Abuelas of the Plaza de Mayo, the country’s leading human rights organization, in order to call attention to their situation (Videla 2009).

Beginning in 2011 the police launched a series of raids against family workshops in several shantytowns. Fidel Colque described the raid against his workshop. “It resembled a witch hunt; our families were terrified. The police smashed the front door, entered our house, and ordered us to lie flat on the ground; they forced our children to do the same. They respected no one (Guibelalde 2011).” Instead of targeting sweatshops, city inspectors attacked workshops owned by Bolivian immigrants, which reaffirmed their belief that the municipal government is racist and discriminates against them.

ACIFBOL and its radio stations led 15,000 workers through the streets of Buenos Aires in protest against these raids. One of the participants, Carlos Jimenez, a workshop owner, recalled that the fear had become widespread. This is the reason that so many of us participated in the protest. The textile firms that we work for were surprised and confused. They had no idea of what was going on; how did we come together; where had we come from; how could we organize such a
large demonstration? We had finally woken up, all of us needed to be heard. (Santiago and Krell 2006:8)

In contrast to sweatshop owners who can afford to bribe policemen and inspectors, undocumented immigrants rely on street marches, radio stations, and community groups to protect their workshops. According to ACIFBOL, human rights groups such as La Alameda are perpetuating racism under the guise of defending human rights.

ACIFBOL also accused La Alameda of denying immigrants the right to represent themselves. In the words of a workshop owner, Vera (La Alameda’s director) and La Alameda’s members “treat Bolivians as if we were idiots. They think we are incapable of knowing whether we are being exploited or not” (Eliaschev 2010:3).

Bolivian immigrants sought to represent themselves as self-exploited workers rather than as slave labor as La Alameda portrayed them: “Vera [La Alameda’s director] is a liar and a cheat. We are not slaves, we are workers, and if we work as hard as we do it is because we want to earn more money (La Nación 2006:3).” In seeking to defend Bolivian undocumented immigrants, La Alameda violated their “right to have rights,” in Hannah Arendt’s sense. These immigrants have developed their own idiom based on notions of self-exploitation, moral economy, and so on in order to represent themselves.

Concluding Remarks

La Salada and the countrywide network of Saladitas brought the newly impoverished middle class into contact with the urban poor and undocumented immigrants, reconfiguring each others’ ethical-political practices and notions of selfhood and contributing to the emergence of a new form of life: plebeian citizenship. In the remainder of this article, my aim is to summarize in a highly stylized manner its key features as they were experienced by La Salada and Saladita’s vendors, buyers, and producers and Cuartel’s residents and undocumented immigrants in workshops and sweatshops.

In the course of resolving legal-administrative disputes with city officials, tax collectors, and members of the police force, plebeian citizens developed their own ethical-political understanding of the rule of law, property rights, and the common good, which contributed to making themselves and their interlocutors and adversaries among local officials increasingly legible to each other.

The many thousands of undocumented immigrants and Argentine citizens who toil in workshops and practice mimetic branding and mimetic consumption became aware of their capacity to exercise their right to have rights despite the fact that they have fewer material and symbolic resources than textile firms, malls, and international brands. The ethicopolitical campaign that La Salada and the network of Saladitas launched against rentierism made it possible for recently impoverished members of the middle class, undocumented immigrants, and working poor to develop their own conception of moral economy and reject those who sought to portray them as part of the informal sector.

The secessionist movement led by La Salada in Cuartel added a new layer of ethicopolitical meaning to plebeianism. This neighborhood movement encouraged local residents to break with populism long identified with the Peronist Party and rooted in patron-client relations, ideological militancy, and a party-centered conception of politics. Plebeianism instilled in members a pragmatic, issue-centered, and post-ideological conception of politics rooted in daily life and needs. This approach encouraged plebeian citizens to break or develop ties, as the case might be, with any and all parties and coalitions as long as they contributed to the secessionist cause. This pragmatic stance might strike some readers as opportunistic and devoid of ethical content; however, as I noted earlier, this was not so. Those plebeians who broke away from populism did so knowing that they would no longer have access to any of the material and symbolic resources (public employment, welfare relief, access to influential city officials) they once had.

Bolivian undocumented immigrants in workshops that produce garments for La Salada organized a series of street marches in the city of Buenos Aires. These immigrants demanded to represent themselves in their own terms as self-exploited workers and rejected the way that La Alameda and other human rights groups portrayed them as slave labor. Bolivian immigrants also challenged the Abuelas of the Plaza de Mayo as well as municipal officials, the police, and city inspectors. According to immigrant groups, all of them to varying degrees employ the idiom of human rights and legality in order to energize and reaffirm the xenophobic practices that remained dominant and widespread in the city of Buenos Aires, especially among the middle-class “progressive” sectors of society.

Despite its momentary setbacks and long-lasting reversals, plebeianism has already left thick material and symbolic residues across Argentina’s public landscape, providing a significant number of poor and impoverished middle-class families an alternative to rentier and populist models of democratic life. Similar processes are occurring in other countries of the global south, although it remains to be seen whether plebeianism will generate its own alternative set of institutions like those (citizenship, civil society, mass markets, public sphere, political parties) that were developed by the marginalized, working, and middle sectors of nineteenth-century North America and Western Europe (Breauagh 2013).

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In June 2013, a series of large demonstrations throughout Brazil started to shake its main cities and political landscape. In this article I juxtapose these protests, the social movements of the 1970s and 1980s that brought the poor peripheries of São Paulo to the center of the political scene, and the cultural production coming from these peripheries after the 1990s. This juxtaposition creates a perspective from which to look at the changes that have transformed cities, citizens, and the polity in Brazil during the last decades. One of my main arguments is that in São Paulo, as in many other metropolises shaped by peripheral urbanization, political agency is inseparable from the spatial configuration of the city and from its shifting patterns of spatial segregation and social inequality. I focus on the peripheries and argue that the quality of both poverty, the urban environment, and citizens’ engagement have changed a great deal from the 1970s to the present. Poverty has different signifiers in a city of better infrastructure, mass communication, democracy, less violence, and broader access to consumption. Difficulty in moving around the city is one of these signifiers. Moreover, politics has other languages and tools in the context of intensified cultural production and circulation and of a democracy people can take for granted.

Peripheral Urbanization

São Paulo’s urbanization was in large measure shaped by the way its citizens, especially its poor workers, built the city themselves. As in many other metropolises in the global south, migrants who arrived by the hundreds of thousands a year to work on what was becoming an important industrial center could not find housing. They thus relied on “auto-construction.” They bought cheap pieces of land in non-urbanized areas in distant peripheries and then started a long-term process of building and expanding their residences.1
transforming them year after year until they would become nice houses of their own. This process typically takes one to two decades to complete and simultaneously urbanizes the city and politicizes its residents.

I call this process “peripheral urbanization,” a mode of production of urban space that has three main defining characteristics. First, its most important feature is to operate within a specific temporality: it is a long-term process that produces spaces that are always in the making. Second, it has transversal engagements with official logics. Third, it generates new modes of politics through practices that produce new kinds of citizens, claims, circuits, and contestations. Cities produced through this type of process are usually highly unequal, and the quality of different sections of urban space varies considerably. Peripheral urbanization is a mode of production of space quite pervasive in societies of the global south.

The formation of São Paulo’s peripheries dates from the 1940s. They started from scratch, as residents occupied empty lots and streets, autoconstructed their houses, and subsequently forced the urbanization of their neighborhoods. Peripheries are not spaces already made, spaces to be consumed as finished products before they are even inhabited. Rather, peripheries are spaces never quite done, always being altered, expanded, and elaborated on. Seen as processes of becoming, then, peripheries may be everywhere, not necessarily on the fringes of a city or metropolitan region.

The main agents of this urbanization are the residents themselves: they literally build their houses instead of being just the consumers of spaces built and regulated by others. The making of the houses and streets is a process of bricolage in which each stage depends on time and resources and involves a great deal of improvisation. For long periods of time, people inhabit spaces that are clearly precarious and unfinished, but they do this with the expectation, frequently realized, that the spaces will improve and one day will be as urbanized as wealthier parts of the city.

In peripheral landscapes, houses and urban spaces mirror each other: they usually improve and change together. With time, facades improve, and houses grow and are redecorated. With time, the neighborhood grows, streets are asphalted, commerce expands, and electricity and water arrive. Despite indisputable precariousness and persisting poverty, the processes of transformation of peripheral areas offer a model of social mobility because they become the material embodiment of notions of progress and evolution and express the upward mobility of their residents.

As peripheries do improve, they may become inaccessible to the poorest. There are many mechanisms that can make this happen, from simple land valorization to processes of gentrification that affect what used to be peripheral areas. Thus, peripheral urbanization is a process that is always being displaced, being reproduced somewhere else where land is cheaper because it is more precarious or more difficult to access.

Peripheries are also spaces that frequently unsettle official logics—for example, those of legal property, formal labor, colonial dominance, state regulation, and market capitalism. Nevertheless, they do not contest these logics directly as much as operate with them in transversal ways. That is, through engaging the many problems of legalization, regulation, occupation, and speculation, they redistribute and redefine their logics and in so doing generate urbanizations of heterogeneous types and remarkable political consequences.

Cities such as São Paulo that urbanized through peripheral formations are usually marked by significant spatial and social inequality. Nevertheless, because of these transversal engagements, inequalities cannot always be mapped out in simple dualistic oppositions, such as regulated versus unregulated, legal residencies versus slums, formal versus informal, and so forth. Rather, these are cities of multiple formations of inequality, and categories such as formal and regulated are always shifting and unstable.

There is broad agreement in the literature about housing in the global south that both irregularity and illegality are the most common means through which the poor settle in cities and in fact urbanize them. Frequently, illegality and irregularity are the only options available to the poor to become urban dwellers given that formal housing is not affordable and public housing is not sufficient. This is definitively the case in São Paulo, where conditions of irregularity regarding land tenure and construction vary widely and involve numerous layers of complication.

These shifting conditions and their accompanying configurations of both improvement and reproduction of inequality have entangled the agents that produce urban space in complex political relationships. Peripheral urbanization generates new modes of politics through practices that produce new kinds of citizens, claims, circuits, and contestations. These politics are rooted on the production of urban space itself—primarily residential urban space—and its qualities, deficiencies, forms, and practices. The instabilities of the conditions of tenure, the skewed presence of the state, the precariousness of infrastructures and services, the constant abuse of residents by the institutions of order, and several processes of stigmatization and discrimination are at the basis of the fact that peripheries in many parts of the world are spaces of invention of new democratic practices. Thus, they are what James Holston (2008) calls “spaces of insurgent citizenship.” Movements organized from the peripheries are at the root of democratization processes in several parts of the world and of the affirmation of rights to the city. Social movements

2. I develop the notion of peripheral urbanization in a forthcoming article previously presented as a lecture (Caldeira 2014a).


and grassroots organizations from peripheries have created new discourses of rights and put forward demands that are the basis of the rise of new citizenships; the formulation of new constitutions; the experimentation with new forms of local administration; the invention of new approaches to social policy, such as conditional cash transfers (CCTs) and participatory budgets; the emergence of democratic innovations in planning, law, and citizen participation; and the development of new national societies.5

Thus, peripheries are spaces in which residents engage in processes of construction that constitute them simultaneously into new kinds of urban residents, new kinds of consumers, new kinds of subjects, and new kinds of citizens. In São Paulo, as in many other metropolises shaped by peripheral urbanization, political agency is inseparable from the spatial configuration of the city, from its shifting patterns of spatial segregation and of social inequality as expressed in the making and uses of the city. The relationship to the space they constructed and where they inhabit and the ways in which this space figures in the city’s geography of inequality are the main elements that shape São Paulo’s residents’ political agency and social identification. Thus, in the analysis that follows, I will refer to residents of the peripheries instead of using other sociological categories such as the urban poor. Although both the peripheries and the politics of their residents changed considerably over the period I consider here, it is still the dynamics of insertion in peripheral urban spaces that anchors subjectivities and political engagements.

In the last decades, residents of the peripheries have engaged in several processes that significantly transformed their neighborhoods, their modes of circulation and cultural production, and their forms of political articulation. However transformative these engagements may be, obviously they are not able to erase the gap that separates peripheries and their residents from other spaces and social groups, a gap that has been constantly recreated. Nevertheless, the persistence of poverty, inequality, and segregation should not preclude us from acknowledging the crucial dynamic, creative, and transformative aspects that constitute peripheral spaces. They should also not preclude us from noticing that the parameters that define poverty, inequality, and segregation always change. São Paulo’s poverty in the 1970s is quite different from its poverty in the 2010s, and urban social movements have been directly involved in this change.

São Paulo: Segregation and Democracy

In São Paulo, peripheral urbanization generated a specific type of highly segregated urban space and entangled the city, its residents, and its transformations with the process of Brazilian democratization. As a consequence of the way in which the peripheries were built, by the 1970s São Paulo was clearly segregated according to a center-periphery pattern. The better off lived in well-urbanized and equipped central areas, while the working poor inhabited the precarious peripheries that they had built on their own. By the 1970s, almost any social indicator was better in the center and worsened as one moved to the peripheries. But as this pattern crystallized, it also started to change.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the main agents of transformation were urban social movements that spread throughout the peripheries claiming rights to the city. These movements helped to democratize Brazilian society and to significantly transform the peripheries. The majority of the participants in the social movements were autoconstructors and married, and those involved in the daily routines of organizing were mostly women. They legitimated their demands by emphasizing their condition as proprietors and taxpayers. The large majority of the participants had bought their lots, although frequently they did not have the deeds to their properties because of the several layers of illegality and irregularity involved in the acquisition of the land and/or the construction of the house.6 The impossibility of registering the deed associated with the very precarious conditions of infrastructure and the lack of public services in peripheral neighborhoods led the residents to get organized to claim what in the late 1970s was already articulated in São Paulo as “rights to the city.”7

Social scientists in Brazil and abroad debated intensively about the novelty represented by social movements in Brazilian and Latin American politics in the 1970s and 1980s.8 Although these debates have never been totally settled, I consider that the

6. These could include the following: the lot was swindled; the person who sold the lot never had a registered deed; the development was not registered; the physical characteristics of the streets violated zoning laws; the design of the house was not approved at the planning department, and thus the construction was irregular; and so on. See Holston (2008) for a discussion of all of these situations and about the significance of uncertainty concerning legality in the history of Brazilian class relations.

7. The expression comes from Henri Lefebvre and was brought to the social movements by urbanists and architects who became highly involved with them and with the formulation of an agenda of urban reform in Brazil starting in the late 1970s. See Caldeira and Holston (2005, 2014).

8. International authors who in the 1970s and early 1980s emphasized the importance of social movements and the focus on the city and who were influential in Brazilian debates include Alain Touraine, Manuel Castells, Henri Lefebvre, Jean Lofkine, Jordi Botja, and Alberto Melucci. The list of Brazilian social scientists who participated in these debates is simply too long. Some of the most influential in Brazil were Ruth Cardoso, Lúcio Kowarzick, José Álvaro Moisés, Eveline Dagnino, Renato Boschi, Lúcia do Prado Valladares, Paul Singer, Carlos Nelson Ferreira dos Santos, Pedro Jacobi, and Maria da Glória Gohn.

5. This description applies not only to Brazil but also to several countries in Latin America and Africa.
most convincing and innovative analyses, especially when considered 30 years after the fact, are those that highlighted two sets of important characteristics of the movements: the symbiotic relationship with the state and the cultural transformations they provoked in everyday life.

To consider the relationship with the state is crucial for understanding the novelty the social movements introduced into the Brazilian political landscape. Initially, urban social movements addressed their demands to the state, which they strongly antagonized. However, especially as Ruth Cardoso showed in a series of important articles,9 the new forms of political action articulated by the social movements in the late 1970s and early 1980s were intrinsically associated with changes in the state. As the process of democratization progressed, the Brazilian state at different levels chose to engage with these movements and incorporate both their demands and popular participation to its own logic of operation. On the one hand, as newly elected officers came to power, they chose to address directly demands from the peripheries, from which a large majority of voters came, and to invest heavily in the improvement of their spaces. On the other hand, with the consolidation of the democratization process, the approval of the 1988 constitution, and especially as the PT started to spread its influence, popular participation became part of the modus operandi of the state. In other words, the state depended on popular participation (initially organized by social movements) to formulate public policies. Moreover, state agencies started to relate directly with organized groups according to a logic of segmentation (expressed, e.g., in the formation of sectorial councils) that contributed to the fragmentation of movements and their demobilization in the late 1980s after the approval of the constitution. In sum, in Brazil and elsewhere, changes in civil society expressed in the organization of urban social movements and changes in the state apparatus were two sides of the same coin, and the history of democratization and of changes in the state apparatus cannot be separated from the history of organization and later demobilization of social movements.

Urban social movements, the ones organized from the peripheries and demanding urban improvements and rights to the city, existed in relation to another set of movements that may be called libertarian and that involve all the identity and minority movements. Regardless of their differences, all types of movements ended up changing the everyday sociability of their members, challenging hierarchies and especially gender relations. This was especially true in the case of the urban social movements in São Paulo, in which the large majority of the participants were women. They legitimated their participation on the basis of the argument that they were mothers and housewives who needed to fight for better living conditions for their families. Their engagement, however, transformed these same roles and the dynamics of their families.10

Social movements in Brazil were fundamental to shaping the 1988 Brazilian constitution. They presented to the Constitutional Assembly several popular amendments supported by hundred of thousands of voters’ signatures. Several of these amendments were incorporated into the constitution, most noticeably those that define a series of social rights, those that require popular participation in the formulation of several public policies, and one that defines the parameters of urban property in Brazil. In the 1990s, urban social movements faded away as organizations, but the agenda they had formulated continues to shape both the state and the creation of public policies.

This is not the place to tell the complex history of the PT. It is undeniable that its administrations at all levels, from municipalities to states, and 10 years in the federal government have in many ways been animated by the demands and imaginaries of the urban social movements. These imaginaries have generated a great deal of experimentation and have definitively helped to transform the state apparatus and to consolidate Brazilian democracy. It is clear that in spite of the strength of neoliberal arguments globally, in the last decade the Brazilian state has expanded its social agenda and created new forms of social policy, the most famous of them being a national program of direct cash transfers. However, as the PT institutionalized and articulated its plan to reproduce itself in power at whatever costs (including an undeniable level of corruption and constant alliances with all the parties to the right), it has lost contact with the peripheries, their modes of organization, and their new wave of movements. This new wave is the one that erupted on the streets in June 2013—to great surprise of those in power, who were the main targets of the protests.

Before I get to this recent history, however, I will briefly present some data on the transformations that occurred in São Paulo and in Brazil after the consolidation of democracy, that is, from 1989 to the present. These transformations contextualize both the contemporary types of organizations in the peripheries and the agenda of the protests.

Parenthesis: A Brief Picture of Transformations

Urban social movements in São Paulo transformed the center-periphery pattern that had been consolidated from the 1940s to the 1970s. The peripheries have improved considerably in São Paulo and in all Brazilian metropolitan regions largely as a result of the action of these movements and subsequent state and municipal investments in the peripheries. Asphalt, water, and electricity became almost universal

9. I follow Cardoso’s analyses here. All her articles about social movements published between the early 1980s and the 1990s were reprinted in Cardoso (2011).

10. I have analyzed the engagement of women in social movements and in political parties in the early 1980s in Caldeira (1990).
in São Paulo, and sewage systems expanded considerably.\textsuperscript{11} The number of schools, health clinics, and later on (in the 2000s) cultural centers grew exponentially. What used to be unquestionably very precarious spaces became less precarious spaces. The “city” arrived in the peripheries, fulfilling the dreams of their residents.

The improvement of living conditions in the peripheries was accompanied by a significant expansion of consumption, especially during the late 1990s and early 2000s (Osorio et al. 2011). Despite the economic crisis of the 1980s, the list of goods owned by households has only increased since then. Basic appliances (stoves, refrigerators) became practically universal in Brazilian households, and the list kept expanding to include televisions, stereos, video players, and more recently washing machines, cell phones, and computers. Additionally, the individual automobile was included in the list, especially in the 2000s, as the PT has opted to promote consumerism as a mark of social mobility and has created incentives and subsidies for the acquisition of individual cars. This was done at the expense of policies to expand public transportation and to create better transportation infrastructure. As a result, São Paulo, a city of around 11 million inhabitants, had in 2011 more than 7 million registered vehicles. Of this total, more than 5 million were automobiles and around 900,000 were motorcycles. The inevitable result was impossible traffic and a permanently congested city. It is thus not hard to understand why traffic, mobility, and the price of public transportation were the triggers of the protests in June of 2013.

The expansion of income and the decrease in poverty levels are crucial factors associated with new consumption in the peripheries. In Brazil, measurable poverty has decreased consistently since the mid-1990s and especially in the 2000s.\textsuperscript{12} There has been a real increase in individual income in the period from 2006 to 2012 (Medeiros, Ferreira de Souza, and Avila de Castro 2014a, 2014b). The per capita income of households of all social groups increased between 2003 and 2008 (Barros et al. 2011).

Studies analyzing this important decrease in poverty levels, such as Barros et al. (2011) and Soares (2011), have tried to identify the factors that have influenced the improvement in the income of the poor. The series of cash transfer programs (such as Bolsa Família) implemented by the government since the late 1990s have certainly played an important role. However, both studies reveal that the factor that has contributed the most to improvement in the income of households is the increase in the remuneration of labor. The labor market has in fact had good performance during the 2000s (Corseuil et al. 2011).\textsuperscript{13} All this improvement has not affected racial inequalities: African Brazilians continue to be the poorest, the least educated, and the most discriminated against social group. More importantly, the improvement in individual and household income has not affected substantially what is one of the most accentuated patterns of social inequality worldwide: according to recent studies (Medeiros, Ferreira de Souza, and Avila de Castro 2014a, 2014b), during the period from 2006 to 2012, the richest 0.1% of the population concentrated 11% of the total income, more than the percentage appropriated by the poorest 50%. In Brazil, the richest 5% appropriate 44% of the total income.\textsuperscript{14}

While income was growing, other processes had a negative effect on the peripheries during this period, which roughly coincides with the phase of democratic consolidation. In the 1990s a series of negative factors also shaped lives in Brazilian cities and especially in the peripheries of cities such as São Paulo. Without doubt, the most significant of them was the increase of violence and crime, especially in poor neighborhoods. Starting in the 1980s, homicide rates started to climb in the city, jumping from 14.62 per 100,000 inhabitants in 1981 to 47.29 in 1996 (Caldeira 2000) and to 57.3 in 2000 (PRO-AIM 2011). Murder hit the peripheries especially hard, where rates of homicide reached around 120 per 100,000 in some areas compared with less than 10 in central neighborhoods. The majority of the victims were young men, especially African Brazilians. They are also the main targets of police known to abuse the use of force and to kill. In the 1990s, homicide became the main cause of death of young men (the third for the total population) and made life expectancy for men decrease by 4 years (Jorge 2002).

From the mid-1980s on, violence and fear became dominant concerns in the everyday life of the city, shaping both the built environment and its social dynamics. The city was

\textsuperscript{11} This is a significant achievement considering that in São Paulo in 1968 half of the domiciles lacked water and sewage services and 60% of the streets were unpaved. The large majority of the residences without infrastructure were in the peripheries. Infant mortality in 1975 was 80 per 1,000 live births in the city, but rates in the peripheries were well above 100 per 1,000 (Caldeira 2000:228). After the first decade of social movements, in 1991, sewage service reached 86.3% of the domiciles and water 98.41%. In 1991, infant mortality had dropped to 26.03 per 1,000 live births in the city and to around 30 per 1,000 in the peripheries (Caldeira 2000:236).

\textsuperscript{12} Between the years 2003 and 2008, the percentage of the population considered to be poor dropped from 39.4% to 25.3%, while the percentage considered to be extremely poor dropped from 17.5% to 8.8% (Barros et al. 2011:47).

\textsuperscript{13} Labor force occupation rates have increased as has the level of education of workers. The proportion of formal jobs has also risen consistently since 2001, although the percentage of informal jobs, 48.9%, continued to be high in 2008 (Corseuil et al. 2011:216). Unemployment has dropped to 7.8% in 2008 (Corseuil et al. 2011:215). The national average labor income reached R$998.90 in 2008, around US$554 (Corseuil et al. 2011:220).

\textsuperscript{14} The research by Medeiros, Ferreira de Souza, and Avila de Castro (2014a, 2014b) uses data from tax returns. Analyses based on household surveys, such as those of Barrost et al. (2011) and Soares (2011), underestimate the income at the top and have indicated a decrease of the Gini coefficient between 2001 and 2008, something contested by Medeiros, Ferreira de Souza, and Avila de Castro’s (2014a, 2014b) analyses. Brazil’s Gini coefficient was stabilized around 0.69 in the period from 2006 to 2012, according to Medeiros and colleagues.
enclaved by its residents, who preferred to retreat to securitized spaces and to treat the public as leftover, a process I analyzed in City of Walls (Caldeira 2000). The social movements waned in the 1990s, the decade in which murder reached its highest rates. But this was also the context that framed the reinvention of the engagement of residents of the peripheries. This happened through cultural and artistic production. Although timid in the beginning, this production now significantly shapes everyday life of the young people in the peripheries, who are its main producers. Violence and death, more than anything else, framed the emergence of the new youth cultures of the peripheries in the 1990s. Hip-hop was its first expression.

The dynamics of the city changed substantially in the 2000s. One of the clearest evidences of the changes is the steady drop in homicide rates. In 2000, the rate reached its highest point: 57.3 per 100,000 in the city of São Paulo. However, in 2005 it had dropped to 25.62, and in 2010 it had fallen to 11.48. By any account, it was a significant decrease, whose consequences have not yet been really appreciated.15

In the late 2000s, death was no longer the central fact of everyday life in most neighborhoods of the periphery. At the same time, new forms of cultural production exploded in the peripheries. In the beginning, this production (especially rap and marginal literature) further elaborated the distance and the opposition between center and periphery, making more rigid their separation. Nevertheless, various genres such as graffiti, pixação (São Paulo’s style of tagging), skateboarding, and parkour soon articulated the idea that the city as a whole should be their site of intervention and that they had the right to move around and enjoy the city beyond the frontiers of their neighborhoods. Although the producers of these interventions remained connected to the peripheries, where they continue to live, they went beyond them and especially problematized the conditions that keep them restricted to their limits. The right to circulate freely and appropriate the whole city became central to the practice and imaginary of this cultural production. Free circulation and the price of public transportation were the issues that triggered the protests in June of 2013 in São Paulo.

The 2000s: Explosion of Cultural Production

The young generation of artists and cultural producers today in São Paulo are the children or grandchildren of the migrants who first moved to the then empty peripheries to build their houses and who later organized the social movements of the 1970s and 1980s. The perspective from which this new generation looks at the city is quite different from that of their parents. When they were born, the social movements were already fading away, and the spaces of their neighborhoods had improved considerably. They grew up in a world of democracy, NGOs, relative access to education and work, and increasing availability of goods and of technologies of communication that keep them connected to global networks of cultural production. They all carry cell phones and have some access to the Internet. In contrast, their parents, a proportion of them illiterate, faced long years of a military dictatorship and censored mass media and only dreamed of an almost impossible telephone landline. This generation spent at least part of their lives without electricity and asphalt and could not consume goods at rates seen in today’s generation. While poverty most certainly persists and continues to frame many peripheral areas of the city, its character and conditions have changed.

The generation that built the peripheries had one central project of consumption and social mobility: their houses and their appliances. For this they made incredible sacrifices and accepted a state of significant immobility in the city. Their project was a family project, and the social movements reflect this fact, as most of the participants were married. Women made up the majority of the participants and justified their engagement in urban struggles on the basis of their roles as mothers. Nevertheless, levels of poverty and patterns of consumption have changed, as have the modes of political engagement. Today the projects of consumption of the new generation are mainly individual. They value a large list of items ranging from clothes, cell phones, and all electronic and communication-related items to motorcycles and cars. They want to move around and to do so in a fashionable way. Their cultural production, which is almost exclusively male, clearly expresses this desire.16 It also expresses a significant broadening of horizons, as the Paulista cultural production dialogues with global circuits, from which it takes inspiration and simultaneously contributes to its transformation.

This new cultural production started in the early 1990s with hip-hop, when rates of violent crime were on the rise. It was especially rap that articulated a view from the peripheries at that moment. São Paulo’s rappers identify themselves as from the peripheries, as poor, and as black, and they articulate a powerful social critique. In a few years, they became the interpreters and voices of a generation of young men coming of age in the peripheries at its most violent

15. There is not a consensus among either citizens or social scientists regarding the reasons for the sharp decrease. The government credits it to its policies of incarceration, police reform, and improvement of systems of information. NGOs and human rights activists associate it with the control of weapons and policies of empowerment of youth in the peripheries. Hip-hop may associate it with its efforts to incorporate youth into its practices. Some people associate the decrease with the role of organized crime in disciplining the use of weapons among its members and structuring everyday life in the peripheries under its authoritarian practices (Feltman 2010).

16. I analyze this gender imbalance in Caldeira (2014a). The emphasis on individual consumption and style is articulated especially by a genre called funk ostentação (ostentation funk), which became especially popular in the 2010s.
moment.\textsuperscript{17} Paulista rap of the 1990s talks about the periphery (they talk about it in the singular) as a world apart, and they describe it in quite dystopic and unsuitable ways as a space of despair: violent, ugly, poor, dirty, and polluted; a space of single mothers and alcoholic fathers, of treacherous young women, of feuds and deaths of young men, most of them black. This is a space in which “to die is a factor / The true trick is to live,” as the group Racionais MC’s put it. Rappers transformed “the periphery” into a homogenizing symbol of precariousness, violence, and inequality that disregards the real improvements that have happened in the peripheries and erases the differences among their spaces. It is in the terms of this symbol that the periphery has been appropriated by thousands of its residents for whom rappers offered a language to express their despair and frustration with the daily indignities they suffer in the city.

The imaginary articulated by the raps of the 1990s became the repertoire of other artistic genres created in the peripheries. One of them is “marginal literature” (literatura marginal), a term that designates the production of a series of writers from the peripheries who write about the periphery as a world apart and may at times call it “ghetto” or sometimes “favela” or senzala, the Brazilian term for slave quarters.\textsuperscript{18}

But while rap and marginal literature elaborated the notion of an enclosed periphery, other artists were going beyond its limits and trying to mark and appropriate the whole city. They started to be noticed in the 1990s but became especially visible in the 2000s. A less murderous city is a city in which circulation is more feasible and where the themes of cultural production may be broadened. Although it may be hard to prove, one can certainly speculate that the decrease in homicide rates is associated with other phenomena that have been changing considerably the everyday dynamics in the city. Since the mid-2000s, the city has been booming with cultural and artistic interventions, in the center and in all directions of the peripheries, and death and violence are not necessarily their dominant themes, although social inequality continues to be.\textsuperscript{19}

The dispersion of cultural producers from the peripheries into the public spaces of the city is probably most evident in the types of practices that take the whole city as a site of intervention: graffiti, tagging, skateboarding, parkour, and motorcycling. They all grew exponentially during the 2000s. Against the symbolic construction of the ghetto and seclusion to its limits, they claim all urban space. “A city only exists for those who can move around it!” says a graffito from 2009 in downtown São Paulo. This graffito is associated with Movimento Passe Livre (MPL; Free Pass Movement), the movement for free public transportation that called the demonstrations in June of 2013.

I do not have space here to analyze all these urban practices. However, it is important to add a few comments about the most visible of them: graffiti and pixação.\textsuperscript{20} Most graffiti artists and pixadores (taggers) are young men who come from nonelite and noncentral areas of the city. Most pixadores come from the peripheries and grew up under conditions of significant poverty. The two basic formal elements that set those two styles apart are the use of color and figuration. Today, what most Paulistanos recognize as graffiti are large and colorful murals painted mainly on public surfaces and creating amazing characters and complex compositions. São Paulo graffiti is known internationally and has become one of the city’s touristic attractions.

Pixação has a much more transgressive relationship with the city and its public. It is writing in public spaces, usually in black and without figuration. Pixadores tag any type of surface or building, and their inscriptions are omnipresent in the city today, constituting a central mark of the public in any direction one wonders, from the center to all the peripheries. The idea is to inscribe onto the most impossible of spaces, to experience an adrenaline rush by risking personal safety. Pixação is about being recognized for one’s daring deeds and the marks left all over the city. Violence, competition, aggressiveness, and adrenaline are ingredients in the type of masculinity it articulates. Pixação accepts the illicit as something both inevitable and desirable, as the only location from where young men from the peripheries can speak. The majority of the population detests pixação. They see it as vandalism and crime, as attacks on their property, and as proof of the deterioration and defacement of the public spaces within which they no longer prefer to circulate.

Pixação and graffiti are not organized movements, even less political movements. They are transgressions. More than improper appropriations of public or private space, they imprint on the city, especially on its wealthier parts, the presence of those who were supposed to be invisible. In the same way as other forms of artistic interventions produced from the peripheries, they destabilize existing systems of representations, social relations, and rules for the use of public space dominated by the upper classes. Thus, all these practices dislocate the center, affecting its character and reconfiguring the public of the whole city. In this sense, they differ a great deal from the social movements of the previous generation. The latter demanded the recognition of workers’ dignity and their rights as citizens as well as their access to the benefits of the modern city. Their imaginary aimed to bring the center and its good quality of life to the outskirts of the city. In

\textsuperscript{17} It is impossible to do justice here to the complexity of the repertoire articulated by rappers, something I attempt in Caldeira (2006).

\textsuperscript{18} For a history of marginal literature, see Nascimento (2009).

\textsuperscript{19} I will not be able to address all types of artistic interventions that have proliferated in the peripheries starting in the late 1990s. One of the main genres is the sarau, a weekly literary encounter in bars throughout the peripheries where hundreds of people meet regularly to read their poetry. I analyze the sarau in Caldeira (2014a).

\textsuperscript{20} I have addressed their characteristics in a previous article (Caldeira 2012).
contrast, the art of the peripheries in the 2000s started to formulate the notion that the future of the cultural production in the city would come from the peripheries and then be diffused throughout the metropolis, affecting deeply rooted patterns of social inequality. These interventions can only be tense and frequently aggressive, as they challenge long-term and entrenched patterns of dominance and discrimination and take by force the spaces they utilize for their expression. However, this production of self-representation and its transgressive character are without doubt some of the most innovative by-products of Brazilian democratization.

The City and the Protests

Participants in the June 2013 protests in São Paulo were from all social groups. Some accounts have characterized them as middle-class protests. In fact, they were not the protests of one group or another but rather an amalgamation of complaints from all sides of the social spectrum. Participants were on average young, and many of them came from the peripheries and had been participating in the types of cultural productions that I have just described. In fact, the protests and this cultural production do share several features and themes.

Some common characteristics relate to the form in which the protests unfolded. Dispersion is probably its main characteristic. Although the protests were initiated by an organization, the MPL, it has never tried to articulate all that was happening on the streets and never claimed a role of coordination. The protests started slowly in early June, bringing to the streets maybe 1,000–2,000 people. Participants in this phase were heterogeneous but included some groups of cultural producers I just mentioned, such as pixadores. It also included a range of groups of anarchistic and libertarian orientation. To call the protests, they relied on what they have always relied on for circulating their production: the Internet. Moreover, they evidently relied on the imaginaries articulated in years of intense cultural production, especially on their views of the city and of alternative futures for it. But they did not predict the success of their call and could not control some of its developments.

Evidently, the protests also have a global lineage, and they followed closely the ones in Istanbul in the previous month. “Turkey is here” was a banner in São Paulo’s streets. Analyses of protests such as those of the Arab Spring, Occupy, the Indignados of Spain, and of Istanbul have already revealed features that point to the existence of a new type of public mobilization. They include a symbiotic relationship with the Internet and the social media; the diffused and spontaneous organization around networks; the capacity to attract thousands of participants in a short period of time; the heterogeneity of the participants, who may or may not form coalitions; the handmade quality of posters and banners; and a high participation of young people. The demonstrations also disregard established political institutions such as political parties and unions and clearly indicate a shift in the way in which political languages are produced, circulate, and guide practices. They reveal that previous monopolies in the production of information and forms of organization have broken down.

One of the main features of the São Paulo demonstrations was the proliferation of handmade posters with imaginative phrases in which individuals expressed their frustrations, their take on what was going on, and their demands. Many posters in June 2013 communicated ideas that have been in the making and circulating in several genres of cultural production, in the social media, and in blogs for quite a while. Moreover, from the streets, participants fed back the social media, describing, documenting, interpreting, and thus amplifying the events and rearticulating networks. This exchange between the Internet and the streets was palpable in São Paulo and other Brazilian cities, where events such as police repression were posted and shared immediately on Twitter and Facebook, convincing many who had stayed at home to join the crowds. Moreover, these signs also established dialogues with mainstream media, politicians, the Internet, and other groups of participants.

The protests problematized the city. The demonstrations in São Paulo were triggered by an increase of R$0.20 (US $0.10) in the fare for public transportation. It did not take long for protesters to insist that the demonstrations were not only about the 20 cents and for a long list of demands to appear on the streets. Moreover, the demonstrations persisted after the increase was canceled. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the city—its pattern of spatial segregation with great distances separating social classes and especially its everyday dynamics of stalled traffic and eternal difficulties of moving around—was at the core of the protests.

The experience of moving around in traffic is painful for all, and the indignities of using absolutely packed public transportation—buses, vans, and the subway—are a constant complaint of the millions who commute everyday. The Internet has been functioning for a long time as the space to express and spread the feelings of irritation. Anyone who follows Facebook and Twitter on a daily basis knows that people sitting in the immense traffic jams use their cell phones to post messages such as “in the damn bus: stopped for 15 minutes!”, “Will be late for work AGAIN,” “Oh no! Now it stopped to get a handicapped person: will be even more delayed.” And so it goes, a breeding site for frustrations and a space for the expression of prejudices and intolerance, some times in cruel and vulgar terms.

Traffic and mobility are also fundamental to a new type of social movement that made the call to the streets in June: the Movimento Passe Livre. It describes itself as “an autonomous, a-political (a-party), horizontal, and independent movement, which fights for true public transportation, free for all, and away from the private initiative.” It is not a new movement, because it was founded in 2005, but it had not been taken seriously by the instituted political organizations.
Although it did not originate in the peripheries, it is a movement that knows how to articulate the everyday frustrations of the city and the aspirations of its young people and that dares to look for democratic and radical alternatives for the problem of urban mobility, such as the notion of zero fare, a proposal it has supported with studies of alternative modes of taxation that could finance a free public transportation system of quality for all. For years, the motto of the movement has been, “A city only exists for those who can move around it.” This is a demand of a fundamental right to the city.

But as I have argued above, this affirmation is more than a demand of a fundamental right to the city. It also expresses the practice and the values of an immense number of young people and of the intense cultural and artistic production that proliferates especially in the peripheries. A city in which pixação is omnipresent should have already understood both the desires for mobility and visibility of many young men, the aggressiveness of the interventions that attempt to materialize them, and the mounting indignation associated with the continuous difficulties to move around in and become part of the whole city.

But this new cultural production also expresses several other indignations related to everyday life in the city, most importantly anger in relation to a police force that has never refrained from using violence in the peripheries. It is not surprising, therefore, that social media exploded and the streets became full of people as soon as the demonstrations in mid-June started to be treated with an unusual level of police violence (tear gas and rubber bullets shot at the crowd, plus beating). It should also not be a surprise that posters incessantly reproduced on Facebook remarked, “The PM [military police] is doing on Paulista [a central avenue] what they have never stopped doing in the peripheries.”

The class tension that marks the city and that is expressed by its spatial segregation became palpable on the streets and in social media as the protest unfolded. An image that went viral juxtaposed two photographs: on one side, a middle-class young man held a poster with the words “The people woke up”; on the other side, a bus burning in some area of the periphery with the saying, “I’ll tell you a secret: the periphery has never slept.” Posters indicating the peripheries’ sharp awareness abounded. Thus, those who had been articulating new imaginaries and a deep indignation in alternative spaces for quite a while finally arrived in the streets and made sure to attribute to others the feelings of surprise. They knew; the others were the ones only now discovering and being surprised. Those who did not realize what was going on were the political parties that have not listened to them, the governments that have disrespected them continuously, and the middle classes that arrived late in the streets to join in the indignation.

Thus, in the same way that the spontaneity of the demonstrations and the new format of the MPL indicate a break in monopolies, authorities, and modes of political organization, the new cultural production of the peripheries and its circulation via Internet or via the walls and streets of the city has been breaking monopolies in the production of representations and interpretations and displacing authorships and authorities. This dispersed cultural production does not conceive itself in terms of political movements, but it has certainly been producing new imaginaries that circulate in autonomous and nonregulated ways, imaginaries that crystallized on the streets and that express some of the great inequalities and social tensions that constitute the metropolis.

Democracy

It is obvious that this was not the only thing that crystallized on the streets and that participants in the protests were not only young people from the peripheries. After the demonstrations exploded, all manner of simmering irritations and anger from across all social groups found expression on the streets, most notably exasperation with politicians and their corruption; frustration with government at all levels and branches (government buildings were attacked in several cities); the sense of absurdity of the expense of megaevents such as the World Cup contrasted with the disregard of basic social rights such as education and health (we want “FIFA standard” schools and clinics, said the posters); annoyance with political parties (the PT flags were burned on the streets); perplexity with the attempt of some in Congress to undermine LGBT rights; and the revolt at continuous police violence. This proliferation of protests on the streets, preceded by exchanges on the Internet and years of cultural production and interventions into the space of the city, indicate the incapacity of established organizations and institutions to maintain a hegemony in the production of interpretations and practices. This can be very positive and liberating, opening new paths, breaking old monopolies, and revealing new articulations. But it also indicates risks and the need for a new democratic articulation that goes beyond posters, hashtags, and inscriptions on walls, an articulation able to contain authoritarian and violent impulses and create alternative political spaces without sacrificing the novelties.

How this new articulation may be obtained is an open and challenging question. When the urban social movements emerged in the peripheries of São Paulo in the mid-1970s, they were a big surprise. They had been silently in the making for a while, but no one had predicted that the movements that would be fundamental to democratizing Brazil would come either from the peripheries or from the Catholic Church and that they would be articulated through demands for rights to the city. Moreover, no one could predict the influence they would have in shaping Brazilian democracy in the decades that followed. The urban social movements waned after the 1990s, but the imaginaries, experiments, and institutions they helped to create, including the PT, remain up to today. But they are now facing a serious crisis.

The protests of June 2013 have also been a big surprise. It is clear that old interpretive frameworks will not help to
understand them. These protests have not been preceded by years of careful political organization and have no clear leaders or organizations associated with them. However, it is clear that the political interventions that now carry the promise of innovation and pushing the limits of established and unequal social arrangements are not coming from predictable places, and they reveal how much the city and its polity have changed in the last few decades.

In the period after June 2013, the city continued to see a series of protests and mobilizations that suggested that the processes unleashed then are still unfolding. One of the most interesting of them started to appear in December 2013: the rolezinhos. These are gatherings on the order of a few thousand young people, mostly male, in shopping centers. They get together to have fun for the sake of just going around and having a good time. These encounters are organized via Facebook, and they soon became a matter of great concern and significant repression as the police were called in to control them. However, people participating in rolezinhos do not commit any crimes and are not violent: they simply circulate. But they usually enter the malls in large groups singing songs that belong to the last genre of cultural production that is shaking the peripheries: funk ostentação (ostentation funk). This is a genre of music/video production that has some relationship to rap. However, while Brazilian rap has always maintained a sharp critical perspective regarding the deep inequalities that mark the city and an ambiguous relationship with consumption, funk ostentação, which emerged in the context of the increase in individual income, celebrates exaggerated consumption.21 While it shares with other genres of cultural production pleasure in circulating around the city and doing so in style, its transgressive character is more complex and indirect. It does not come from any aggressive attempt to criticize and disrupt established configurations of power in the city but rather from the type of visibility it creates. The simple presence of a large number of young men circulating in style is sufficient to disrupt order and generate fear in a society in which young men are supposed to know their place, which means not only to stay in the peripheries but also to not consume what is associated with the better off. The confusion of class boundaries caused by ostentation consumption and the circulation of young men from the peripheries in spaces such as malls has proved to be quite intolerable to the current mode of regulation of class distance and differentiations in the city.

In spite of recent improvements, São Paulo continues to be almost as unequal as it has always been, but the nature of poverty, the urban environment, and citizens’ engagement have changed a great deal. Poverty has different signifiers in a city of better infrastructure, mass communication, democracy, less violence, and broader access to consumption. The difficulty in moving around the city is one of these signifiers. Moreover, politics has other languages and tools in the context of intensified cultural production and circulation and of a democracy people can take for granted. For years, youth groups from the peripheries have been inscribing the city and especially its center with their transgressive interventions. Their presence disturbs the public of the city accustomed to great distances between spaces and social groups. As such, their presence provokes what Rancière (1999 [1995]) would call a “disagreement,” a disturbance in the taken-for-granted that opens a disensus and the possibility of the political.

Any new democratic articulation will have to consider these groups, their political inventiveness, their aggression, and the challenges they present for the creation of a more democratic and less unequal society.

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21. Funk ostentação has become very popular in São Paulo in the early 2010s. One of its main forms of diffusion are music videos posted on YouTube. Some of them have views of the order of tens of millions. A good introduction to their aesthetic and imaginary is the film Funk Ostentação—o Filme, available at http://vimeo.com/53679071.


Forget the Poor
Radio Kinship and Exploited Labor in Zambia
by Harri Englund

Gogo Breeze, a popular radio personality in Zambia’s Eastern Province, responds to his listeners’ frequent evocations of poverty by refusing to consider them as members of the generic poor. Instead, he deploys idioms of kinship by which his status as the listeners’ grandfather on air assigns him moral authority that is both intimate and infallible. In this article I examine radio kinship in the context of abundant labor and scarce opportunities to be gainfully employed in Chipata, the provincial capital. A labor dispute between Zambian workers and Chinese management brought to the fore grievances about wages and conditions. When the grievances fell on deaf ears with both management and the government, the workers turned to Gogo Breeze with a letter in which they asserted themselves as children. The radio grandfather responded by visiting the provincial labor office and by broadcasting a richly allusive story about exploitation. The article concludes by discussing hierarchy and conflict as intrinsic to the mutuality and dependence that the workers yearned for. Radio kinship as one modality of mutual dependence offered a frame for making claims that was compatible with what the workers demanded.

“What makes me laugh in this case is that there is hunger in his house.” Gogo Breeze, the most popular radio personality in Zambia’s Eastern Province, had erupted into laughter when a letter about destitution had been read to him during his weekly broadcast of listeners’ letters. He had found hilarity in the letter’s initial comment, “My wife and children want to leave me because of hunger.” I have failed to buy food and pay the rent,” the letter went on to say, “I do not have anything at all.” The letter also disclosed that the writer was 46 years old, had continued secondary schooling until form 3, and had worked as a housekeeper in a mining town. After composing himself, Gogo Breeze remarked that form 3 “is a very powerful grade” and had a brief conversation with Pauline Phiri, his fellow presenter, who had read out the letter.

Gogo Breeze. Let me just say that the fellow should come here so that we meet.
Pauline Phiri. Do you want to give him a job?
Gogo Breeze. Not to give him a job, but let us see who he is, because to merely write on a paper, I don’t know what his status is.
Pauline Phiri. All right.
Gogo Breeze. When he comes, we can try to share ideas so that maybe he can find a way of helping himself on his own.
Pauline Phiri. All right.

Gogo Breeze. Please come next week, you will find me. Let’s help each other.
Pauline Phiri. And also, a man of 46 years, he is a healthy man, he has strength.
Gogo Breeze. Healthy indeed, he should come here.4

Gogo Breeze’s response was consistent with how he treats the frequent evocations of hunger (njala in Chinyanja) and poverty (umphawi) among the listeners he interacts with, whether through the letters program or during his visits to urban and rural areas. Heart-rending tales of misery would often turn into moments of comedy when Gogo Breeze declined the solemn tone his interlocutor had chosen. After listening to a village woman’s litany of complaints that culminated in her request to file a formal complaint, Gogo Breeze remarked:

Ndingonene motere kuti akuluwa akabwere kuti tionane.
Mufuna kuwapatsa ntchito?
Koma osati kuwapatsa ntchito, koma tikaonane m’mene aliri. Chifukwa kungolemba chabe papepala pamenepa, sinddziwa status yawo, m’mene aliri ali bwanji.

1. Nkhani imene ikundiseketsa apo ndi nkhani yakuti ayi ali ndi njala panyumba; broadcast on February 5, 2012. Transcriptions and translations from Chinyanja are mine. Fieldwork in Chipata in 2012 and 2013 was generously funded by the British Academy.
2. Akazi pamodzi ndi ana akufuna kundithawa chifukwa cha njala.
4. In Chinyanja:
Gogo Breeze. Ndingonene motere kuti akuluwa akabwere kuti tionane.
Pauline Phiri. Mufuna kuwapatsa ntchito?
Gogo Breeze. Koma osati kuwapatsa ntchito, koma tikaonane m’mene aliri. Chifukwa kungolemba chabe papepala pamenepa, sinddziwa status yawo, m’mene aliri ali bwanji.
Pauline Phiri. Chabwino.
Gogo Breeze. Tsopano akakabwera takayesa kupatsana maganizo kuti mwina angapeze njira ina yake yowathandiza pa iwo wokha.
minated in her assertion of hunger, Gogo Breeze remarked, “Your bodies look smooth; you are fine.” Such responses came close to laughing at rather than with the poor. Yet his popularity was unparalleled among Eastern Province’s broadcasters and entertainers during my field research in 2012–2013. Gogo Breeze received more letters, telephone calls, and SMS (text) messages than he could respond to, and his appearances in the streets and villages were often accompanied by commotion as people thronged to see and greet this provincial celebrity. He was a radio friend of the kind that African stations have long produced as a corollary of the radio’s status as the main (and in many countries, the only) mass medium, its reach and appeal greatly buttressed by the use of vernacular languages (Coplan 2011). How could Gogo Breeze enjoy this level of popularity when he seemed to deny what everyone knew was Zambia’s main challenge: poverty?

The answer may lie in the recognition that it was not so much poverty as the poor that Gogo Breeze had little time for. His approach to injustice and hardship—by no means devoid of compassion in most instances—was strikingly different from the veritable industry that had evolved around poverty in Zambia as in many other countries in the global south. State- and NGO-led attempts to alleviate poverty had assumed a central place in public life from the late-colonial experiments with “welfare” to successive programs after independence in 1964. As a consequence—and despite major differences in policy ranging from allusions to African socialism to a particularly severe regime of structural adjustment—Zambians had generally come to consider themselves as belonging to a nation where the vast majority languished in poverty. It was Zambians’ self-identification as the poor that Gogo Breeze’s radio personality so effectively disturbed. Working for Breeze FM, a privately owned provincial radio station, he summoned a public in ways that neither the state nor any NGO was able to do (cf. Forment 2015). Critical to his radio personality was his status as the listeners’ grandfather.

Gogo meaning “grandparent” in Chinyanja. Rather than allowing listeners to approach him or Breeze FM as though they were asking for charity from the state or an NGO, Gogo Breeze based his compassion on the idiom of kinship.

As the grandfather, he wanted to know the circumstances of the grandchild who had written him the above-quoted letter about destitution. The mere claim of hunger merited little more than laughter when it was associated with the image of the letter writer’s wife and children running away from him. The hapless poor, a subject of ridicule, had to be replaced by a personal encounter between the grandfather and the grandchild. Gogo Breeze would not give him employment, let alone charity, but he wanted to meet the letter writer in order to determine how this grandchild could be made to help himself. “Let’s help each other” was a key phrase used by Gogo Breeze, a reference to a form of assistance informed by neither alms giving nor individual empowerment. The letter writer depended on the grandfather not as the poor depended on their benefactors but as an adult person whose potential to care for his own family required grandfatherly advice.

Georg Simmel argued long ago, “No one is socially poor until he has been assisted” (1971 [1908]:175). The purpose of his argument was to determine the place of the poor in producing social differentiation. For him, the poor were not assisted so as to equalize their position with that of the rich. Assistance to the poor was supposed “to mitigate certain extreme manifestations of social differentiation, so that the social structure may continue to be based on this differentiation” (Simmel 1971 [1908]:155). Peter Brown (2005) has given this theoretical interest in social structure a more contemporary slant by discussing the place of the poor in the “aesthetic of society.” Contrasting the ancient world with medieval and early modern societies, Brown concluded that concern for the poor was a relatively recent development in the history of Europe and the Middle East. By not recognizing the poor in their aesthetic of society, however, ancient Greeks and Romans were not “hardhearted or ungenerous” (Brown 2005:517). The beneficiaries of the acts of kindness were not “the poor” but members of the city, the benefactor’s fellow citizens. In their distinct ways, Jews, Christians, and Muslims came to recognize in their compassion for the poor a way of pleasing God, an orientation that began to transform into a solution to a pressing social problem in early modern Europe. The emergence of charitable institutions was, therefore, accompanied by the injunction to “remember the poor.”

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5. Matupi anu ndi osalala, muli bwino; broadcast on Chidwi pa anthu, October 15, 2012.
6. Radio’s central role in Africa’s public cultures has been the subject of volumes such as African Broadcast Cultures (Fardon and Furniss 2008) and Radio in Africa (Gunner, Ligaga, and Moyo 2011). Radio Fields (Bessire and Fisher 2012) makes a powerful case for an anthropological approach to what is the world’s most widespread electronic medium.
7. Ferguson (1999) examines the social consequences of Zambia’s descent from a “middle-income” country at independence to economic crisis and the entrenchment of Zambians’ self-identification as poor. The period discussed in this article coincided with economic growth, again largely driven by copper mining, a point to which I return below.
8. To be sure, Chinyanja speakers laugh in different registers and with variable intents, not least to defuse awkward or difficult situations. In this case, however, Gogo Breeze admitted to me that he had laughed “before I had thought of him” (ndisamuganizire). The expression “to think of someone” can be used to express care for someone, such as when the interviewees on Breeze FM often ask “the government to think of us” (boma litiganizire).
poor,” because the poor, in Brown’s (2005) words, were “eminently forgettable persons” (519). At issue was charity beyond the family—or the city-state—and the imagination of its subjects not as relatives or fellow citizens but as the poor.

The world in which Gogo Breeze had achieved a vast following showed no such signs of forgetting the poor. Zambians of every class, gender, age, religious persuasion, and race were reminded of the poor on a daily basis. Beggars and hawkers in the streets and domestic workers at home gave the well off in urban areas little respite from a social world shaped by ubiquitous poverty. The rest of the Zambians—the majority—were subject to all manner of secular and religious concern for the poor. Gogo Breeze’s achievement was to forget the poor. This achievement is thrown into sharper relief if Brown’s argument is considered a little further. Brown also wrote about those whose role it was to remind others of the poor, particularly the religious teachers and their students in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim societies who were, in effect, as forgettable as the poor. Medieval monks and nuns were somewhat paradigmatic in this regard, marginal as they were to both warfare and kinship and yet insistent on being remembered through the laity’s gifts (Brown 2005: 521). The poor scholars of Islamic law were ostensibly more valued as judges and teachers, but they too had little security of “being remembered as necessary to anyone in particular” (Brown 2005:522). Remembering the poor was, therefore, mediated by remembering those who ran charitable institutions.

Charities and government departments devoted to fighting poverty in Zambia hardly face a similar risk of being forgotten. Far from being inconspicuous, they occupy public life to the extent that it may become difficult for the anthropologist to discern any other ways of addressing injustices arising from material deprivation and inequality. Brown ended his argument by aligning the contemporary situation of scholars with that of the clergy who had remembered the poor in other historical times. Both include “persons committed to elevated, weightless words of no obvious social utility” (Brown 2005:522). After decades of official and popular concern with “development,” the analogy seems suspect for the way in which the poor are remembered in Zambia. Scholars would not be identifying themselves with forgettable persons if governmental and nongovernmental technocrats were imagined as their counterparts, nor would the common denominator be “tolerance for a certain amount of apparently unnecessary, even irrelevant, cultural and religious activity” (Brown 2005:522). The distance that separates remembering the poor in the historical times described by Brown and in contemporary Zambia finds one measure in the figure of Gogo Breeze.

For Gogo Breeze’s approach to poverty and injustice to be understood on its own terms, what he forgot must be juxtaposed with what he remembered: kinship (ubale). Radio kinship was here an expansive modality of mutual dependence, not a way of connecting dispersed relatives as in, for example, Aboriginal Australia (see Fisher 2009). Kinship in south-central Africa, particularly where it has involved matrilineal features, has historically been contingent on media such as food, land, and money in a context of spatial mobility and shallow lineages. Although radio kinship brought mediation to another scale, the voices and words through which kinship was mediated entailed no reduction in intimacy. Gogo Breeze assigned to himself moral authority at once intimate and infallible, a grandfatherly prerogative to consider everyone, from villagers and workers to state officials and employers, in a hierarchical order of relationships only incidentally affected by legal-bureaucratic rules and regulations. Customary codes of conduct animated this mass-mediated imagination of kin and affines. Gogo Breeze built his radio persona on the imagined rural home where, as in a classic ethnography on Eastern Province, grandchildren were tied to their grandparents, particularly through the mother, by a coherence that combined physical intimacy with the moral lessons of “bedtime stories” (Marwick 1965:34). What the tacit media ideology (Gershon 2010) here rendered invisible (or inaudible) was, of course, the very contingency of kinship. If one of Gogo Breeze’s achievements was to forget the poor, the other was to mediate a sense of stability in kinship that had, in fact, been subject to numerous pressures by missionary, colonial, and postcolonial interventions.

In this article I focus on a labor dispute involving exploited workers, government officials, and Chinese managers to show what it took for the radio grandfather to regard the injured not as the poor but as kin. 10 Remembering kin was a distinct way of addressing the twenty-first-century conditions of abundant labor and scarce opportunities to be gainfully employed in Chipata, a town of about 75,000 people near the border with Malawi and sustained by cross border trade and agricultural industries in a rural province. 11 Collective action, such as worker protests, was compatible with radio kinship, but the grandfather’s intervention demanded care for the workers as neither the proletariat nor the poor but as kin.

9. It is no wonder that this contingency of kinship—documented in monographs such as Mitchell (1956), Turner (1957), and van Velsen (1964)—led to methodological innovations that continue to be rediscovered by anthropologists (see Evens and Handelman 2006).

10. A number of issues, to be explored in my other writings on this subject, fall outside the purview of this article. They include the life history by which Grayson Peter Nyozani Mwale, a retired primary school teacher, became Gogo Breeze in 2003, the year when Breeze FM was founded by a Zambian broadcaster from the province after making his career in Lusaka. Mwale’s life history would indicate his commitment to public service long before he became a radio personality, along with his love for the Chinyanja language, to which he devoted several programs. Another issue would be his complex relation to other authorities in the province—including state officials, chiefs, and commercial agents—on whose cooperation his interventions on behalf of his public depended.

11. See Central Statistical Office (2012:19). The contrast to African cities such as Kinshasa (De Boeck 2015) is clear in the extent to which many people in Chipata, while long-term residents in town, found the idioms of kinship and rural home compelling.
Surplus People

John Iliffe (1987) identified a new category of poor people in southern Africa—“those willing and able to work but continuously excluded from employment by an absolute shortage of jobs and land” (273). For the first time in southern African history, the period of economic growth from 1978 to 1981 had not reduced unemployment. Three decades later, a similar scenario is even more starkly evident. Many national economies in southern Africa have in recent years registered impressive growth, but it has not translated into a large-scale creation of new jobs. On the contrary, mining and commercial agriculture, long the two main sources of employment in southern Africa, have witnessed technological change that makes it unnecessary to employ workers on the same scale as half a century ago. The trend cuts across world regions and industries, so much so that analysts are beginning to ask whether economic growth, where it occurs, is essentially jobless (Li 2010, 2013). A concept of “surplus people” comes to describe the predicament of those who are surplus to capital’s requirements. For the anthropologist, the predicament raises important questions about the kinds of claims surplus people might be making—on prospective employers, on governments and other organizations, on kin and friends, and on religious communities. How are claims framed and made to reject the sense that some people have become simply superfluous to other people’s creation of wealth (see Ferguson 2013)?

The controversy in focus here is the China-Africa Cotton Company, an instance of Chinese investment that had brought mixed blessings to Zambia. The provincial labor office, the government department most immediately responsible for investigating labor disputes, turned a deaf ear to its workers’ grievances until the radio grandfather intervened. The cotton workers’ letter of October 16, 2012, was sent to Gogo Breeze. It ended with a postscript: “You the government of Zambia and the government of China please agree. We the workers don’t want the big boss we have. He should go home to China, because he is cruel as well as a thief and has no mercy with the workers. They should send another big boss.” Asking for another “big boss,” it addressed the permanent secretary, the province’s highest-ranking civil servant, through the radio grandfather. The workers made the address by positioning themselves as children: “Please, please, we are pleading with you in government, we who work at the China-Africa Cotton Company are your children, please show us mercy and listen to us.” By contrast, the current Chinese management had imposed working conditions that made the workers themselves strangers on their own land. “This question should go to the government and be answered quickly, especially by the permanent secretary, whether it is good that the Chinese make us work in a cruel way and as if we were foreigners.” Even prisoners appeared to have more freedom than the workers subjected to this “cruel” dependence: “The Chinese make us work as if we were prisoners. However, prisoners are given days when they can rest, but we don’t have a holiday when we can rest.”

The letter was included on Gogo Breeze’s Makalata (Letters) program on November 4. It had a format, as was seen above, by which a granddaughter (mdzukulu)—a female member of staff at the radio station—read out letters before the grandfather offered his response. On this occasion, Naomi Mwimba, a female voice familiar to many listeners not only from this program but also from news broadcasts, summarized the contents of the letter. She remarked that the letter contained three or four complaints, such as the lack of contracts for the workers to sign, the expectation to work more than the usual 8 hours per day, and the lack of holidays. Also in accordance with the program’s practice, the name of the company was not mentioned, nor was it made explicit that the management was Chinese. Instead, the granddaughter substituted the “prisoners” in the workers’ text with another familiar idiom for exploitation and alluded to the foreign origin of the exploiters: “They are just working like slaves, but it is their country, they work with our friends from other countries.” No mention was made that the complaints from these “slaves” addressed the permanent secretary. Instead, the hope for a resolution was invested in the figure of

12. With the exception of 2011, when the annual growth rate of its gross domestic product was 6.8%, Zambia has registered a growth rate of 7% or more for the past few years, a trend that the World Bank predicts will continue (World Bank 2013:214). Neighboring Mozambique and Tanzania have registered similar growth rates in the same period.

13. Before his ascension to the state presidency in 2011, Michael Sata criticized Chinese investment patterns in Zambia, particularly their apparent focus on accessing natural resources and their failure to generate jobs for Zambians (Sautman and Hairong 2009:249–252). Such criticisms were toned down when he and the Patriotic Front took up the reins of government. Among the many academic perspectives on China’s current involvement in Africa, see Park (2013) for ethnography on local perceptions in southern Africa and, more broadly, Large (2008) and Monson and Rupp (2013) for a shift from international relations to history and ethnography.

14. The postscript was written in capital letters: INU ABOMA LINO LA ZAMBA NDi ABOMA LA CHINA GWIRIZANADI. ISE MAWORKERS BIGG BOSS YEMWE ALIPO SITIMUFUNA AZIPITA KWAWO KU CHINA CHIFUKWA NDi WANKHANZA KOMANSO NDi KWALALA NDIPONSO ALIBE CHIFUNDO NDi MAWORKERS. ATUMIZE WINA BIG BOSS.

15. Please, please, conde. tapatata, a Boma ise tiswena ku China-Africa Cotton ndife anu anu tichitireni cifundo ndi fipa timvereni.


17. Ma China azipigiritsa njolo mungo ndife skaidi, komanso akayidi amapatwa maski opumulako koma ifc tilibe Hollyday yopumuluka.

18. Akungosewena ngati akapololo, koma ndi chalo chawo, akuswena ndi anzathu a kumaiko kwina.
the grandfather: "Now, grandfather, what should they do, your children, please help them!"

Gogo Breeze began his response by referring back to another letter on the same program. It had also complained about labor relations, particularly about the employer’s failure to observe new legislation on minimum wage, and he remarked, “Others are complaining, they are also complaining. The issue is the same.” The grandfather also immediately seized on his mandate to approach those whom the workers had addressed in their complaints. “I will go to the government to ask what do you say when people are complaining, and government representatives should meet with those who employed them, because it is not good to do like that.” Chuckling, he engaged the granddaughter in a brief comment on so-called investors:

Gogo Breeze. I am wondering, Naomi.
Naomi Mwimba. Mm.
Gogo Breeze. For someone to be called an investor, for an investor to come here as an investor to cook nsima [the staple porridge].
Naomi Mwimba. [Laughter] Aa!
Gogo Breeze. That’s an investor, now don’t we have Zambians who know how to cook nsima?
Naomi Mwimba. We have.

Having signaled his view on the matter, the grandfather ended the response to the workers’ letter with these words: “We finish here for the time being lest I bring misfortune, but I will take this issue people are complaining about to leaders/authorities, and they will see the one who makes you work like slaves.” The literal translation of ndingautsi kalgone as “I can bring misfortune” does not capture the idiomatic sense in which kalgone has its origin in the image of a sleeping dog. Instead of letting sleeping dogs lie, as in the English idiom, the allusion here is to a person who would be attacked by a dog if the dog woke up to realize that the person is walking with a weapon. The grandfather was treading on a politically sensitive path, at risk of being attacked by the state if he was seen to carry the weapon of criticism against investors. His acceptance of the workers’ point of view was unambiguous, however. In closing, he even repeated the idiom of slavery that the granddaughter had introduced to the case.

The Proletariat That Never Was

True to his words, Gogo Breeze visited the governmental labor office in Chipata. He was a familiar figure there as in other offices in the provincial capital, and he had in fact visited the labor office about this issue already in September when he first heard about the workers’ grievances at the China-Africa Cotton Company. It was around this time in September that he also broadcast a richly allusive short story about exploitation. After the November broadcast of the workers’ letter, however, Gogo Breeze’s intervention in the labor office became more direct and public. A group of workers also staged demonstrations outside the labor office and, when developments appeared too slow to them, at the permanent secretary’s office. By now, the dispute had become a news item on which Breeze FM and other local radio stations reported without inhibitions about mentioning the company’s name.

The provincial labor officer held talks with the Chinese management and was able to announce in December that the company had agreed to pay housing and transport allowances to qualifying workers and would implement the minimum wage from January onward. For many workers, however, the settlement was too little too late. The most vocal protesters were casual workers without contracts, employed for 6 months in the highly seasonal industry and, by January, no longer working for the company. January therefore saw fresh demonstrations to force an audience with the permanent secretary. Apart from expressing their frustration over the lower than expected level of compensation, the protesters had become determined to oust the provincial labor officer from office. In an interview with Breeze FM’s newsroom, one of them insisted that “the labor officer does not do her work here in Chipata. She must be transferred.” Another protester made explicit the reason for the demand: “It would be another attack on Breeze FM or any other independent media outlet were rare in Zambia, but Gogo Breeze’s capacity to work with state authorities at the local level required a measure of restraint over the opinions he expressed on air.

25. Among the local stations, Breeze FM has the widest coverage in Eastern Province. Its main rivals are the Catholic station Radio Maria and the commercial station Feel Free FM.

The government’s response to these grievances had a markedly different tone from Gogo Breeze, who alluded to exploitation perpetuated under the guise of investment. Through statements broadcast by Breeze FM in February, both the labor officer and permanent secretary sought to draw the line at the dispute. They did so by unilaterally declaring the case closed and by advising workers in the province to observe different procedures in the future. The labor officer maintained that “the workers who [were] still complaining of not being paid [did] not understand their conditions of service and labor laws because it [was] clear that they did not qualify to be given the allowances.” 28 The workers’ lack of understanding had also resulted in “uncivilized” expressions of protest, as suggested by the permanent secretary, who “appealed to employees in the province to lodge their complaints with his office so that they are attended to in a civilized way.” When I carried out interviews in the labor office with its professional and clerical staff a month after these supposedly final statements, it became clear that the workers’ demands had challenged their professional commitment to hearing both sides in labor disputes. One officer saw a general pattern in the cotton workers’ complaints and pointed out that “even employers have their own rights, but when [workers] come here, they always want us to defend them even when they are wrong.”

The understaffed and under-resourced labor office was virtually helpless in combating exploitative labor relations in the province, a fact well recognized by its three professional members of staff, as was the plight of the vast numbers of people in the province who had, even after completing secondary school, few chances of finding well-paid and secure employment. Yet by associating their professionalism with their knowledge of labor laws and the need to ensure employers’ rights as much as those of employees, officers made themselves deaf to workers’ grievances on their own terms. Officers insisted on an impersonal order of labor relations in which workers, as the proletariat, were expected to sell their labor under the same conditions regardless of who their employer was. As one officer put it, “These people when they are looking for jobs, they are ready for anything. Even when the employer says 400,000, they say, ‘It’s fine, as long as I am able to feed my family.’ Now when that contract ends, that’s when they come to complain, ‘We were underpaid,’ but in the first place they agreed with the employer that they would be getting this much. They come when their contracts end, but before they were just okay.” 29

The opportunity to attend to the workers’ grievances on their own terms was foreclosed by the officers’ view on the correct sequence in wage negotiations. Rather than entering a relationship in which mutual benefit might be negotiated over a long period of time, the expectation was for employees and employers to meet as mutually independent individuals. The cotton workers’ appeal to the government was no more comprehensible to the labor officers than was their willingness to agree on underpaid employment. The government (boma) as the ultimate parent to whom the workers as children would turn faced a blunt rejection in the officers’ commitment to attend to both employees’ and employers’ rights equally. In one sense, the officers assumed a proletariat where there was none. While the labor movement had played an important role in Zambia, the predominantly rural Eastern Province was far from the mines on the Copperbelt where such mobilization had taken place. 30 In another sense, the officers’ understanding of why the workers did not behave like the proletariat turned them into the generic poor. It was, by contrast, the grandfather on the radio who not only appreciated the specific terms of the workers’ grievances but also provided imaginative resources for envisioning kinship between himself, the government, and surplus people.

The Grandfather’s Allegories

Among Gogo Breeze’s programs were those devoted to storytelling, such as Zotigwera (What befalls us) and Miyambi mu umoyo wathu (Proverbs in our lives). On these programs, he performed his own scripts as well as, with due acknowledgment, short stories from Chinyanja literature, typically from its golden age from the 1950s until the 1970s. Although often situated in rural settings with an unmistakably “traditional” feel to them, these stories could also strike a topical chord. This effect was achieved partly by Gogo Breeze’s comments with which he concluded each story. Without referring to any topical event in particular, he adopted a didactic tone familiar from much popular culture in Africa (see Barber 1997; Newell 2002) to urge his listeners to conduct themselves in a morally upright manner. However, the stories often built on, and even celebrated, the kind of allusive language that reminded listeners of the perils of assuming transparency in social life. One such story was broadcast, as mentioned, in September 2012, when Gogo Breeze had become aware of the dispute at the China-Africa Cotton Company. 31 Although he denied that he selected stories specifically to address current events, he admitted to me that he did find inspiration in what happened around him and was delighted whenever listeners were able to relate the stories to their own experiences.

29. ZMK400,000 was about US$77.
30. Among the many studies of labor and capital on the Copperbelt is A. L. Epstein’s (1958) classic ethnography. The argument that unionized mine workers were Zambia’s “labor aristocracy” is explored in Parpart (1984). For the fate of trade unions in postcolonial Zambia, see Larmer (2007) and Mulenga (2008).
31. The story was broadcast on September 23, 2012, on the program Miyambi mu umoyo wathu.
Under the title “To Leave a Leftover Is to Pick Up [Work] during the Day” (Kuika mkute ndi kutolatola masana), Gogo Breeze told about a son-in-law (mkute), because the nsima porridge his wife cooked was not sufficient for him to do so. The setting was familiar to most listeners as a village in which residence follows the uxorilocal pattern by which a man moves to live with his wife’s relatives when they marry. The narrative quickly shifted its focus to the father-in-law (mpongozi wamwamuna), who one morning wanted to join his young, unmarried children for the leftover but found them crying hunger (njala). He asked why they did not have a leftover, to which “the children replied that the brother-in-law had finished all the nsima, and it happened every time” (ana anayankha nsima ija anatsiriza alamu yonse popeza izinachi nsimaished all the “which” so as not to leave a leftover (njala)).

The father-in-law thought that the son-in-law was greedy (wosusuka) and resolved to let him know his opinion, albeit euphemistically (mophiphiritsha). He arranged a game of nsikwa, in which participants compete using a spinning object, and told the unmarried sons to invite their brother-in-law. During the game, the father-in-law shouted, “He does not leave a leftover” (saika mkute), a phrase repeated by some of the children. The son-in-law realized that they had him in mind and in turn shouted later during the game, “To leave a leftover is to pick up during the day” (kuika mkute ndi kutolatola masana). “The in-laws now saw each other,” Gogo Breeze continued, “they now talked to each other obliquely.” He explained the meaning of the son-in-law’s response by pointing out that only those who “picked up” enough food during the day were able to have a leftover the following morning.

After the game, the father-in-law asked his daughter to see him in private (paseli) and said, “Your husband is rude, why does he insult me that I leave a leftover because I pick up during the day? I am not pleased about it.” The daughter went to her husband to report her father’s words. The husband’s response was defiant: “What did your father do when telling you that? Was it not me whose problems he insulted because I cannot pick up food during the day like he does? How then to leave a leftover?” The woman returned to her father to report back the son-in-law’s words, which indeed “woke him up” (anatsutsidwa), and he ordered her to put aside a little something (timagodi) for her husband. From then on, the son-in-law was able to leave leftovers.

Gogo Breeze began his comments on the narrative by remarking that “the short story teaches, my friends, that it is not appropriate to insult your hungry friend: ‘How come you don’t leave a leftover, money?’ How could he/she when he/ she is naked, hungry, or unsatisfied? When you add to what he/she picks up during the day, he/she will leave a leftover.” He continued, “This reminds me of what happens.” The parallel to labor relations was immediate: “We often hear it said that workers want a pay increase because they are not able to leave a leftover.” Gogo Breeze strongly endorsed such demands in a phrase that emphasized interdependence: “Let us give each other enough so that we can leave leftovers.” A comparison with dogs made the demand particularly acute: “It should not be that our dog eats and leaves food while we as people do not have good food, and the dog is the one who eats well.”

The rural setting was not, therefore, an impediment to an allegorical reading of the story. The figure of the son-in-law—the Chinyanja term mkamwini alludes to a “small owner”—could readily embody moral dilemmas in labor relations. He was the unemployed or underemployed subject whose dignity had to be protected by the father-in-law boss. Four aspects of the story are particularly germane to understanding how kinship was remembered in claims to justice. First, the focus was on the way in which the father-in-law as the one with power was made aware of injustice. As far as the son-in-law’s rights were concerned, it was for the father-in-law to render his rights rather than for the son-in-law to demand them. Second, this hierarchical order entailed a certain register, or aesthetics (see Englund 2011:181–186), of claim making in which an oblique and euphemistic language was preferred to language that made claims in a direct and confrontational fashion. Third, rather than addressing each other directly, the antagonists relied on mediation in their dispute.

32. Although people living as self-employed entrepreneurs or casual laborers in Chipata and as farm laborers in surrounding rural areas rarely follow the uxorilocal principle, matrilineal features, such as inheritance patterns, continue to inform their family lives, particularly among those who regard themselves as Chewa, Nsenga, or Ngoni.

33. Apongozi ndi apongozi aonana tsopano inde, wakuluwikana tsopano.

34. Mwamuna wako ndi wachipongwe, chifukwa chiyani amandinena ine kuti ndimaika mkute chifukwa ndimatolatola panthawi ya usana? Zimenezi sindili nazo bwino tiyani.

35. Kodzi iwe bambo wakoyo pokuza anatani? Kodzi sindine amene anayamba kundinena zovuta zanga popeza nthawi ya masana sindiona zakudya zotolatola monga zimene amatolatola bambo wakoyo? Nanga mkute kuika bwanji?

36. Magodi (prefixed here with the plural diminutive ti-) refers to food or beer put aside, typically by a wife for her husband’s benefit, to be consumed without pressure to share it. It is not clear from this account how the wife was supposed to ensure this increase in the household’s food reserves.


38. Izi zikumbutsa zimene zimachitika.


40. Tiyeni tizipatsana mokwanira kuti tiziisya mkute.

41. Osati galu wathu achita kudya chikutho akipamha ifeyo anului ayi theradi, zakudya zabwino osaziona koma galu ndi amene akudya zabwino.

42. In a Marxist-inspired historical study, the institution of chikam wini indeed becomes a domain of exploitation (see Mandala 1990:30–31).
such as the game of nsikwa, children, and their wife and daughter. It was particularly with her that they could speak, in private, their minds and move toward a resolution. Fourth, food as the crux of contention highlighted how just relationships were those in which subordinates did not so much feed others as were fed by them.

When he responded to the cotton workers’ letter, Gogo Breeze also alluded to feeding by asking whether there were no Zambians to cook nsima. As such, he framed the workers’ demand for a new “big boss” as a quest for a kin or affinal relationship in which their work enabled the employer to feed them. The emphasis on the boss’s Zambian identity seemed to exclude the Chinese from the sphere of kinship. At no point were the Chinese subject to grandfatherly advice or opprobrium. Although this specific labor dispute was not mentioned in the above story, Gogo Breeze’s involvement in it accorded with the story’s features identified above. The preference for allusive language was evident in Gogo Breeze’s remark about cooking nsima as well as in his care to avoid misfortune or kaligone, the sleeping dog. He joined the workers in addressing the Zambian government rather than the Chinese management and thus mediated the workers’ grievances. In so far as the workers felt powerless to make their grievances audible to government representatives, Gogo Breeze’s mediation of claims was expected to facilitate government representatives’ own mediating efforts vis-à-vis the Chinese management. One (grand)parent was required to make another aware of the depth of the (grand)children’s predicament.

Conclusion

So entrenched are the poor in the memory of academics and practitioners alike that it takes some effort to remember any other ways of addressing the injustices that produce poverty. Forgetting the poor is particularly onerous in countries like Zambia, where the entire social world is structured around the premise that the poor constitute the country’s majority. It was in Gogo Breeze’s laughter, with which this article began, that the imperative to forget the poor revealed its urgency. Misery always risks becoming the object of ridicule when its subjects are anonymous others, their destitution their only attribute. The various ways in which charitable institutions seek to identify poor people’s faces and voices can turn ridicule into pity. Yet specificity appears in a different light when it is not dictated by charitable causes that inevitably require some concept of the poor to stage their campaigns. Kinship mediated by a provincial radio station in Zambia makes it possible to forget the poor and to engage subjects across social divides. The achievement by which the radio grandfather forgot the poor rested not only on the evocation of idioms for shared, if hierarchical, kinship but also on certain features of language and comportment: the emphasis on rendering rather than demanding rights; allusive and oblique phrases, proverbs, and narratives; and the quest for mediation.

In other words, Gogo Breeze summoned a public of grandchildren to engage decidedly contemporary dilemmas, such as the discrepancy between abundant labor and the scarcity of jobs. Chipata has its share of surplus people who often present themselves as though they were looking for bosses whose dependants they would become (see Ferguson 2013). By studying the exchanges between Gogo Breeze and his public, the anthropologist can nuance the quest for dependence with an understanding of the point at which it becomes exploitation in the idioms used by surplus people themselves. Slavery and imprisonment appeared as some of those idioms in the labor dispute examined here. By the same token, the idiom of kinship was entirely compatible with demands for enhanced workers’ rights. Minimum wage and leave entitlements, for example, were some of the means by which the management was asked to pledge its commitment to a relationship of mutual dependence. The demonstrations, in turn, complemented the radio grandfather’s efforts to convince the government to fulfill its parental duties.

None of this would inspire further reflection if the focus were on the all too obvious failure of mass-mediated kinship to generate the outcome that the workers desired. No long-term relationship between them and the company ensued, casual workers were disqualified from the kinds of benefits they were demanding, and the labor officer did not face dismissal. Yet the focus on failure would foreclose broader intellectual and pragmatic considerations. Whatever might best describe the field of relations that brought together workers, a radio personality, government officials, and company managers, it was not an instance of the proletariat rising to challenge capitalism. Without a major push toward labor mobilization, it is unrealistic to expect that workers in Chipata would see themselves as a collective force selling their labor and bargaining with those who own the means of production. In seeking dependable bosses, they make no assumption that the labor they have to offer belongs to them in person and is therefore inevitably alienated when they enter into contracts with their employers. As the use of feeding metaphors suggests, workers and bosses are imagined as one body in which mutual dependence rests on functional differentiation.

Radio kinship as a means of imagining mutual dependence resembles the mutuality of being that Marshall Sahlins (2011) has recently attributed to all kinship. Among many

43. The exclusion of the Chinese from most relationships on the ground in Chipata, whether or not self-imposed, found one extreme in the violent attacks on two Chinese nationals there in January 2013, only shortly after the government had announced its resolution of the labor dispute. The victims were employed at another cotton company under Chinese management. Violent crime is rare in Chipata.

44. Well-known examples include the sponsorship of African children by northern individuals (Bornstein 2003:67–95) and the uses of children in humanitarian campaigns (Malkki 2010).
“Poverty” and the Politics of Syncopation
Urban Examples from Kinshasa (DR Congo)
by Filip De Boeck

By means of an ethnographic “urban acupuncture” of a specific building within the city of Kinshasa, this article explores how poverty effects emerging publics in the city. Poverty “rhythms” city life in specific ways, and these rhythms may be best understood in terms of a politics of the syncopated and the suspended through which urban publics are constantly splintered and reassembled. The suspensions and missed beats that thus punctuate urban daily living often produce violence, closure, and isolation, but simultaneously they also generate unexpected accents that form openings into the “something else” of the offbeat track, thereby hinting at the (always vulnerable and equally problematic) possibility of alternative collective action and the ad hoc creation of new groups, publics, and public spaces.

Rhythms of Poverty: Of Syncopation and Suspension

Syncopation, a musical effect caused by a syncope, missed beat or off-the-beat stress (also referred to as suspension).

Syncope: In phonology, syncope (Greek: syn- + koptein “to strike, cut off”) is the loss of one or more sounds from the interior of a word, especially the loss of an unstressed vowel.

A loss of sounds from the end of a word is an apocope (from apo-, meaning “away from” and koptein, meaning “to cut”).

Syncope is also the medical term for fainting, and is defined as a transient loss of consciousness and postural tone.

Teka masanga na yo!
Soki olandi mibela ya lelo,
Oya kote ka liputa ya chinois!
Teka, teka, teka!
Mibali ya lelo basalaka te.
Soki olandi bango,
Okoya kote ka liputa ya chinois!
Teka, teka teka nguba na yo!
Mibali ya lelo basalaka te.
Soki olandi bango,
Okoya kozanga elamba ya kolata!
Sell your corn,
If you follow today’s husbands,
You risk selling your Chinese loincloth!
Sell, sell, sell!

Today’s husbands don’t have a job,
And if you follow them,
You risk wearing a used and repaired Chinese loincloth!
Sell, sell, sell your groundnuts!
Today’s husbands have no work
And if you follow them you won’t have a loincloth to wear at all! (Popular song among Kinshasa market women)

“Sell, sell, sell!” But who has money to buy anything? In Kinshasa, nzombo le soir (the evening nzombo) is the name given to a specific buying strategy on the market. In the late evening, just before the market’s closure, unsold perishable food stuffs such as nzombo, a specific kind of freshwater fish (*Proopterus*, or African lungfish), are being sold at a reduced price by women known as bamama bitula. Many customers wait for that ultimate but very brief window of opportunity to buy something affordable for their families to eat that night. More generally, *nzombo le soir* has become a standing expression to denote an unexpected opportunity or windfall within an overall condition of lack and want. For many, though, for lack of pecuniary means, even survival tactics such as *nzombo le soir* cannot be pursued on a daily basis.

As in multiple other urban settings across the global south (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2013), the extremely low income level of most urban residents in Congo imposes a specific frame that deeply affects the rhythms of daily life. It also modifies the very language that urban dwellers use to make sense of this life. To stick to the market example, when people go to the market in search of chicken meat, they no longer buy *nsoso* (the common word for chicken in Lingala, the Congolese capital’s lingua franca), but they buy *nso* instead. *Nso* has become the common term to refer to the minuscule portions of chicken skin that most of Kinshasa’s inhabitants can still afford. Not

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that chickens themselves have become scarce. Rather, it is again because most people lack the amount of money necessary to buy a sizeable portion of chicken meat that the apocope nso, as an evocation of the concept of chicken and a reminder of its flavor and scent, has come to replace the materiality of the “real thing.” What does this verbal amputation mean in a city where speech is so important as a strategy of self-making and where one has to fully master the art of rhetorics and know “ce que parler veut dire” (Bourdieu 1982) in order to survive, to exist socially, and to become someone with social “weight” (mwana ya kilo)? What kind of crisis underlies the fact that even language, the very tool of individual self-making and collective realization, is syncopated, and the words of this urban speak are rationed or have to be cut in half in order to adapt to the reduced possibilities that mark the quality of social life for most in the Central African urban site?

Poverty, as we know, does precisely that: it modifies the rhythm of life and language. It syncopates the temporality of one’s day (hence nzombo le soir) by constantly generating time- and energy-consuming deviations and suspensions and thereby limiting and reducing one’s options on all immediate practical levels of everyday life. Similarly, poverty also reduces or “cuts away from” the capacity of one’s language to reveal, demystify, clarify, or explain the unsteady ground of one’s life, a life that seems to be formatted by conditions that are increasingly dictated by fate or by miracle. Indeed, heavily borrowing from the vocabularies of the Neo-Pentecostal churches that have permeated the city’s public sphere (De Boeck 2005), “miraculous” has become an important term and one of the main structuring devices of people’s lives. It is not as if the violence of poverty fully diminishes one’s power to reflect or to speak. Rather, it creates its own vocabularies and verbal regimes. Often it changes the very form of words while also modifying the capacity to order these urban vocabularies into comprehensible syntaxes. Often, also, it generates a verbal diarrhea, a swelling army of words, of little soldiers, that people deploy to confront and fight the chaos of their daily existence or to overcome and rearrange that chaos into an alternative order. Despite the wit and humor that is often involved in these verbal and grammatical skirmishes with an overwhelming reality, these attempts to attenuate its violence frequently remain futile. In this way, urban living is constantly punctuated by a semantic overproduction, an “overheating” of meaning, a veritable “speaking in tongues” that, in the end, renders the world even more complex. And through this excess of regularly incomprehensible and always strangely coded messages, through the often meaningless shouts that are constantly produced by the atalaku (the popular animators of Kinshasa’s orchestras; cf. White 2008:59) and that strongly determine the quality of the city’s acoustic scape, through the miraculous glossolalia that are produced in the city’s countless prayer meetings or through the words and messages scribbled or painted on every car and every wall of the city, it is as if this overproduction of words diminishes even more one’s own agency or capacity to read meaning into the urban site, to understand the rules that govern life beyond the immediate surface of its chaotic appearance, or to give that life a purpose and finality other than mere survival.

To meander successfully through all of the contradictions, the impossible possibilities, and the changes of pace and rhythm that urban life constantly generates, to calculate one’s chances and to know when to cut one’s losses, demands a quality of judgment and a capacity to multitask that Kinois (Kinshasa’s inhabitants) commonly refer to as matematik (mathematics). And indeed, to steer the course of your life unharmed through all the pitfalls, all the possible and constantly changing parameters of your daily existence, or to successfully network and simultaneously connect and insert yourself into as many collectivities as possible, seems to demand an advanced knowledge of higher mathematics and of topics such as chaos, fractals, and mobility or a profound understanding of vectorial capacity and the dynamics of (social) transmission. The constant networking and branching out (locally referred to as branchement) that the city requires of people to survive in it, the fact also that one constantly, and often within a fraction of a second, has to decide whether or not to grab an opportunity or to connect or insert oneself or not, frequently drives the urban dweller to the brink of insanity. It is no coincidence that a mentally disturbed person is said to be na ba-réseaux (she is with [too many] networks [in her head]), like the cell phones with several SIM cards that people use to be able to switch between different providers. But madness is also the very opposite of this: it may result from the fact that one’s “network is cut off” (réseau ekimi), that one does not know how to connect and therefore becomes too isolated to survive in the city.

In this article, and by means of an ethnographic “urban acupuncture” of a specific site within the city, I want to further explore the rhythms of the syncopated, the excessive, and the suspended in relation to the emergence of new publics in the city. How do these rhythms influence people’s branchements, their (in)capacity to plug in and connect? And how does this contribute to the creation of various publics and the (im)possibility of a shared urban public sphere? What kinds of openings and closures, potentialities and violations does it generate? How, in short, does poverty effect emerging publics in relation to the city? As we know from Amartya Sen’s social choice theory, poverty, as a rhythm of syncopation, often constitutes a cutting off, a reduction of the alternatives available for choice, and therefore it regularly leads to “a life within limits” (Jackson 2011) and to deviations and transient or more permanent blockages and losses (of time, of energy, of the capacity to express oneself, and above all of social possibilities and associative life, of living and living together in the city).

2. Faire le branchement (to connect) is also used to refer to acts of “corruption”: e.g., a student looks for a branchement, a connection with a teacher in order to buy his diploma. As such a branchement is also a more illicit version of what Kinois describe as a coop, a deal or bargain (coop as in “co-operation”; Nzeza Bilakila 2004). The illicit, corrupt, and therefore more hidden and invisible version of such a bargain is also referred as s/hilda, after the French acronym for AIDS, the “invisible” disease.
However, the suspensions and missed beats, generated by the syncopal and staccato rhythms of the mental and material lines that people’s lives are forced to describe in the urban terrain, simultaneously also generate new and often unexpected accents that form openings into the “something else” of the offbeat track and hint at the possible suturing cuts and ruptures and the possibility of alternative encounters and new collective actions and hence the creation of new groups, publics, and public spaces. But before further exploring the specific (and often potentially violent) microprocesses of these alternative socialities, let me say something about the notion of the “urban poor” in the context of Kinshasa first.

The “Urban Poor”

To talk about the “urban poor” as a general denominator of a specific social class within the city of Kinshasa does not clarify a lot. First, in Congo the notion of “class” in itself has never been a major organizational principle. Second, for a long time, urban poverty was an almost nonexisting category. There are many historical reasons for both. Under Belgian colonial rule, for example, structural poverty was (officially) absent in urban centers such as Léopoldville. It was not as if the (often forcefully recruited) Congolese labor force that constituted the bulk of the urban population did not suffer any privation in the camps and quarters in which they were housed, nor was it the case that there were no unemployed, but the real wages of unskilled laborers were rather high, and the colonial authorities only allowed Congolese into the city if they had a job. Unemployed city dwellers were deported back to the countryside.

In the 1960 crisis that followed the country’s independence, unemployment rose to 52% (Iliffe 1987: 169ff.; see also La Fontaine 1970). To some extent, however, the 1960 crisis was conjunctural rather than structural, and between 1960 and the early 1970s, Kinshasa went through a period of relative prosperity even though its population more than doubled (from 400,000 in 1960 to 1 million in 1970). But in spite of this demographic growth, many continued to find employment as manual laborers while at the same time a lot of urban residents accessed new labor markets from which they had previously been barred under colonial rule. In this way, for example, an important number of people were drawn into the state apparatus as civil servants while others became teachers, doctors, lawyers, and so on, or entered the world of commerce and trade, especially after Mobutu’s “Zairianisation,” a large-scale nationalization of the private and commercial sector that, up till 1973, had continued to be in Belgian hands or had been outsourced to other groups, most notably Greek and Portuguese. The latter constituted an important fraction of the colony’s commercial middle class, both in the colony’s capital and its provincial towns. Many of these commerçants continued their businesses after independence until they were dispossessed of their shops and enterprises by the Mobutist state.

Although the Zairianisation aimed at creating an autochthonous commercial middle class of shop owners, traders, and businessmen, it actually produced the opposite effect. A total economic debacle, it inaugurated the beginning of an economic and political crisis the country still has not recovered from. And rather than creating a local middle class (a role played by Portuguese, Greeks, and Belgians until the 1970s, by Lebanese and Pakistanis in the 1980s, and by Chinese more recently), it generated the start of a process of generalized pauperization that touched both the city’s manual labor force as well as its new army of white-collar workers. The latter had started to work for the postindependence state administration in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but as the economic crisis became more pronounced by the early 1980s, they did not have the time to consolidate their new status and solidify as a new upper middle class. In the beginning of the 1990s, inflation rates started to reach 8,000% on a yearly basis, and the two waves of looting that subsequently swept through the city of Kinshasa and the country as a whole (in 1991 and 1993) further killed off whatever was still left of the national economic infrastructure and activity (Devisch 1995).

Toward the mid-1990s, only 5%–10% of Kinshasa’s population was estimated to participate in the formal economy, a situation that condemned everybody else to the “informal” survival strategies and the small-scale corruption that became famous as madesu ya bana (beans for the children), kobeta libanga (breaking stones), “article 15” (an imaginary article of the Zairean Civil Code: “Débrouillez-vous!” [Sort it out yourself!]), or to a diasporic existence. The vast majority of Kinois for whom such an outward-bound trajectory was and is no option continues its survival struggle on less than US$2 a day, and most monetary indicators of well-being and poverty indicate a continuing downward leveling of different regions of the capital city (De Herdt and Marivoet 2011).

An Urban Acupuncture: “The Building” of Masina Sans Fil

In such a context of “precariat” (Standing 2011) from which only a very small but unsteady political and economical elite manages to escape (Freund 2009), the “urban poor” as a concept to designate a separate social class loses most of its explanatory strength because it basically encompasses the majority of the city’s inhabitants. Here the notion of “poverty” itself comes to mean something totally different.

A place where these histories of continued decline materialize is the site Cielux Office Congolais de Poste et Télécommunication (OCPT), colloquially known as “the Building” (le bâtiment; fig. 1). The Building is located in the neighborhood of Sans Fil (Wireless), a neighborhood of the populous municipality of Masina, itself part of Tshangu, the riverine district that extends east of the colonial heart of the city.

The Cielux site was constructed in the mid 1950s as one of many succurcales of the major post office in the central downtown municipality of Gombe. At the time of its construction, it was located outside of the city. A grand modernist L-shaped building, it housed a section of the national radio, and it functioned as an outgoing relay station for international telephone and telegraph communications (hence the name "Wireless," which is used to refer to the neighborhood as a whole). It thus literally connected Kinshasa to the outside world. Situated in a huge walled compound and connected to Kinshasa’s main road, the Boulevard Lumumba (the N1, which connects the airport to the downtown Gombe area), by the neighborhood’s only asphalt road, the Avenue Matankumu, it remained relatively isolated even when the rest of Masi-sina rapidly developed as an illegally occupied zone annexe of the municipality of Ndjili, one of the last municipalities to be developed by the Belgian urban planners before independence (Fumunzanza 2008:54). In 1968, people’s auto-occupation of Masina as an annex zone to more planned and officially recognized neighborhoods was formalized when Masina itself was elevated to the status of municipality (Fumunzanza 2008:227). From then on, it quickly developed into a Chine populaire, the “People’s Republic of China,” as it is nicknamed today because of its extreme population density (estimated at 50,000 inhabitants per km²).4

In the beginning, the peripheral squatter areas of Masina mainly attracted (unemployed) workers from other, more populous neighborhoods of the city. Quickly they were joined by newcomers from Kinshasa’s adjacent rural areas. Untouched by this swelling tide of new urban inhabitants and their improvised dwellings, the area of Masina Sans Fil, as it was surrounded by a long wall that protected the Building and the land around it against intruders, remained virginally empty till the early 1980s. But then the OCPT gave in to the mounting pressures of the personnel it employed in the Building, and it finished by opening up a small part of the site, in order to parcel out a number of lots for its employees to compensate for all the years the latter had not, or only very partially, been paid. Inevitably, however, once the wall was breached, and even though the site officially continued to belong to the OCPT, it did not take long for other actors (often with a very good branchement, such as politicians, or members of the na-

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4. In 1984, Masina’s total population was estimated at 162,000. In 2004, it had risen to nearly 600,000 (Fumunzanza 2008:62), and it surpasses 1 million inhabitants today.
to the city are the numerous neighborhoods that are not even connected, and for a duration that is never the same), and some neighborhoods or even streets within a neighborhood do not receive electricity most of the time, most receive it for any form of human habitation, and the other electricity equipment. Other machines and motors were sold by corrupt OZRT officials, and market stalls that came to invade the OCPT compound and its immediate surroundings. In sharp contrast with the “human” scale of most adjacent constructions (e.g., almost none has two levels), the Building dominates the whole neighborhood by its sheer size, as if, after all this time, this colonial architecture has remained an alien body in this postcolonial environment, a Gulliver surrounded by Lilliputians.

Yet although it has kept some of its modernist elegance, the Building did not escape the material degradation that has come to mark the rest of Sans Fil. And it is when one steps inside the Building that one realizes the full extent of this degradation.

When the land surrounding the Building started to be invaded in the 1980s, it was already clear that the Building itself was also going to succumb under the pressure. And indeed, although the industrial infrastructure of the site makes it totally unfit for any form of human habitation, OCPT allowed some of its employees to move in as a form of advance payment for their unpaid salaries or as a form of pension for some of its retiring employees. Numerous OCPT employees thus started to inhabit the site with their wives, kids, and other family members. They were quickly followed by the employees of the national radio and television broadcasting corporation (formerly Office Zaïrois de Radiodiffusion et de Télévision [OZRT], today Radio Télévision Nationale Congolaise [RTNC]), located in another wing of the same building. Even though the equipment allowing them to work has long since disappeared, most of these people continue to be formally employed, although those I spoke to had not been paid for more than 150 months (or they had only been paid a tenth of their monthly salaries, not more than US$10–US$15 for most). When the first occupants moved into the Building, the infrastructure had already been badly damaged in the two waves of generalized looting and popular uprising that hit Kinshasa in 1991 and 1993 and that destroyed a major part of the city’s and country’s industrial and commercial infrastructure. The looters removed water pipes, electricity cables, elevator equipment, and a substantial part of the power turbines and the other electricity equipment. Other machines and motor parts were sold by corrupt OZRT officials during and after the looting. Only the machinery too heavy to move or of no immediate practical use was left in the Building, and it constitutes a silent reminder of the site’s more glorious past (fig. 2).

Today the Building is occupied by several families, totaling more than 300 people. In principle, access to and “ownership” of an “apartment” in the Building is arranged, supervised, and controlled by an agent of the OCPT who does not live...
there himself but who holds office there every day. Known as the ADGA (Assistant of the Adjunct General Director; see fig. 3), he knows who has a right to the Building, and he manages conflicts and daily problems (and if necessary, he is also the one who will report problems to his OCPT superiors in the central district of Gombe). His authority, however, is limited. While some families arrived rather recently, some other families have now been living in the Building for so long that the “ownership” of the “legal” squats they occupy within the building has de facto been passed on to the next generation or that the children of the original occupants have already become parents themselves, so that several generations are now inhabiting this squatters’ village together with a growing number of in-laws and other dependents. Some occupants also brought their own parents along. Other parts of the site are occupied by a number of single elderly people, mostly former OCPT employees, as well as by some young orphans of deceased OCPT employees. Its least occupied parts are intruded into at night by shege (street children) and other, even more unwanted guests such as members of Kinshasa’s violent kuluna youth gangs.

Graffiti written on the walls by the Building’s inhabitants to warn gang members not to trespass testify to the sense of insecurity that often reigns in the Building, especially at night: “Kuluna, watch out, we will catch you! We will know you in death” (Kuluna keba, tokokanga bino. Na liwa toyebi bino).5

Given the increasingly violent nature of street life in the Sans Fil neighborhood (that for a long time was spared the worst in terms of gang violence), the Building’s inhabitants try to organize their own security even though (and maybe also because) the local police are stationed inside the Building. The Building also houses a bar, a restaurant, a cell phone repair shop, a Pentecostal church, and a local community radio station of Pentecostal signature, owned and exploited

5. That this warning is not just rhetorical was recently illustrated by an incident (March 2013) that took place in an adjacent street in Sans Fil, when boys from the neighborhood killed a kuluna intruder from a different neighborhood after the latter had attacked someone from Sans Fil. Thereupon friends of the deceased gang member launched a counterattack in the streets of Sans Fil. The word kuluna derives from the Lingala verb kolona (to plant, to sow, to cultivate), but it is also a derivative of the French coloniser. In addition, it refers to the military notion of colonne (or coluna in Portuguese, as the term was adopted by young Congolese diamond smugglers in Angola to describe their movement along the bush paths of Lunda Norte). In a city that does not otherwise give a full right of access to the urban public sphere, the young thus “militarily” occupy, appropriate, colonize, and reterritorialize the city.
by some students, themselves children of the families living in the Building. All of these activities generate a constant coming and going of inhabitants and visitors, and this adds to what the inhabitants themselves describe as the Building’s “promiscuity.” The presence of all these bodies, hands, and feet also adds to the material strain the building undergoes. Without any sanitation blocks, toilets, running water, bathrooms, or kitchen areas, the overall hygienic condition inside the building is far from ideal. Many corners of the building strongly smell of urine, the elevator shafts are used as toilets, and the water that children have to carry upstairs to the different living quarters inside the building constantly seeps down to street level again via the broken pipes of a ruinous drainage system or via the stairs.

Poverty and the Anthropology of Infrastructure

It is often in local zones and domains within the city (such as the Building) or at the city’s periphery (fields, gardens, cemeteries, markets, the street, the bar, the church)—with their myriad activities centering on the local production, marketing, and consumption of goods and services—that the city most fully illustrates its own complex production and generates the possibility of economic survival and of collective social life (on Kinshasa’s everyday urban life, see also Simone 2010:129ff.). Here, the city reveals itself not as the product of careful planning or engineering but rather as the outcome of a randomly produced and occupied living space that belongs to whoever generates, grabs, and uses it. Of course, this occupation is always accompanied by (the threat of) expulsion. Because the urban residents often stand in no steady or lasting proprietary relationship to anything they own—scarcely even to the space they seize, occupy, and inhabit—unsteadiness, or movement, thereby becomes a form of property in and of itself. This random occupation of urban space almost always engenders conflicts with the urban authorities. Yet in spite of such conflicting interests and the uncertainties and the constant renegotiations that these clashes entail, it is this organic approach to the production of the city and its spaces that enables city dwellers to survive at all.

Partly as a result of this organic occupation of space, everyday lives in Africa’s cities are to a large extent conceived around architectures that are defined by lack and absence on a material level. And many activities in the city become possible not because there is a well-developed infrastructure available to sustain them but because that infrastructure is not there or only exists through its degradation and its “absent presence.” As in the Building, people’s lives in large parts of the city unfold around truncated urban forms, fragments, and figments of imported urban technologies, echoes of built environments from the colonial period, and recycled levels of infrastructural ac-
commodation. Although such infrastructure might have originated as the product of a careful engineering of the urban space, it no longer functions along these lines today. Its functioning is, more often than not, punctuated by constant breakdown, by paucity, by failure, by recycling and repair. As such, urban residents are constantly confronted with infrastructural shortcomings and impossibilities, but, paradoxically, these in turn also generate new possibilities and opportunities, as well as different kinds of space, that are important to investigate and understand. The potholes or pools of water on the public road underneath the Building (fig. 4), to give but one example, may become infrastructural elements in themselves, because they create thickenings of publics and offer the possibility of assembling people or of slowing them down (so that one might sell something to them along the road).

In short, these vulnerable and often rather “invisible” infrastructures impose their own spatial and temporal logic onto the city. They close off many possibilities but also generate new social infrastructures, alternative spheres of social interaction, and different coping strategies and regimes of knowledge and power, which force us to look at city life differently and to question standard urban paradigms and prevailing notions of “slum” life and urban dystopia (see also Robinson 2010 on tropes of urban dystopia in Africa’s cities).

Infrastructures, Politics, Publics, and Violence in the City

In recent years, even more than before, everyday urban life, with its shifting appropriations of public space, has taken on the dimension of an existential struggle for day-to-day survival. Simultaneously, Kinshasa is currently being reframed by neoliberal urban reform and development plans that radically relocate the right to the city.7

In Kinshasa, the implied teleological futurities of these urban reforms have a tendency to physically and conceptually obliterate the reality of local lives. Time and again, a number of common assumptions are evident in urban authorities’ policy engagements, governance practices, and private investment frameworks. Above all, they are marked by a profound lack of attention to and a total disregard of the small-scale connections, negotiations, and decisions that people engage in on a daily basis in order to make a living and survive in the moment of the urban context.

A focus on infrastructure is therefore becoming increasingly “political”: it is a means to reflect on the changing connotations of what constitutes the public sphere and the meaning of the categories of public (and private) and of diversity in the urban locale. In postcolonial contexts such as the DR Congo, the state does not hold the monopoly over the definition of these categories, nor does it constitute the sole core of power to orchestrate its contents. As the role of the ADGA within the Building illustrates, the state, in the realities of its everyday governance, constantly needs to negotiate its place to the same extent as all the other actors (Hagman and Péclard 2011). In such contexts, the lines that define the “public thing” remain blurred or are constantly given new meanings (in terms of the spaces, of the infrastructures, of the body politics, and of the specific conditions of the sort of modernities and informalities in which these categories are erected and transform their meaning).

The important issue of diversity in the city should first and foremost apply to this diverse notion of the public itself (and its association with political life). As already noted above, “class” has never been a strong marker to delineate publics and public spheres in Congolese urban life (notwithstanding the much heralded but often still largely illusory birth of a new African upper middle class). An urban context such as Kinshasa’s does not consist of a single public sphere, one dominant ethical or normative space. Rather, it is made up of a much vaster realm of embodied everyday “co-presence” (Amin and Graham 1997:417–418), always already diversified through various different and often conflicting views on what collectivity, sociality, solidarity, collaboration, or the associational might mean on a very immediate daily basis. Various publics, from within and across various (often entangled) spaces, constantly offer a ground for questioning, recalling, bypassing, or resisting official definitions of the public “thing.” This, it must be added, does not exclude a consensus with, a simultaneous adherence or conforming to, or a longing for the realization of the official definitions. For example, even though many in Kinshasa will never be able to live in new city projects such as Cité du Fleuve (fig. 5), it still inspires the feeling, even if only by distant association, of being able to participate in a better, more modern, and global urban future (De Boeck 2011).

At the same time, and rather paradoxically, the mobilization of diversity in these urban contexts is often played out in rather monolithic ways. One the one hand, urban life incessantly generates openings, divergences, possibilities, and lines of flight; but simultaneously, it constantly generates closures and exclusions on other levels through the creation of fake dichotomies, oppositions, and potential choices that are a pretense of diversity but in fact spring from an extremely limited number of options, generating an overwhelming sense of uniformity. As mentioned, this is true for the state itself as negotiated entity but also for the various publics in their attempts to constitute collectivities and groups and through them individual identities. One’s membership in a certain collectivity or group might be less defined by class, but it certainly is defined, to a greater or lesser extent and at varying moments in time, by ethnic belonging, along regional or territorial lines, along generational or religious lines, or by belonging to a trading or smuggling network, a fan club, a rotational saving bank, a student club, and so on. According to the various needs or the relevance of the moment,
each of these “belongings” might be strategically activated or go into “sleep” mode. Sometimes different memberships might be combined, but often the ethical spaces that each of these groups generate seem to exist as mutually exclusive: if one is a supporter of Vita Club (one of Kinshasa’s famous football clubs), one cannot possibly make this known in a neighborhood where people support Vita’s rival club, Motema Pembe (see also Simone 2010:141). One either listens to the music of Werrason or JB Mpiana, and it would be unthinkable to admit to liking both even though their music sounds rather similar. Similarly, if one uses Vodacom as one’s mobile telephone provider rather than, say, Zain or Airtel, it makes one part of a specific constituency, a certain public (even though, for obvious reasons of connectivity and networking, one often needs several memberships and several réseaux [networks] simultaneously, and therefore one uses a phone with several SIM cards). But even so, here too a strong sense of uniformity generates the obligation to conform to your public, and often, while meeting someone for the first time, these are the exact questions that will be asked: which club are you a supporter of, whose music do you like, what kind of beer do you drink, which cell phone provider do you use? The answer to these questions determines the possibility of a longer relationship, places you within a specific moral or aesthetic universe, and offers the sense of being able to “know,” “place,” and “read” the person in question. But when scrutinized more closely, this “knowing” is often based on a (performative) pretense of difference. The more it is impossible to constitute the public or even imagine the possibility of the public, the more the pretense, the simulacrum of difference, takes over.

This is also in part how the city produces its own specific forms of social violence. Even if Kinshasa has been a relatively nonviolent urban space throughout most of its existence (surprisingly, perhaps, given the harshness that marks life in this city on the material and social level, the formidable scale of the city, and the multiple imperfections of its administrative and policing structures), it is undeniable that there has been a sharp rise in extreme violence throughout the city, as the example of the kuluna gangs mentioned above attests. But most people’s experience of quotidian violence is less spectacular. It is the violence of daily survival, produced by all, and directed most of the time against each other (rather than against the political and economical elites that exploit and abuse them). In fact, all the cleavages that run through the city (in terms of class, ethnic background, political adherence, generational rifts, etc.) are constantly overcome by a fracturing of the city’s public space that generates a violence of proximity but that also manages to overcome that violence because of the same proximity (or “promiscuity” as the Building’s inhab-
itants call it). Kinshasa’s public space is a conglomerate of multiple spaces that are constantly being “privatized” to various degrees and with varying success. Public space is constantly fractured and parcelled out by a multiplicity of actors through intricate processes of seizing and capturing. Similarly, the actors themselves are constantly pushed to identify with a very specific group and public. A woman working in the market is not just a market woman, for example. In the beginning of this article I mentioned the mama bitula, the name given to a specific kind of market woman (namely the one who sells unsold goods off the market at reduced prices in the evening). This is a totally different category of market woman than the mama benz, for example, or the mama manoeuvre, the mama bipupula, the mama trieuse, the mama mitelengano, or the bamama baboya toli, not to mention the multiple different categories of specialization existing for men and children in and around the market.7 The income and survival of each of these individual women and groups of women depends on sticking to their specificity and particular skill, hardening the lines of their professional identity and group, and staking their claim, marking their territory, standing their ground, because they all have to fight, among themselves first and then as a group against other groups of mamases, for their place on the market and for the same clients (who themselves most likely hold similar professional occupations). These demarcations, therefore, go hand in hand with lots of social violence, verbal abuse, and even physical aggression. “Everything is a fight” (ntonso ezali hitumba), as a market woman told Kamba (2008): “To climb into a bus, a minibus, a taxi, to make some money, to eat, everything is vi-

Figure 5. New houses under construction as part of the Cité du Fleuve project (Kingabwa, March 2013). Photo used by permission of Sammy Baloji.

7. The mama manoeuvre is a small-scale retailer who resells goods and food that she bought from important suppliers (referred to as mamases benz, from Mercedes-Benz, especially when they sell high-quality textiles). The mama manoeuvre divides everything she sells in as many small quantities as possible in order to make more profit. She does not specialize in one specific product. The term mama bipupula, on the other hand, is used to denote "scavenging" women who look for food scraps and pick up leftovers from the market in order to resell them at a much reduced price. The mama bipupula or mama trieuse is also hired by more powerful merchants to sieve flour or clean vegetables, for which service they will be paid with a small quantity of these items. The mama mitelengano (from the verb -telengana, to vagabond, to tramp, to meander) wanders about on the market looking for something edible or in search of a small job such as washing clothes, delivering food at home, helping buyers to discuss a good price with the seller, etc. The bamama baboya toli are successful market women who, thanks to the relative financial independence they enjoy and the social power that comes with it, refuse the authority of their husbands and claim a position as heads of their households. (For other occupational categories, see Dekossago and Namayele 2003–2004 and Kamba 2008:345–346).
olence. If you are not awake and vigilant, if you are too passive, you’ll die before you know it and then they’ll bury you. It’s like the jungle. When you are weak, you are eaten by those who are stronger” (348).

As such, public space becomes the sum total of a multiplicity of narrowly defined identities and of small parcels that are temporarily and rather fleetingly owned by individuals and small, often ad hoc, collectivities. These constantly have to guard the boundaries of their temporary ownership of a little piece of space within the city’s streets and markets and constantly have to negotiate their right to be there with a multitude of others: neighbors, passersby, street gangs, police, municipalities, and so on. All of these instances never enter into the game as institutional entities but as individual actors, as men and women, with whom (often very provisional and very temporary) bonds and relationships of trust, reciprocity, interest, and mutual gain might be established, and who all become each other’s “field” (elanga), and therefore who also need each other, whether they like it or not.8

The absolute need to constantly renegotiate these links, the need, also, to inscribe oneself in as many networks as possible and engage in as many relationships as possible, offers a mechanism through which strangers and others are constantly being redefined in terms of relatedness, kinship, friendship, and autochthony (and possibly also vice versa). This constant lifting of the anomaly of anonymity also necessitates the ceaseless construction of a promiscuous public social life that takes place on a localized scale and by means of very physical proximity. Not that these conceptualizing manoeuvres of relatedness or the necessity of proximity and promiscuity do not pose problems or dangers (they are often more dangerous: e.g., witchcraft accusations are far more common among close kin than between strangers; see Ayimpam 2014; Geschiere 2013). But at least they offer the possibility of a performance of possible ad hoc sociabilities and convivialities. This performance is most often conditional or pro forma, and sometimes very short lived, but at least it gives an indication of the possibility of overcoming differences and generating temporary copresences or at least the intention thereof. That is why interpersonal conflicts and disputes (over money, about access to a field, or the “ownership” of a lover) are always played out in public. This “playing out” invariably takes place in very theatrical ways that always involve verbal and often even physical attacks, because it is this performance, the theatricality of the way in which the conflict is acted out, that draws a crowd and constitutes a public that will eventually but inevitably end up intervening and preventing the conflict from further escalation, at least momentarily. This even goes for witchcraft accusations: such an accusation has the potential to fracture a collectivity, but at the same time it also brings the conflict out into the open, and by making it public it offers possibilities for reassembling and for what Simone refers to as the “setting of the screen” for a possible public:

For example, one striking aspect of everyday life in Kinshasa—that vast rambling almost ungovernable megacity of the Congo—is just how often strangers intervene into scenarios on the verge of getting out of hand and come up with the right sense of things in order to steer them in another direction. . . . But in contexts where the legitimacy of actions of all kinds can be incessantly contested, where people are always looking out for instances of self-aggrandizement and where veracity has long disappeared as an essential component of believability, the screen must always carry with it the traces of elsewhere—i.e. something inserted that is familiar, desired or reliable. Of course, the person who “sets the screen”—who “screens”—cannot be expected to be aware or in control of this. In this way the screen acts as a kind of “graft,” an image of momentary integrity and completeness that comes from the outside but is capable of acting as if it had been inside of the scenario in question the whole time. An imposition can take place—a different way of keeping things moving, a change in the anticipated story line, where individuals feel variation in the way they experience they are in matters—but with the sense that everything is taking place in the same “neighbourhood,” at the same time, in the same world. (Simone 2012:212)

The performative nature of public space is thus constantly marked by three interrelated processes. First, the “morcellation” or “informal” privatization of that space, that is, the erection of boundaries to mark a piece of that space as one’s own, through acts of taking possession, of capture, and of seizure often made possible by infrastructural imperfections (see the pothole example above) and marked in tangible and material ways by shacks, fences, trees, and so on. Second, given the permeability of borders and the constant possibility, and even the right and the obligation, to interfere in other people’s matters (even if that right will be instantly contested as well), there is the necessity to constantly guard one’s propriety by relentlessly (re)negotiating these boundaries (which in and of themselves not only generate power and control, and thus income, but also the possibility of identity construction and of constituting a public of which one can be part). And thirdly, given the shaky nature of the proprietary reality of one’s claims, there is the constant recourse to mobility, letting go, moving on, to perhaps return at the right time to repossess the place one had to relinquish.

Here the corporeal infrastructure becomes important, for the body is always with you, it is movable, and it is something that may be beaten but never stolen or taken away from you. The possibility and often necessity of physically moving away and coming back, of retreating, waiting (and exactly determining the time one needs to wait), and then returning to stake one’s claim again, is crucial to understand the spatial and temporal politics of urban poverty and public space and the precise

8. A common expression in Kinshasa compares citizens to fields that soldiers (or “the state”) harvest to “feed” themselves (Civil azali elanga ya soda; Kamba 2008:350).
ways in which these shape up in an urban environment such as Kinshasa’s.

Conclusion

In these urban poverty worlds, in the end, diversity mutates into something else. While offering the possibility to constitute a collectivity and make a group, it also generates boundaries and differences that, by lack of a difference in content, and because of the interchangeability of publics, seem to be erected and played out along totally arbitrary lines that prevent different publics, that is, different groups of individuals, to constitute a general public (as the overarching totality of such groupings). The possibility of (a simulacrum of ) the freedom to choose in an environment of poverty that does not otherwise offer many real choices and options is indicative of a constant tension between the public thing and its various publics. In any case, through these mechanisms the urban context continually generates fixity, conformity, and homogenizing uniformity (that is also very persistent in the monotony of the built environment itself, which is often marked by its strongly generic quality). Simultaneously, in doing so, it also generates incessant heterogeneity and dispersal.

On the one hand, then, the urban world is the space where (political) subjectivation takes place. It imposes a strong and dominant necessity to conform in order to socially and/or politically exist within the city (and it seems to be very successful in doing that: the possibility of an Arab Spring still seems very remote in Congo). But at the same time, this conformity is always double edged and always unravels in a disorderly, sometimes playful, but often also violent plurality that equally seems to be a necessary prerequisite in order to survive. The often fanatic adherence to arbitrary rules, laws, and legal frameworks in a lawless world, or at least in a world where laws always seem to shape-shift into something else; the longing to believe in absolute truths in a world where truth is volatile, arbitrary, easy to manipulate, and always multiple; the generation of a monolithic high moral ground in a world that often seems to be devoid of morality: all of this goes hand in hand with flow, flux, opening, excess, fragmentation, dissipation, difference, mobility, and multiplicity. The necessity of singularizing and thereby realizing oneself through becoming the member of an exclusive group is copresent with the impossibility of being exclusive: if exclusive membership in a group seems an absolute must to become visible and to socially exist in the urban site, this only works if, simultaneously, one has the capacity to inscribe oneself in as many groups and networks as possible, for it is this capacity to insert oneself, to belong and to belong together, that also constitutes the possibility to survive physically, socially, economically, and politically. This tension between singularization/exclusivity and the need to conform to and be part of as many collectivities as possible is constantly played out on all levels and constantly makes and undermines the public realm.

Acknowledgments

The data for this article were collected over the past 15 years during various periods of fieldwork in Kinshasa, a city that I have a long-standing engagement with (see also De Boeck and Plissart 2004). The photos were taken in February and March 2013 by Sammy Baloji, with whom I am currently working on a new book about the city of Kinshasa. The photos included here are used with his permission. Research was funded by a research grant from the University of Leuven as part of a larger research project on “Planning Poverty” in several African cities.

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HaTikva Encampment, 2011
The Ambiguous Agency of the Marginalized
by Gerardo Leibner

Under the legitimacy of the wave of social protest initiated by middle-class Israeli students in July 2011, a much broader movement developed as thousands of marginalized poor hoping to obtain housing solutions began encamping in public spaces. These Israeli poor, mainly of Mizrahi origin, did not fit the model of “the salt of the earth,” the “good citizens” who by virtue of their contribution to the colonization project are supposed to enjoy preferred treatment by the state. Based on a reflexive analysis of my political intervention, in this paper I describe the dynamics of the HaTikva encampment of the poor in south Tel Aviv. Making use of the contradictions between the state’s colonialis logic and its neoliberal reforms, a marginalized and poor segment of Mizrahi Jews was able, for a short while, to act as an autonomous political agent and shed the control and patronage of political bosses. The very same marginality that allowed them to develop significant agency and even to experiment with alliances with Arab Palestinian protesters in opposition to both hegemony and dominant sociopolitical structures explains the rapid decline of their protest and its failure to obtain housing solutions and policy change.

During summer 2011, hundreds of thousands of Israelis flooded the streets in an unprecedented protest. Under the slogan “The people demand social justice!” they raised to the top of the Israeli public agenda issues that have long been left out of public debate: the rising cost of housing, the erosion of social rights, the state’s abdication of social responsibility, and growing corruption.

The protests were sparked by students who established a tent encampment pointing to the high rent rates in Tel Aviv’s city center. These students, mostly of well-to-do, middle-class origin, succeeded in drawing a significant amount of public attention. Mainstream media treated them as “the salt of the earth,” young people deserving special consideration. To be considered as such, they had to be Jewish, they had to have served in the army, they had to have paid taxes, and they had to express bourgeois aspirations. In Zionist jargon, they “contributed their part to the State,” so according to an unwritten contract, the state was supposed to treat them as “good citizens” and grant them opportunities. Under Zionism, social claims do not derive from universal rights. Citizenship is basically a colonizing citizenship that allows access to rights and privileges depending on ethnicity and functionality to the colonization project. However, neoliberal policies, which have been implemented in Israel in the last three decades, have eroded public services and the wealth redistribution mechanisms to the point that the state, renouncing many of its social functions, was accused of breaching the implicit contract with “its best sons.” The initial group was soon joined by thousands of protestors, mostly of similar social background: the educated middle class of Ashkenazi origins.1 A political coalition reflecting this social spectrum was established and took control of the mass rallies and the media campaign: the first encamping students were joined by the Student Union (whose leaders adhered to the Labor Party or later to the new liberal-right formation Yesh Atid, the socialist-Zionist Dror Israel, and the Communist Party). The tactical decision to avoid political statements that go beyond social-economic protest allowed this coalition to survive for a number of weeks.2

However, under the shadow of the temporary legitimacy provided by the “salt of the earth” protesters, a widespread and more diverse protest movement soon developed. With the expansion of protest encampments throughout the country and especially in poor neighborhoods and peripheral towns, the young middle-class leadership had difficulties communicating with the more popular strata. From the first mass rally, the professional campaigners reduced the representation of Mizrahi and lower-class people on the stage to a

1. Ashkenazis are Jews of central and eastern European ancestry.
2. For the first scholarly accounts of the Israeli protest movement of 2011, see Marom (2013), Rosenhek and Shalev (2013), and Allweil (2013).
minimum. Repeated incidents and confrontations, in which the prejudices and distrust of the young, educated, and Ashkenazi middle-class activists toward protesters from lower-class background and their popular culture, drove local leaders of poor encampments to organize separately and articulate their own demands.

Different priorities became clear even on the housing question, the most acute issue at that stage. Middle-class protesters raised the slogan of “affordable housing,” demanding that the state intervene in the housing market to lower prices (through subsided mortgages, tax reductions) so that they would be able to acquire an apartment of their own without drowning in mortgage debts or having to relocate to Israeli’s periphery or to the state-subsidized colonies in the occupied West Bank. The state also uses “affordable housing” projects to channel favored social groups toward certain areas. Subsidized housing for middle-class citizens in impoverished neighborhoods promote planned gentrification under the banner of “improving the neighborhood,” which means pushing out the poorest inhabitants, mostly Mizrahi, Ethiopian Jews, or Arabs. This is part of the internal logic of colonialism embedded in Zionism. By contrast, the housing solutions demanded by the poor consisted in reviving and expanding “public housing” schemes by which public companies offered low-cost apartments for rent. The poor, then, demanded “public,” not “affordable,” housing that they could not afford.

A first version of this article was a reflexive account from the perspective of a political activist. I became involved with HaTikva encampment as part of my engagement in the struggle for public housing. During the few months of the encampment’s existence, I did not consider my involvement as part of my research. Only more than 1 year after its dismantlement did I decide to approach the experience from a critical distance in order to distill some lessons for future struggles. These reflections circulated among a few activists and were mainly concerned with analyzing our intervention. A few months later, in response to the invitation to take part in the “Politics of the Urban Poor” conference, my focus shifted again, this time to consider it as a case study that might shed some light on the broader issue of the political agency of marginalized urban poor Jewish citizens under the double constraints of Zionist colonialism and neoliberal policies.

These shifts pose several methodological problems. During the existence of the encampment, I was not acting as a participant-observer. I neither recorded interviews nor systematically took field notes. On the other hand, as a scholar experienced in using oral history, I paid attention to some aspects that political activists tend to ignore. I was highly aware of the contradictory feelings of the people encamping in HaTikva toward the middle-class protesters in the city center and of their ambiguous relation toward us, a “strange” mixed group of activists (Mizrahi and Ashkenazi, Jews and Arabs, working class and middle class). As time went on, I gradually gained the trust of many of the people encamping and their leaders. I was hence privy to many day-to-day deliberations, doubts, and inner conflicts. On the other hand, my position as a kind of counselor and partner to the local leaders may have shaped the way I understood the social and political dynamics at the encampment. My intense personal involvement also meant a strong emotional investment. Both aspects required that I create reflexive distance to look critically at my own role in the events and to try to understand the social conditions that constrained my political intervention. As an activist one tends to underestimate the social limitations to of one’s political will. Self-illusion is a precondition of any effort to defy the social order. Retrospective reflection also requires overcoming the tendency of self-justification. There is another issue in considering my relation to the object of analysis: I lived for more than 20 years in a nearby popular neighborhood, my wife is originally from HaTikva, and I have several personal connections there. My daily interactions among my half-Mizrahi family and my southern neighborhood and my privileged workplace at a bourgeois and mainly Ashkenazi university in the northern outskirts of the city made me intensely aware of the power differentials. The familiarity with HaTikva habitus also allowed me to establish relations of confidence in the encampment despite my own Ashkenazi origins.

A word about the guiding principles of our political action intervention is necessary in order to understand the interactions described and the questions I asked. Basically they are similar to Touraine’s (1980) propositions for sociologists of social movements. Our approach was inspired by the principles of Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970). We, the radical solidarity group of activists neither sought to control or guide the protest nor pretended to be fully a part of it. We offered practical support and established a dialogue with the campers. We listened to them and presented openly our own wider interpretation of their stand. They responded toward our hypotheses, and we were forced to consider their changing responses and to adjust our own.

One morning in July 2011, I picked up Reuven Abergel, the veteran social activist, from Tel Aviv’s central bus sta-

3. The term “Mizrahi” usually refers to Jews of Middle Eastern and Mediterranean origins; until the 1980s, the usual generic term was “Sephardi.” Both terms are partial and historically inaccurate; not all Mizrahi are considered Sephardi (of Spanish origins and culture), while many Sephardi have west European culture and cannot be considered Mizrahi (oriental). However, what matters is the meanings these terms acquired in contemporary Israeli society, socially divided between two cultural poles, Ashkenazi and Mizrahi. On Mizrahi struggles in Israeli society under Zionist-Ashkenazi domination, see Chetrit (2010). On Israeli Mizrahi, see also Shohat (1999) and Swirski (1989).

4. I changed names and distinctive traits in a way that does not affect the analysis while reducing risks to the people involved.

tion. After a short ride we reached HaTikva Park, the only open green area in HaTikva neighborhood. Two days earlier many families established there a new encampment demanding housing solutions. We decided to offer help on behalf of our small organization. Reuven had bad memories from the place. In the early 1970s, after their explosive emergence from Jerusalem’s poor neighborhoods, the Israeli Black Panthers tried to open local branches in poor neighborhoods populated by Mizrahi. HaTikva, one of Tel Aviv’s poorest neighborhoods, was one of the places where their efforts were crushed by local inhabitants led by right-wing politicians. In the 1990s, an ambitious attempt by a new generation of highly educated Mizrahi activists to develop a community-controlled high school was undercut by local political bosses while most of the inhabitants remained indifferent; only a few defended the initiative. “The political structure of HaTikva does not favor social activism,” he told me when we parked. “People here may rebel in a certain moment and immediately after they would look for a politician eager to embrace them as clients. Local politicians are always around and will manipulate people in order to turn them against anyone who helps them to struggle.” He immediately added, “Still, let’s give it a chance.”

A few activists of our group were already helping there. One of them, a student from a nearby neighborhood, was encamping. Two city council members of a municipal list in which we participated had brought some tents and chairs. The encampment was divided into distinct locations. A few men were connecting an old refrigerator to the electricity grid by tapping into the public lighting. One of them spoke to us:

“What are you looking for?”

“We are social activists,” I said.

Reuven added with confidence, “We want to talk with the marvelous people that are organizing this and see if we can help.”

“Are you from the central protest in Rothschild Boulevard?”

“No, not really. Who could sit and talk with us?”

“You can take a walk around. Avi will come in a few minutes and will speak with you.” The young man whistled to another and said loudly, “They are from the protest! Go and tell Avi to come.”

In those days, to be “from the protest” was a generic description of people involved in the wave of social protest invoking a loose and heterogeneous collective identity. To be considered “from the protest” was enough to start a conversation in any encampment. People would then check who you were and see whether they could do something with you.

Walking about, crossing through some 30 meters of dry grass that separated this part of the encampment from the next, some of the women asked us again, “Aren’t you from Rothschild?” Rothschild Boulevard, located in Tel Aviv’s historic and business center, was where students built their tents a few days earlier, starting a protest against the high rents. The women sought to know whether we were envoys of the organizers of the Rothschild Boulevard protest, whom they considered some sort of celebrities. Our answer seemed to disappoint them. “How can they be from Rothschild? Look at them!” said another woman carrying two little children. In HaTikva most people would not hesitate to refer directly to a person’s appearance and to classify him ethnically and socially. Reuven’s look is typically Mizrahi Jew, and he is in his late sixties. My origins and appearance are Ashkenazi, like most of the protesters at Rothschild Boulevard, but I was 20 years older than them.

The fact that we were “not from Rothschild” was interesting enough for a woman who until then seemed indifferent. When she, Ilana, started to speak loudly, everyone else stopped: “Why don’t those people in Rothschild come here, with their TV cameras, to see us? We are in real poverty! Why isn’t the protest about us?” Our positive response encouraged her to continue:

In those tents here, we’re all one-parent mothers. We don’t accept men here. We have no housing solutions. Even when we receive some help from the social security, it’s not enough for renting a place here, in the city. Sometimes they offer us social housing away, in places without jobs and away from our families. Who will help me to raise my children there? We cannot work much because they cut the social-security benefits if we earn above a certain minimum. Many women here with children are living together with their parents and siblings in horrible conditions in very small flats. So we came here and we shall leave the place only with housing solutions for each of us.

Ilanas has an uncommon charisma. She expressed loudly her distrust of men. More than once I heard her shouting at someone, “Don’t even try to contradict me or tell me what to do. I am more of a man than any man here, and I am not afraid of anyone but God!” The mothers that followed her

6. According to the municipality’s data, the HaTikva neighborhood counts some 12,000 inhabitants. It probably has at least 5,000 more if unregistered illegal immigrants and refugees are taken into consideration.

7. In those first days, around 100 persons installed themselves in the park. Two weeks later there were more than 300 encamping and many others coming during the day to take part in activities.

8. Tarabut-Hithabrut ("connecting, bringing together" in Hebrew and Arabic), a left-wing Arab Jewish movement for social and political change (http://www.tarabut.info).

9. The Hebrew term for single mom, “one-parent mother” (em chad-horit), became during the last three decades a formal term that under certain conditions implies access to some entitlements. Sometimes single mothers with three children or with health problems are offered moves from the Tel Aviv metropolitan area to public housing in poor towns in the northern or southern regions of Israel. Cheap housing solutions are also offered in Israel’s urban settlements in the Palestinian occupied territories. See Offer, Samol, and Benjamin (2011); Sa’ar (2009).
admired her, but they were also apprehensive of her violent reactions. In the past, she proved her ability to get things from the social services by combining aggressiveness and willingness to repay for small achievements with support for low-ranking politicians. Meanwhile, a young man called us. Avi was ready to talk with us. Ilana remarked, "He thinks he is the chief, but he only decides for that other part. Here, in these tents, nobody would listen to him. Here you have to talk with me."

Avi, a man in his early 40s, took us aside to talk in a less noisy spot from which he could see the tents and everybody would be able to see us talking. He was impressed when hearing that Reuven was one of the founders of the Black Panthers. Still, he wanted to know where we stood with regard to the Rothschild protesters. We told him about our involvement in the struggle for public housing and against evictions and explained that we were more interested in supporting the struggle of the poor. Reuven was direct: the protests of the "sons and daughters of the old elites," he said, "created an opportunity for those like us." He looked into Avi’s eyes:

We were always discriminated against by the Ashkenazi elite. They are now discovering social injustice and that’s important, but we know what social injustice is since the day we were born. They will fight for their own, but we can use this opportunity to push forward our own demands. In the end, they will go back home. But we, the people of the backyard of Israeli society, we have no secure homes to go back to.

Throughout the whole summer of protest, Reuven repeated this argument in many encampments of the poor.10 Avi’s eyes and body language expressed agreement. “That’s why we’re here,” he said.

When I heard about the young students encamping in Rothschild Boulevard, I took my wife and children and joined them. They asked me and Dani to help them with the infrastructure of the encampment. We worked for hours. When the time came to have a consultation about the struggle, a group of students went aside and didn’t even tell us. “Please help me with this, help him with that . . .” [imitating a typical young middle-class way of speech]. But for them, we were only good enough to work hard, but not to decide! We left them and moved in here. Immediately other people came from HaTikva, Argazim, and Ezra neighborhoods. Me and my wife, we had lived for 3 years in a house that I built myself in Argazim [neighborhood] until the municipality demolished it 3 months ago; we had no construction permits.

Avi is in his early 40s. He was born in Israel to a Moroccan Jewish family that immigrated in the late 50s. He is married to Iris, a woman younger than him, also Mizrahi. They have four children. This is Avi’s second marriage; he has other children from his previous marriage and pays alimony. For 3 years they lived in an illegally built house on a public space in a poor and conflict-ridden neighborhood south of Ha-Tikva. This is an Israeli example of what Bayat defines as the “quiet encroachment of the poor,” a widespread phenomenon that he observed in Egypt and in other Middle East countries. It is a common practice in Israel, too. Generally it is associated with Bedouin “unrecognized villages” or with the practice of building without permits in many Arab settlements in Israel.11 In such cases, the underlying structural cause is the notorious national discrimination they suffer (see Khamaysi 1990; Yiftachel 2002, 2004; Yiftachel and Meir 1998; and Yiftachel and Yacobi 2003). In the context of Zionist colonization and Palestinian dispossession, these practices from below have a clear meaning of national resistance to displacement and are considered a form of sumud (steadfastness, the determination to stay on one’s land). However, this phenomenon—without its Arab designation and its political meanings—also exists on the margins of Israeli Jewish society among poor Mizrahi families in urban environments in which municipal authorities and entrepreneurs seek to impose projects of “city renewal” or “development,” euphemisms for planned gentrification.

Avi had been involved in illegal activities and even served a prison term. Until the 1980s, for many Mizrahi men from poor neighborhoods it was the more accessible way to get some money; it was also a reaction to the daily experience of discrimination and humiliation in the educational system (Swirski 1999). After his release, Avi was making an effort to work as a handyman and subcontractor with increasing success and mounting expectations until his illegally built house was demolished. He felt pushed back to the margins.

Avi became a leader of the most stable part of HaTikva encampment. Toward the end of our first conversation, we stated the principles of our involvement: “We will support your struggle as long as it is directed against the authorities and not against other inhabitants of the poor neighborhoods.” That was a polite way of saying we would not participate in xenophobic demonstrations against Africans that right-wing politicians were organizing in HaTikva from time to time.12 We also explained that we did not have money or media contacts and that our contacts were with people like him from other cities. When the big protests started, we were in the middle of an effort to create a support network of people


12. Tens of thousands of African refugees arrived to south Tel Aviv poor neighborhoods during the last decade. Most of the refugees fled from wars in South Sudan and the Eritrean dictatorship.
struggling for public housing. We also warned Avi that people would advise him not to work with us “traitors to the Jewish nation” and that our support network included Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel who were indeed leftists and who supported the right of the Palestinians to struggle against the occupation. We did not expect him to accept our positions, but we would support his just struggle without prior conditions and without seeking publicity. We would offer our views but would accept their decisions. Avi was surprised, and he hesitated. A week later, after some long days and nights of working together, we were already partners; he confided,

Everybody who came here was looking for something to gain; mainly they wanted some kind of publicity. A businessman promised to bring us new tents if we put here a big poster promoting him. A member of the municipality council organized a free “fun day” for our children in a swimming pool. She made the kids and mothers wear a T-shirt with her name, took pictures, and ignored our requests regarding the municipal housing company. You are the only ones who do not ask for publicity and are willing to listen and support our demands.

However, our relations were not always idyllic; sometimes Avi and others expressed uneasiness about us and were afraid to be associated with Arabs, “enemies of the state.”

Without a republican constitution and with Zionist institutions and ideology enshrined in its structures, Israel is not a “state that belongs to its citizens,” not even formally; rather, it defines itself as belonging only to “the Jewish people,” and it only functions democratically to the extent that it allows proportional representation to its citizens. Under Zionism, citizenship functions as a colonizing citizenship: validation of social and political claims depends on the capacity to link them convincingly with the logic and tasks of Jewish colonization. Colonizing new areas, establishing Jewish towns or neighborhoods in the place of Palestinian indigenous ones, is considered the most appreciated contribution, one that pays off with privileges and benefits. Military service in prestigious units or contributing in some way to the Judaization of spaces, physical or cultural ones, are good credentials from the point of view of the “Zionist Enterprise.”

As other encampments of the poor, HaTikva encampment leadership tried to approach public opinion and the authorities by arguing they were Jewish citizens deserving better treatment. However, only a few could use the ultimate argument proving “good citizenship”—military service in a combat unit. Being social and culturally marginalized, many of them did not serve or did not complete a full term of service, and if they did, it was usually not in high-profile combat units. Because they were asking for housing solutions in the Tel Aviv area, where they had access to jobs and had relatives and informal networks of support, they could claim neither to be colonizing new lands nor maintaining a Jewish majority in the face of Arabs in a “mixed city.” Unable to rely on sources of legitimation as warriors or colonizers, some tried to connect with Zionist ideology by claiming that as Jews, they deserved support in neighborhoods invaded by migrant workers, mostly African refugees whose status as refugees the state refuses to recognize. This led them to approach a rightist organization that was inciting actions against Africans. However, the inability of the extreme rightists to link anti-African agitation with any policy proposals offering housing solutions convinced the encamping leaders to point their finger at the government and not at other poor.

Because many of them, as is so often the case among the poor in some neighborhoods, also have criminal records, they could not even claim to be just “proper citizens” in acceptable bourgeois terms. Their weakness and inability to make such claims enabled us, non-Zionist leftists arguing for universal social rights with Arab Palestinian connections, to become acceptable partners. In several other social struggles involving mainstream working-class Jews or even marginalized poor populations, we faced more reluctance, because poor Jews tend to formulate demands in terms of the dominant logic of colonizing citizenship. In the particular circumstances of the summer of 2011, marginal Mizrahi poor were able to establish themselves as autonomous political agents and to experiment with unprecedented alliances.

While the tents on Rothschild Boulevard were something unheard of, the encampment in HaTikva neighborhood built on a local tradition and transformed it. For many years, since the early 1990s, at the beginning of every summer, two or three families would camp in HaTikva Park, demanding housing solutions. The municipality would ask the police to evacuate them, cut water supplies, and fine them for connecting to the municipal electricity grid. The mayor would usually adopt a hard-line attitude, “defending law and order.” At the same time he would send council members from the right-wing lists, themselves Mizrahi, to negotiate some temporary solutions for the families on a clear clientelistic basis. Most inhabitants of the neighborhood are deeply ambivalent about this pattern. They know that by spending some weeks in the park, people with serious housing problems would obtain some temporary relief. However, going out to encamp in the park is also viewed

13. The “Zionist Enterprise,” in Hebrew, HaMifal HaTzioni, a term used by Zionist organizations to refer to all the aspects of their mission, is considered an ongoing project, not concluded with the consolidation of the State of Israel. World Zionist Organization, “Mission Statement,” http://www.wzo.org.il/Mission-Statement (accessed January 27, 2014). Massive investments in public housing projects in the first decades of the State of Israel were both an effort to respond to mass immigration and a project for reshaping territory and identity; see Kallus and Law-Yone (2000). For a Palestinian analysis of Israeli “internal colonialism,” see Zureick (1979).

14. Lavie (2014) shows how even in slightly different circumstances, previous protest movement of single mothers, from a similar Mizrahi and marginal social position, was constrained to express itself inside Zionist discourse.
as something shameful, the last resort, and a symbol of failure. The political bosses put it very clearly: these are poor, dependent people unable to help themselves. Invoking the value of "success," they tried to discourage social demands and to depoliticize them. Stigmatization served to reduce the phenomenon to only a few families every year, a quantity that made it easier for politicians to find enough solutions, to posture as socially sensitive, and to maintain a manageable network of dependent clients. When it comes to drug users suffering from health issues or "chronic homelessness," politicians would not even try to offer solutions; they would just use the police and municipal inspectors to throw them out of the park to live under the bridges and on the streets of the nearby even poorer neighborhood, where Tel Aviv's central bus station is located. Drug addicts or the mentally ill, people in bad shape and without family support, are not useful political clients.

Neoliberal policies of the last two decades reduced the capacity of public housing companies to offer solutions for those in need. The companies sold flats and reduced the number of available buildings. While economic disparities widened, market prices—especially housing prices—went up, and the number of people in need of social housing more than doubled. At the same time, especially in the Tel Aviv area, the flow of African refugees into the poorest neighborhoods, usually living in overcrowded small flats, contributed to rising rents in HaTikva and adjacent neighborhoods. The government reacted to growing needs by manipulating the criteria for obtaining social housing and by expanding cash subsidies for renting apartments. Tens of thousands lost their right to public housing while unable to pay the rent in the free market; state cash subsidies contributed to a further increase in rents in popular neighborhoods. Local politicians' ability to actually deliver solutions was hence significantly reduced.

When the social protests of the summer of 2011, started by middle-class students, were met by empathy in the media, hundreds of poor families in popular neighborhoods around the country felt that they, too, might now go out to encamp in the public sphere to demand housing solutions without being stigmatized. From "poor and dependent persons" whose lives were "a failure," the media transformed them, during the first enchanted weeks of the protests, into "social heroes." After the first weeks of HaTikva encampment, local politicians were in panic. Instead of looking for solutions for 20 or 30 persons, they now had to deal with nearly 300. (See videos and photos in CA+ online supplement A.) Furthermore, it seemed that any achievement of the campers would encourage many others who were hesitating to take the step, visiting the park daily, trying to assess the costs and chances of the protest.

The mass media gave enormous attention to Rothschild encampment and to the massive Saturday night demonstrations in the city center. People in HaTikva encampment were ambivalent. They did their best to be considered part of a wide movement that had such "good press" in the belief that, on the one hand, under the umbrella of "The Social Protest" they could achieve housing solutions. On the other, their use of the broad "us" in referring to "The Social Protest" was always accompanied by another "us," a distinctive one meaning "HaTikva residents," "Mizrahi," or the "poor neighborhoods," as opposed to "them" (the students, the privileged Ashkenazi middle class). Their expectations from the Rothschild central encampment were disappointed when the campaigners directing the moves displayed an instrumental and insensitive attitude toward the representatives of the poor encampments. At certain moments they wanted HaTikva people "in the frame" in order to maintain a pluralistic and inclusive image and counter government's suggestions that protesters were just "spoiled kids." However, the campaigners did not trust HaTikva representatives and did their best to deny them access to the media. They even ignored the specific demands of the poor. After a few "misunderstandings,"


16. There are similarities between the situation in Israel and the case of Argentinian bureaucratic struggles for housing discussed in Procupes (2015). Yet while in Israel the context is the dismantlement of a partial welfare state that existed in the past (at least for Jews), in Argentina a populist regime is reconstructing in a clientelistic way segments of the welfare system dismantled decades ago.
HaTikva leaders became antagonistic toward the middle-class leadership. In an attempt to improve the relationships, because Rothschild encampment was receiving regular support from large-scale organizations (the Student Union, NGOs, and sympathetic private businesses), it started sending to HaTikva and to other poor encampments part of the food donated. This was first perceived as a sign of social sensibility on the part of young middle-class protesters. However, in the midterm, the flow of food donations became a daily demonstration of the existing power relations. Instead of asking donors to donate directly to HaTikva, organizers of Rothschild encampment received the donations and redistributed them, reproducing the customary patterns of hierarchy and clientage between establishment politicians and the urban poor.

The night after our first visit to HaTikva camp, a group of 20 women, led by Ilana, blocked a nearby road. Few vehicles were actually circulating around 11:00 p.m. After 20 minutes the police managed to reopen the road and detained four women, Ilana among them. Together with Yael Ben Yefet, a council member from the City for All list and coordinator of the Mizrahi Rainbow organization, we spent hours with this group of women near the police station in which the four were held. We thus learned about the logic behind the act of blocking an unimportant road at such a late hour. They were concerned by Avi’s strong leadership in the park and by his ability to establish relations with us as well as with other activists. Their confrontational act was a way of calling attention to the specific demands of “one-parent mothers,” mainly related to the erosion of their social-security rights. However, at this stage, they failed to elicit media attention. In the following weeks, tensions grew between the two sub-encampments of HaTikva Park; there were strong verbal attacks as part of a never-ending leadership contest, undermining the ability of both groups to strengthen their position and to negotiate visibility for their causes. The fact that we stood by the women protesting against Ilana’s detention allowed us to be considered legitimate partners by the group of one-parent mothers despite our close relations with Avi. Rivalry over leadership and strained gender tensions surfaced in power conflicts in HaTikva Park encampment. However, daily interpersonal violence, both physical and verbal, had to do both with chronic processes of social marginalization and with the specific constraints of living in the park under deteriorating conditions. Drug use and small-scale dealing are part of the structure of marginalization, and both created a source of conflict and violence since the encampment became also a small market space. Violence did not deteriorate to the use of arms or severe casualties. As Auyero explains, drug dealing in poor and marginalized milieus brings forth violence not only among dealers and gangs but also inside families, when even mothers and relatives use physical violence to try to control the young from involvement in trafficking and consumption. Sharing the park space without clear boundaries and rules and under constant uncertainty provided further sources of daily conflict and violence. Both main leaders, Avi and Ilana, based part of their leadership on their capacity to exercise symbolic violence and succeeding in controlling their supporters’ behavior to a significant extent.

Orna, a one-parent mother that at the beginning of the encampment acted as Ilana’s right hand, was the only person able to mediate between the two leaders, playing a crucial role in bringing about the few occasions on which the whole encampment came together in collective actions. Orna was the only consensual candidate for representing HaTikva Park in a general assembly of all the encampments in the country. She was in her early 40s, a mother to five children; the father of the youngest two became a drug addict and spent a few years in prison. As a one-parent mother, Orna was entitled to pay a reduced rent for a flat belonging to Tel Aviv’s municipal housing company as well as to alimony allowance for her two youngest children. These entitlements, however, were not without their catches: if Orna were able to earn above a very modest salary, she would lose her social-security benefits, and the municipal housing company would triple the rent she was paying if she were to enter a serious relationship with a man. Afraid of losing her flat, Orna spent many hours each evening in the park but went back to sleep at home.

The separate site of the one-parent mothers in one corner of the park managed to survive for a month and a half. Only rarely did the women join the mass demonstrations. Many left the park after a while, unable to stand deteriorating sanitary conditions and the insecure environment. Alcohol and drug use were one of their concerns. They sought security apart from men. The autonomous agency they tried to develop in the park and in the demonstrations, however, became their main political limitation. Most of them did not have enough resources to take active and visible part in the public struggle. Their main hope was to obtain a practical solution. Social workers and officials of the housing companies threatened that by staying in the park they were risking losing custody of their children. When they were offered some temporary solution and realized that they could not expect to obtain more, most of them left the park. Only few remained and took part in the small protests of the following fall and winter. However, Orna stayed around and worked actively with Avi to establish alliances with the few remaining encampments of the poor.

A few days after our first visit, we invited Avi and Dani to a meeting with our network of people struggling for their housing rights. Thirty persons took part: a few Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel from Jaffa, south of Tel Aviv, threatened by eviction from their homes; an Ashkenazi orthodox Jew from Beer Sheva, the father of five children, also in danger of eviction.

19. Lavie (2012a) describes and analyzes the bureaucratic welfare system that controls one-parent mothers. Women under such a system were seldom able to act as social and political agents.

20. Lavie (2012a, 2012b) offers precious information and analysis into the structural and bureaucratic pressures on low-income Mizrahi women.
tion; a representative of an encampment of Mizrahi mothers in Jerusalem, very similar to HaTikva; a few representatives from poor encampments and families threatened by eviction (Mizrahi women from Yavne and Rehovot and a Palestinian family from Ramle); and a few other activists, Jews, and Arabs. Avi and Dani were uneasy in the presence of Arabs who identified themselves as Palestinians suffering from double discrimination (socioeconomic and national). However, the confidence displayed by activists of Mizrahi origin made things easier. This was the second meeting of the solidarity network we created just before the eruption of the massive protests.21 For Avi it was also a first meeting with people like him, from the same background, becoming social activists and discussing strategies. A few days later he visited with us other poor encampments in the towns near Tel Aviv in order to establish alliances.

The new contacts encouraged Avi to organize a first demonstration. He asked us to invite all our network of people struggling for public housing and to send invitations to other encampments. The plans for a wide demonstration of the poor, hosted by HaTikva encampment, ran into difficulties because of hesitations concerning two issues related to national and racial tensions. First, HaTikva hosts were concerned about reactions in their own neighborhood to the eventual presence of Arabs demonstrating with them. They tried to put forward all kinds of conditions unacceptable for Arab activists. The attempt to use the demonstration in order to gain wider support from within the neighborhood seemed to stand in contradiction with Arab presence.

The issue of inviting the nearby “Lewinsky encampment” to participate also raised difficulties. This encampment, located in a park near Tel Aviv’s central bus station, was set up by a few social activists from the nearby neighborhoods and with the support of a few leftists was coordinated by the feminist Mizrahi Achoti organization.22 It was soon populated, however, by people who in any case had been used to spending days and nights in this park: drug addicts (the streets near the station are the main center of drug dealing in Tel Aviv) and African refugees without a roof over their heads looking for odd jobs. The municipal authorities and the police treated this encampment very harshly; it started to develop into a sort of a refugee camp in the heart of Tel Aviv, exposing a reality that, as far as the authorities were concerned, should have remained invisible. The few references in the media portrayed this encampment as racially and ethnically mixed, the camp of “the most marginalized.” At this point (end of July and early August), HaTikva encampment leaders, in many senses themselves marginalized, rejected any association with Lewinsky.

22. Achoti, “my sister” in Hebrew, is a local feminist NGO led by Mizrahi activists.

However, the leaders of the encampment ignored suggestions by extreme-right activists to demonstrate against the presence of African refugees. They considered the African massive presence a problem but not “the source of our problems,” and they did not want to be labeled racists.

Another ally that they managed to find in the neighborhood was the association of the local football club, called the Lions of Judea. The leaders of the fans’ club brought several tents and some supplies to the encampment and promised that hundreds of fans would join the demonstration together with delegations from other clubs from all around the country. However, they put forward several conditions: it should be a demonstration of the local Jewish population without Africans, delegations of Arab citizens, and “leftist slogans.” There should only be slogans demanding “social justice” but no attacks on the governing right-wing Likud party—“HaTikva is a traditional Likud stronghold,” they said. Hoping to obtain the support of a significant sector of the neighborhood, Avi and Dani accepted the football fans association’s conditions. We accepted a compromise: the demonstration would be a local demonstration, and we would not mobilize our social-housing-struggle network, which includes both Jewish and Arab citizens. We, Tarabut-Hithabrut activists, would be responsible for ensuring that no left-wing organization would impose their own symbols or slogans on the demonstration, while the football fans’ leaders would ensure that no racist or chauvinist slogans would be voiced.

On the day preceding the demonstration, we found out that a small leftist organization was publicly accusing HaTikva encampment’s leaders of being racists. Avi was furious. We had an important conversation. After making clear that we would respect the right of the people of the encampment to choose their own path and strategies, we all agreed about the elitism and hypocrisy of many middle-class Ashkenazi leftists who would not really respect lower-class Mizrahi as autonomous political subjects.

In this awkward situation, the first organized local demonstration of HaTikva encampment set out. Around 200 persons from the encampment itself, accompanied by some 300 supporters, walked around the neighborhood, blocking for half an hour its main commercial street. At the head of the march walked the leaders and the football fans in their orange shirts. Very quickly, the fans started to shout slogans against Prime Minister Netanyahu despite their leaders’ earlier concern that we should refrain from this because the neighborhood was a “Likud stronghold.” The march ended back in an improvised rally. There were no racist slogans and no incidents. Despite pressures, HaTikva encampment was able to express its concerns and demands autonomously.

No more than 40 local football fans joined the demonstration. Clearly the Lions of Judea were not the key to get the support of the local population. Having promoted themselves in the mass media, the Lions of Judea backed off and were no longer involved. More important was Avi’s and Orna’s conclusion that the bulk of HaTikva neighbors would maintain
their distance vis-à-vis the encampment. They might sympathize with their demand to change social policies, but they were not likely to actively join them. Conversations in the neighborhood made it clear that the stigma on those encamping was a powerful deterrent. Rumors about violence and alcohol and drug abuse reinforced negative perceptions. Even people living under conditions similar to the families that camped in the park would do all they could to avoid being identified with those in the park.

Local politicians kept coming to the encampment offering individualizing temporary solutions that were likely to cause further fissures in the loosely integrated camp. However, under pressure they secured access to electricity and chemical public baths. In October, as the long dry summer ended, after the first rain, the municipality offered 10,000 New Israeli Shekels (ca. US$2,500) to every family ready to leave the park. The money was to be paid directly to the landlord of the rented flat on the condition that receivers would avoid the park encampment for the following months. The sum was the equivalent of approximately 3 month’s rent. This meant a tiny temporary “solution” at the price of leaving one’s friends behind. Around 20 families accepted the deal and left the Park.

Back in early August, a few days after the local demonstration, having informally met two of our Arab activists from Jaffa, Avi and Orna asked us to organize a formal visit to Jaffa encampment in order to establish a kind of alliance. It was as if precisely after having realized the limitations of their own local milieu in terms of obtaining wider support and the danger of being labeled “racists” by elitist leftists, the leaders of HaTikva protest decided to make a leap forward in the direction we were suggesting. To have an open meeting with the Arab leadership of the Jaffa protest tent was a momentous move; it meant exposing themselves to allegations that under leftist influence they were crossing the national boundaries and aligning themselves with the “Arab enemy.”

The meeting held in the Jaffa protest tent was successful. Both sides agreed to act together demanding a reform of public housing policies and the social-security system and to join hands in solidarity against evictions and house demolitions. Many issues were left out in order to make this first step possible. Both leaderships agreed to form a common block—“HaTikva-Jaffa for public housing”—in the coming Saturday night mass rally in city center. They agreed not to bring national flags, neither the Jewish flag, Israel’s official flag, nor the Palestinian flag that Jaffa Arab activists usually carried in their demonstrations. The agreement caused lively discussions on both sides. The joint block of Hatikva-Jaffa encampments in the demonstration, sometimes chanting “HaTikva-Jaffa—the same revolution!” was considered a great success for the strategy of building bridges among the poor. At the same time, we were aware how fragile and feeble the basis of this alliance actually was.23

This alliance was expanded and reinforced for a while by setting up the Block of Social Peripheries. It was a coalition encompassing our social-housing network, several encampments of the poor, and the marginalized residents of “unrecognized” Bedouin villages and residents of Kfar Shalem in southeast Tel Aviv with the help of activists of our organization, the Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow, the Mossawa Center for the Rights of the Arab Minority, and independent activists.24 After the middle-class protesters took a step back during the fall, the Block of Social Peripheries became, for a few months, the main venue of continued social protest.25 HaTikva encampment leaders played an active part in the block’s demonstrations. In Israel’s social and political landscape, those were extraordinary occasions in which Arabs and Jews from poor marginalized communities participated together in collective actions. The unstable alliance suffered from different problems, many of them related to national, ethnic, and religious divisions and mistrust, to the inability to obtain concrete achievements outside the logic of colonizing citizenship, and the expected weakness inherent in the marginality of many of its components. Marginal poor can be politically active only for short terms: the logic of survival, daily problems, and lack of self-confidence cause them to suddenly disappear, breaking trust-building processes, hence making it impossible to maintain the intense and open communication needed in order to overcome the ideological abyss constructed between Jews and Arabs and the social pressures on those who dare to transgress it.

Despite the harsher conditions in the winter and decreased media interest, around 50 people persisted until the forced evacuation of the park by the municipal authorities and the police in January 2012. HaTikva encampment was the last to be evacuated after half a year of struggle. Some of the families that participated in it obtained temporary and partial solutions for their problems. Others returned to square one, where they started, and even worse.

On the night before the scheduled forced evacuation, around 1,000 people demonstrated in the streets of the neighborhood. Half of the demonstrators were from HaTikva or adjacent neighborhoods. Still, the solidarity expressed in this final act of protest was impressive, especially in the face of police violence. All the limitations of the agency of the marginalized came out again in this final stage of HaTikva encampment. In a colonizing society with strong control mechanisms and under Zionist ideological hegemony, a marginalized segment of Mizrahi poor was able, for a short while, to act as an autonomous political agent free from control and patronage and to experiment with alliances that contradicted both hegemonic structures of power.

23. For discussions of Jaffa encamping, see Monterescu and Shaindlinger (2013) and Allweil (2013).

24. See the Democratic Mizrahi Rainbow website (http://hakeshethamizrarih.blogspot.co.il/) and the Mossawa advocacy center (http://www.mossawacenter.org/en/).

mony and sociopolitical architecture. In the short term, this experiment did not prove successful in securing its immediate objectives—housing solutions and policy change. We are left with open questions about the future possibilities for such peripheral and contrahegemonic alliances in Israel under the contradictory processes of ongoing colonization and neoliberal reforms.

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The Politics of Interpersonal Violence in the Urban Periphery

by Javier Auyero

Based on 30 months of collaborative ethnographic fieldwork in a high-poverty, crime-ridden area in metropolitan Buenos Aires, this paper scrutinizes the political character of interpersonal violence. The violence described here is not the subaltern violence that, thoroughly documented by historians and social scientists, directs against the state, the powerful, or their symbols. It is a violence that is neither redemptive nor cleansing, but it is deeply political in a threefold sense: (a) it is entangled with the intermittent and contradictory form in which the police intervene in this relegated neighborhood, (b) it has the potential to give birth to collective action that targets the state while simultaneously signaling it as the main actor responsible for the skyrocketing physical aggression in the area, and (c) it provokes paradoxical forms of informal social control as residents rely on state agents who are themselves enmeshed in the production of this violence.

Introduction

It is September 2011, and 13-year-old Jonathan tells me, “This is a .22 gun,” pointing to one of his drawings.1 Few kids his age know the names and shapes of weapons circulating in the neighborhood, but Jonathan can easily distinguish between a .45, a 9mm, and a .22. When his uncle “goes out and steals” in a nearby shantytown, Jonathan is often his lookout. At school, located in Ingeniero Budge (a poor neighborhood in the outskirts of Buenos Aires, Argentina), he spends his days listening to music on his cell phone, horsing around, and drawing; weapons are among his favorite subjects. He has been known to threaten his classmates with statements such as “I’ll shoot you” or “I’ll shoot you in the head,” pointing an imaginary gun at them. His uncle was recently murdered, and he believes a similar fate awaits him. One day, as his teacher ended class, he bragged out loud: “Miss, one day you’ll see me on TV. I’ll rob a bank and they’ll shoot at me. The police will kill me.” At the end of the year, he received his elementary school diploma despite the fact that his reading and writing skills are only at a fourth grade level. On one of the walls outside his school, a graffiti reads, “I was born amid bullets, I was raised among thugs. Of all the neighborhoods mine is the best known, and that’s why I have ‘Lomas’ tattooed” (Entre balas he nacido, entre chorros me he criado. De todos mi barrio es el más nombrado, por eso a Lomas llevo tatuado; fig. 1). Lomas is the district where Ingeniero Budge is located.

The graffiti and Jonathan’s drawing and statements illustrate some of the forms of the street violence that currently besiege the lives of the urban poor in contemporary Buenos Aires. Based on collaborative ethnographic fieldwork, in this paper I scrutinize the political foundations of this violence and its potential to serve as a catalyst for local collective action. The interpersonal violence that suffuses the lives of poor people in Buenos Aires lacks the redemptive properties that Franz Fanon, to use a classic example, attributes to the violence of the subaltern (for a full discussion, see Bernstein 2013). The violence here under examination is neither a “cleansing force” that “frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction” (Fanon 1990:74) nor an energy that makes the poor “fearless” or restores their “self-respect.” Furthermore, the street violence here placed under the ethnoviolent microscope is not the subaltern violence that is often dissected by historians and social scientists and that is directed against the state, the powerful, or its symbols (Darn ton 2009; Davis 1973; Scott 1985; Steinberg 1999; Thompson 2009). Although this violence at the urban margins is not, contrary to many a scholarly treatments of it, used by the oppressed or the excluded as a weapon to reconfigure structures of domination or as a strategy to assert and celebrate popular power, it does have a political character. In this paper I argue by way of empirical demonstration that violence among

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1. Names of persons have been changed to protect anonymity. This study was approved by the University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board (protocol 2011-05-0126).

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the poor is deeply political in a threefold sense: (a) it is entangled with the intermittent and contradictory form in which the police intervene in this marginalized neighborhood, (b) it has the potential to give birth to collective action that targets the state while simultaneously signaling it as the main actor responsible for the skyrocketing physical aggression in the area, and (c) it provokes paradoxical forms of informal social control as residents rely on state agents who are themselves enmeshed in the production of this violence.

After a brief section describing the fieldwork and field site, the third section of this paper presents a basic outline of the criminal violence that affects the area. The fourth, principal section of this paper is divided into three subsections in which I unearth and illuminate the political dimensions of the widespread, seemingly nonpolitical, interpersonal violence in contemporary Buenos Aires.

How and Where
This paper is based on 30 months of collaborative fieldwork (June 2009–December 2011). During this period, Fernanda Berti, my research collaborator, worked in the area as an elementary school teacher. This article draws on detailed ethnographic notes she took during this time (recording students’ activities inside and outside school, such as the vignette that opens this article) and on dozens of conversations with
teachers and residents (details can be found in Auyero and Berti 2013). In order to identify residential patterns, sources of employment, levels of education, and the most common problems affecting the population, we conducted 100 short interviews (which lasted between 30 minutes and an hour). We recruited the respondents via snowball sampling. We also conducted interviews with five doctors working at the local hospital and the local health center. We accessed hard-to-find data on homicides in the area through personal contacts at the Defensoría Municipal, the office that collects death records from the local morgue. Fieldwork continued more sporadically throughout 2012 and 2013. During this time, I interviewed doctors at Lomas de Zamora’s main hospital who provided data on injuries and deaths in the area. I also attended one community meeting and one protest rally in February 2012. Finally, I conducted archival research on local newspapers (all of them accessible online), focusing on instances of interpersonal violence (injuries in interpersonal disputes and homicides) between 2009 and 2012 in order to pinpoint the geographic location of this violence, information not recorded by the Defensoría.

Ingeniero Budge (pop. 170,000) sits in the southern part of metropolitan Buenos Aires. Located adjacent to the banks of the highly polluted Riachuelo River, this poverty-stricken area is made up of several historically working-class neighborhoods, squatter settlements, and shantytowns. The streets and blocks in the neighborhoods and squatter settlements follow the pattern of urban zoning (known as the forma damero, or “checkerboard”), while the shantytowns’ winding alleyways and passages do not. Residents in the working-class neighborhoods are property owners and generally better off than shantytown dwellers and squatters, both of whom have still-unresolved land tenure. Extreme levels of infrastructural deprivation—or what Braun and McCarthy (2005) call the material dimension of state abandonment—characterize the area: unpaved streets, open-air sewers, broken sidewalks, scarce lighting, and sporadic garbage collection.

Together with state assistance (in the form of state cash transfer programs), charity aid (by catholic and other religious groups), and other informal work (construction, domestic service, and scavenging), the main source of subsistence for the population is the largest street fair in the country, located north of Ingeniero Budge. Known by the name La Salada, the fair consists of three different markets (Urkuipina, Ocean, and Punta Mogote) where twice a week thousands of shoppers buy counterfeit apparel, small electronics, and food. According to the Economic Commission of the European Union (La Nación, March 10, 2009), La Salada is the “world’s emblem of the production and commercialization of falsified brand merchandise.” Either as owners or employees of one of the thousands of stalls or as workers in one of the hundreds of sweatshops that manufacture the goods sold there, many residents from the neighborhood benefit from the presence of this vast street fair (Girón 2011; Hacher 2011).

Criminal Violence

During the last two decades and in tandem with similar trends in many Latin American cities (Goldstein 2012; Imbusch, Misse, and Carrión 2011; Jones and Rodgers 2009; Koonings and Kruiti 2007; Perlman 2011), criminal violence has risen substantially in Argentina’s most populous state. Much like in U.S. high-poverty enclaves, whether black ghettos or inner cities (Anderson 1999; Harding 2010; Venkatesh 2008; Wacquant 2008), retaliation shapes a significant amount of the violence that pervades daily life in Argentine shantytowns. As Jacobs and Wright (2006) explain, “A substantial number of assaults, robberies, and other forms of serious criminal behavior are a direct consequence of retaliation and counter-retaliation…. Retaliatory conflicts contribute significantly to the violent reputation and reality of many high-crime neighborhoods” (5; see also Jacobs 2004, but also see Auyero and Berti 2013 for an understanding of violence “beyond retaliation”).

Official data for Buenos Aires Province show a doubling of crime rates between 1995 and 2008, from 1,114 to 2,010 criminal episodes per 100,000 residents and from 206 crimes against persons (e.g., homicides, assault, and battery) to 535 per 100,000 residents. Nonetheless, this violence does not uniformly affect all neighborhoods. In poverty-stricken Ingeniero Budge, the intensification in violence is even more pronounced. According to the municipal Defensoría General, homicides in Ingeniero Budge have increased 180% since 2007, from a total number of 17 in that year to 48 between January and October of 2012. (Meanwhile, the population of the municipality where Ingeniero Budge is located grew only 4.2% between 2001 and 2010.) The murder rate in Ingeniero Budge is thus 28.4 per 100,000 residents—four times that of the state of Buenos Aires.

I am very aware of the “masculinist silence” (Hume and Wilding 2015) and the rigid public/private dichotomy implicit in the way in which urban violence is oftentimes measured (i.e., homicide rates). The exclusive focus on homicide data obscures other forms of interpersonal violence, such as sexual and domestic violence. As a result, normative understandings of urban violence remain mostly public and masculine (Hume 2009). A dispute between dealers over missing payments, like the ones that often took place during our fieldwork, can be seen as the expression of public criminal violence. A woman’s violent reaction to the assault of her drunken partner can, in turn, be understood as violence that occurs in the domestic sphere. But when dealers barge into a home, point a gun at the face of the mother of an addict, and demand a drug payment, and when this same mother threat-
ens to “break the fingers” of her addicted son (or, actually, punches him until she sees “blood coming out of his face” or calls the cops she knows are involved in drug trafficking to have her son arrested and taken away) in order to prevent him from stealing things from her house that he then sells to finance his addiction but that do not belong to her but to her second husband who, mad at the missing items, often beats her—then traditional distinctions between private and public violence collapse, and an exclusive focus on murder rates misses much of the interpersonal violence taking place. In other work, I examine the concatenated ways in which types of violence (drug-related violence, street violence, and intimate violence) interact, intersect, and blur private/public boundaries (Auyero and Berti 2015). Reasons of space prevent me from analyzing these other equally important forms of physical and psychological violence.

In-depth interviews with physicians who work in the emergency rooms at the local hospital and health center confirm the skyrocketing of interpersonal violence. “Today,” says a doctor with 15 years of experience in the district, “it is much more common to attend to patients with injuries from gunshots or knives … at least one per day.” The director of the emergency room at the local hospital seconds this general impression: during the last decade, he says, there has been a 10% annual increase in the number of wounded by gunshots or knives (heridos por armas de fuego y arma blanca). The five interviewed physicians all agree that the two days a week during which the street fair is open, there is an increase in the number of patients injured in street fights. As one emergency room doctor put it, “The fair is a source of conflict. There’s an increase in interpersonal aggression during the days its markets open to the public. Thousands of people come with cash to buy [goods] or with merchandise to sell. There are many robberies, lots of them at gunpoint.” Unsurprisingly, criminally active and its accompanying violence are the main concerns among residents. An overwhelming majority of our 100 interviewees cite delinquency, insecurity, robberies, and drug dealing as their main preoccupations.

Small “bands” devoted to the storage, preparation, and distribution of drugs have operated in Ingeniero Budge and its surrounding area, fueling in part this rise in interpersonal violence (see Sain 2009). During our fieldwork, many police operations, some of them including exchanges of gunshots between police agents and dealers, seized dozens of kilograms of cocaine and thousands of doses of freebase cocaine, locally known as paco.4

Violence and Drugs in Real Time and Space

The vignette that follows is reconstructed from a period of several weeks. It illustrates the variety of ways in which drug addiction and drug dealing generate violence in the area.

Maria (age 45) lives in a precarious house made of bricks and wood, with corrugated metal sheets for a roof. The house bears the marks of her son Ezequiel’s (age 17) addiction to paco. A big wood panel covers a hole Ezequiel made when, in desperate need of cash to buy his next dose of paco, he broke into his own house and stole Maria’s clothes. Clothes are not the only things that Ezequiel has stolen from his mother and siblings. The list, Maria tells us, is quite long and includes a TV set, brand new sneakers, plates, pots and pans, and a new portable washing machine.

Just a few blocks from María’s house, a shop specializes in buying items from desperate addicts and then reselling them either back to their original owners or to anyone else interested for a higher, often twice as high, price. These days, María seldom leaves the house (she stopped taking her little son to day care, and she failed to take her two young children to the local hospital for mandatory vaccines) because she is afraid Ezequiel will take or repurpose whatever items of value remain—“the little TV antenna … he broke it. He uses it as a pipe to smoke [paco].” But Ezequiel does not just steal from María. Recently, he has begun to take clothes from one of her other sons, Carlos. Carlos is an alcoholic, and the last time he discovered Ezequiel’s theft, a huge bloody fight broke out between them. “They threw rocks and bottles at each other,” María tells us. And many of her neighbors agree; the fights between the two addicted brothers are infamous on their block. Impotent but hardly passive in the face of this violence (María makes sure that there are no glass bottles or big rocks handy in the backyard because she knows they quickly become weapons in her sons’ fights), she is very scared (vivo con miedo) by the prospect of one of them killing the other: “I spent last night in the precinct. . . . He stole our toilet . . . and when he was carrying it through the streets, the police stopped him. The cops thought he had stolen it from a local depot. They arrested him. . . . And that’s not all. Carlos beat Ezequiel up really bad for stealing the toilet. Today, in vengeance, Ezequiel threw a huge paving stone at his foot, to hurt him.”

3. Out of the 27 homicides reported between 2009 and 2013 in local newspapers, eight took place adjacent to the street fair—most of them in a robbery attempt. Newspapers underreport homicides (note the discrepancy between the number of homicides reported by local media and the number of homicides recorded by the Defensoría General). I include newspaper information in order to pinpoint the geographic location of the homicides. This information is not recorded by the Defensoría.

Violence between the drug-addicted Ezequiel and the alcoholic Carlos is not the only violence that threatens María’s household, where seven other children, ranging from 4 to 21, live with her. “I couldn’t sleep yesterday,” she tells us as we walk toward the local soup kitchen one morning. “Ezequiel stole a bicycle from a neighbor, who is a friend of Mario, my other son. Ezequiel exchanged it for 20 pesos to buy drugs. That night, the owner of the bicycle came to my home and asked me for the bicycle. I told him that I’ll get paid on Tuesday. But he doesn’t want the money. He showed me a gun and told me that, ‘if the bicycle is not here soon, I’ll kill your son.’” María and the rest of her family did not sleep that night.

Earlier that same week, María, with her two little children in tow, traveled an hour and a half to a precinct in the city of Buenos Aires where Ezequiel had been detained for drug possession. Ezequiel is not only addicted to paco but lately he has also begun purchasing drugs for other youngsters in the neighborhood—acting as a courier of sorts. One night, a group of youths stormed into María’s house angrily looking for Ezequiel. They had given him money earlier in the day, and he had not yet returned with the drugs (or the money). “They looked for him everywhere and they had weapons,” María said. “They threatened me and told me that they would kill him because he had kept their money. I told them that I’d pay them. I told them that he didn’t know what he was doing. I asked them to please not hurt him.”

The constant—and, as far as we could document, increasingly dangerous—fights between brothers and local youth can, in part, be understood as the psychopharmacological product of the consumption of drugs and alcohol. As research has shown (Parker and Auernhahn 1998; Reinarman and Levine 1997), the ingestion of alcohol and drugs can irritate, excite, enrage, and embolden people; these emotional states can often translate into violent behavior. Moreover, Ezequiel’s petty thievery, compelled by his craving for drugs, illustrates yet another individual-level relationship between drugs and violence—what Goldstein (1985) labels “economic compulsive” (see also Goldstein et al. 1997), whereby drug addiction can fuel economically motivated crime to support the user’s habit and may also use or produce episodes of violence.

Until the proliferation of crack use in the United States, most research attributed drug-related violence either to “the physical or psychological effects of drug ingestion” or “the attempts of drug addicts to acquire economic resources that are needed to support the habit” (Ousey and Lee 2002:74–75). Since the mid-1980s, however, research has uncovered that the drug market also produces systemic violence because of “the exigencies of working or doing business in an illicit market—a context in which the monetary stakes can be enormous but where the economic actors have no recourse to the legal system to resolve disputes” (Goldstein 1985:116). In this third way, which accounts for most “drug-related” violence, violent interactions are the “outcome of attempts at informal social control carried out by drug market participants who are unable to rely on formal social control agents (e.g. the police) to handle their grievances” (Ousey and Lee 2002:75). Territorial disputes between rival dealers and punishments for stealing or failing to pay for drugs or for selling adulterated products are commonly cited examples of this systemic violence (Bourgois 1995; Ousey and Lee 2002; Reding 2009; Reinarman and Levine 1997; Venkatesh 2008). While María and her family experience this violence firsthand, so do many of the local children. Countless times students at the school reported shoot-outs between local dealers: “In the neighborhood, every night, dealers shoot at each other.”

The daily interpersonal violence that overwhelms residents confirms, to both victims and perpetrators, that the place where they live exists as a stigmatized and stigmatizing region—literally, a relegated territory, that is, removed and subordinated. Or, as one neighbor eloquently puts it, “It hurts when I hear people saying that Budge is a ‘red zone.’ A lot of people who look for jobs or sign up for a course deny that they live in Budge; they fill in their applications stating that they live in Lomas de Zamora [the district to which Budge belongs]. Because if you say you are from here, they brand you as a bad person. That hurts. There are many bad things here, but there are also a lot of good people, working folks.” Residents also believe that their neighborhood is a place that “nobody seems to care about,” where “anything goes” because it is “liberated” from state intervention—a subject to which I turn in the next section.

**Entangled State**

Collective life in Ingeniero Budge is anything but peaceful. Violence abounds in the social spaces of Budge as residents experience, witness, and talk about violence in their homes, schools, and streets. In what follows, I examine the ways in which the state, the very organ charged with the labor of local enforcement of law and order, subjects the drug market to both victims and perpetrators, that the place where they live exists as a stigmatized and stigmatizing region—literally, a relegated territory, that is, removed and subordinated. The place where they live exists as a stigmatized and stigmatizing region—literally, a relegated territory, that is, removed and subordinated. Here I focus my attention on the level of collective violence—what Goldstein (1985:116). In this third way, which accounts for most “drug-related” violence, violent interactions are the “outcome of attempts at informal social control carried out by drug market participants who are unable to rely on formal social control agents (e.g. the police) to handle their grievances” (Ousey and Lee 2002:75). Territorial disputes between rival dealers and punishments for stealing or failing to pay for drugs or for selling adulterated products are commonly cited examples of this systemic violence (Bourgois 1995; Ousey and Lee 2002; Reding 2009; Reinarman and Levine 1997; Venkatesh 2008). While María and her family experience this violence firsthand, so do many of the local children. Countless times students at the school reported shoot-outs between local dealers: “In the neighborhood, every night, dealers shoot at each other.”

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6. The term “liberated” means that the police forces purposefully cease to protect a specific geographic area, thus allowing criminal activity to flourish. For a full account of the effect of “liberated areas” in the course and effect of collective violence, see Auyero (2007).
As stated above, the area where we conducted our fieldwork sits adjacent to the biggest street fair in the country. Twice a week, thousands of shoppers (mostly from lower and lower-middle classes from metropolitan Buenos Aires but also traders from the rest of the country) come to its markets to purchase (mostly) counterfeit apparel and small electronics.7 Hundreds of thousands of pesos in cash and merchandise pass through the streets of Ingeniero Budge, providing, as mentioned above, excellent occasions for what criminologists call “opportunistic crime.” Military-style federal forces known as the National Guard (Gendarmería Nacional) patrol the streets hours before and during these días de feria. Numerous and heavily armed with state-of-the-art equipment, the officers’ imposing presence transforms the area into a militarized space. In certain areas surrounding the feria, private security guards and the gendarmes create cordones (passageways) through which shoppers and merchants come in and out of the fair.

But this militarization of the margins does not last for long. Once the markets close, the officers disappear until the fair’s next opening. Poorly paid, trained, and equipped, the state police (known as La Bonaerense) patrol the streets when the National Guard is gone. Thirty months of observation and innumerable conversations with residents (young and old) reveal the highly contradictory character of this irregular law enforcement.

**Cops in Action**

The Janus-faced character of the Argentine state is well known. The state partakes in crime and in its repression. The Buenos Aires state police, for example, have been involved in gambling and prostitution for decades and more recently in kidnappings, car theft, and drug dealing (CELS 2012; Dewey 2012; Isla and Míguez 2003; Verbitsky 2011). According to one of the best known experts on the subject, “police tutelage” (i.e., protection and monitoring) is crucial to understanding the territorial expansion of the market of illicit drugs (Sain 2009:143). All the while, rates of incarceration in federal prisons have grown almost 400% in the past 20 years, the result, to a great extent, of the imprisonment of petty drug dealers and consumers (CELS 2009).

The issue is thus not the state’s absence, collapse, or weakness but the contradictory presence, marked in part by police-criminal “collusion” of the kind described by Desmond Arias in Rio de Janeiro’s favelas—an “active political constellation” that promotes violence (Arias 2006a, 2006b). In other words, the proliferating episodes of violence do not signal a context of “state abandonment” but of connections between state actors and perpetrators of violence. And these connections signify an “engagement” that has eroded the rule of law and instituted “a separate, localised, order” (Arias 2006b:324).

A former undersecretary of security in the state of Buenos Aires and a highly perceptive analyst of the state police’s (mis)behavior asserts that there is a “pervasive relationship between politics, crime and police action” (Sain 2004:87). During the early 1990s, the government of Buenos Aires made an explicit agreement with the state police: in order to attain “respectable levels of public safety” (Sain 2002:85), the government provided the state police with substantial material and financial resources and significant freedom of action (i.e., unaccountability). The state government also assured the police that it would not intervene in its long-established illegal self-financing activities. This continuing “circuit of illegal self-financing,” as Sain calls it (2002), emerges as the product of the participation of key members of the police hierarchy in an “extended network of criminal activities that revolved around illegal gambling, prostitution, drug and arms trafficking, and robberies” (86). As such, illegal practices are institutionalized in the police force (Isla and Miguez 2003). Those living at the bottom of the sociosymbolic order directly experience the effects of these clandestine connections between police and criminality. Or as a recent report from the CELS puts it, residents of poor neighborhoods in Buenos Aires “live and suffer the consequences of the connections between the local police and various illegal networks, such as those that sell drugs; steal, dismantle, and distribute cars and/or auto parts; and manage brothels” (CELS 2012:130; see also Dewey 2012).

How does this “constellation” operate at the ground level in Ingeniero Budge? Police-criminal collusion (the political underpinning of violence) manifests itself through the clandestine cooperation between drug dealers, thieves, and cops. A car thief relays to us, “We used to disassemble the cars super fast. The morning after we steal the car, traders would come and buy from us. It was easy, and the police wouldn’t bother us. We would arrange with them beforehand, and they would release the area from interference.” Two women involved in petty drug dealing tell us, “It is easy to make a deal with the police….They come to you for their commission. Every night, you need to give them $500 or $600, and they leave you alone.” And a once big-time dealer recollects, “When we first started dealing, we had an arrangement with the police. Every weekend they would come to ‘pick up the envelope’ (i.e., to receive their cut). The cops knew we were selling drugs, but they didn’t bother us. They would release the area for us. Now, if you don’t pay them every weekend, you are in trouble.” By trouble, he means extortion by law enforcement agents.

Unsurprisingly, this common theme of a “released or liberated area” defines the local point of view on police intervention. As said, residents perceive the neighborhood as a “liberated zone,” an area where perpetrators of all sorts of illicit activities can do as they please (or, as one neighbor put

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it at a community meeting devoted to discussing issues of safety and crime, a place where "anything goes").

In two separate interviews, a federal police agent currently working in the area confirms this. When we ask her about the types of crime that are predominant in Budge, she confides that "there are all sorts of crimes. The problem is that the [state] police don't help, they're involved with the people who commit crimes.... Cops recruit youngsters to rob, to sell drugs [for them].... They are not cops, they are criminals in uniform" (emphasis added). Police involvement in crime (particularly in drug trafficking) has not gone unnoticed by the courts. In March 2013, five agents from Budge's police station were indicted, accused of illegal detentions, of fabricating reports (falsely accusing neighbors of drug dealing), of planting evidence, and (possibly) of distributing drugs. The chief of the station was removed when 40 bags of marijuana were found inside the precinct, presumably used to plant evidence or to distribute in the area. As should become clear, police-criminal collusion is not simply a matter of "generalized perceptions" among neighbors or one or two (possibly disgruntled) cops; it is documentable as an established practice within the force.

Ingeniero Budge's residents suffer multiple forms of victimization, but they are reluctant to call on the police because they intuitively know that agents will not act on their claims or they suspect that they are either the perpetrators of crime or in close association with criminals. Take the case of local drug dealers (publicly known as transas). Neighbors are fearful of going to the local precinct and denouncing their operations because they think that transas will learn about their report (from the cops) and retaliate against them. Thus, the outcome of this intermittent and contradictory police intervention is a variation of what Kirk and Papachristos (2011) call "legal cynicism"—the shared belief that law enforcement agents are "illegitimate, unresponsive, and ill equipped to ensure public safety" (Kirk and Papachristos 2011:1191). But, in Ingeniero Budge, legal cynicism emerges not simply out of the perceived unavailability or bias of law enforcement agents (as in the U.S. black ghetto)—as a female resident clearly puts it, "The cops are always late, to collect the body if someone was killed, or to stitch you up, if you've been raped"—but also out of the complicity between cops and criminals. Local violence has a clear political underpinning because of the irregular involvements of state authorities in the neighborhood that not only "liberate the zone" to alternative and violent modes of law and order but that also often promote and perpetuate violent crime and interpersonal violence.

Collective Action

Localized violence is political not only because the state is deeply involved in its production but also because it has the potential to produce collective political outcomes as attested in the incipient community organizing and protest activity that we witnessed during our fieldwork. Let me now illustrate this second political dimension of interpersonal violence with an ethnographic reconstruction of the makings of a rally against crime, drugs, and police complicity.

On February 13, 2013, a group of two dozen residents of Ingeniero Budge attended a meeting called by grassroots activists linked to an internal faction of the governing Peronist Party (Agrupación Evita) and by the organization Mothers Against Paco, a small but active group of mothers whose sons and daughters are addicted to freebase cocaine. The meeting was called after the murder of 63-year-old resident Luciano Tolaba. Early on the morning of February 11, Tolaba was accompanying his son to the bus stop when a group of three youngsters, apparently under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol, tried to rob them. As Tolaba resisted the attempt, he was punched and stoned to death.

The explicit purpose of the meeting was to organize a rally to the local police precinct in order to demand police protection. But the meeting also served as an arena for residents to vent their frustrations with police complicity with drug dealers and police inaction in the face of increasing violence in the neighborhood. What was said there (and screamed and chanted at the rally two days later) shows that overwhelming violence can produce fear and feelings of impotence, but it also has the potential to unite residents as violence becomes collectively defined as a contentious political issue.

Nerina, a grassroots activist, opens the meeting and attempts to summarize the impetus for the gathering (the leader of the Agrupación Evita, himself a state representative, was present at the meeting, and most of what attendees said was directly or indirectly addressed toward him): "There have been many deaths in the neighborhood recently, and the police are nowhere to be found. ... There are a lot of kids who are consuming paco, and lots of transas." Isabel, the most outspoken leader of Mothers Against Paco, herself an activist at the Agrupación Evita and coordinator of a state-funded soup kitchen, shares, "Things are quite messed up. I do not want more police, or mano dura.... I want the police to do their job. We all know where the transas are.... We have insecurity because the kids who are on drugs steal in order to buy." Alicia, another leader of Mothers Against Paco, begins to speak about police complicity with dealers: "They know where they are but they don't do anything." It is then the turn of Elisa, a 50-year-old woman whose son has recently been murdered. In a low, trembling voice she clearly elaborates the problem they are all facing: "My son was killed because of a fight between two bands that wanted to control the area. We all know who killed him, but the state prosecutor wants witnesses. And who is going to be a witness? The kids [who know] are afraid because they know that the cops are complicit with the dealers. Nobody wants to talk, nobody wants to report. Everybody knows who killed my son, but nobody talks."

Fear, most attendants agree, has a paralyzing effect: "There are a lot of people who are angry about all this insecurity, but
they are afraid to come to the meetings. … They don’t want to report anything because they are afraid they won’t be able to go back to their homes.” People are afraid not only because they know dealers are “in cahoots with authorities” but also, as Isabel clearly puts it (and everybody at the meeting seems to agree), because, “Who here doesn’t have a brother, a cousin, a brother-in-law, who has relationships with dealers, or son or a brother who is consuming? This is a reality. Fear paralyzes us all.”

For about an hour, those at the meeting share stories about their concerns with sons or daughters who are addicted to paco, pills, and alcohol (“Many, many times, I gave him money so that he could buy drugs … because I don’t want him to be around stealing. I never told him the money was for drugs, but I knew. … I just don’t want him to be killed trying to get money to buy”) and about police protection or complicity (“I asked one of the dealers if he wasn’t afraid of the cops … and he looked at me and said that you just have to bribe them”). The phrase “liberated zone” (zona liberada) is repeatedly uttered, conveying both deep knowledge about the actions of the police and also a widespread feeling of being “unprotected.” As the meeting comes to a close, attendees agree on their main claim for the rally that will take place two days later: “We want the police and the courts to fulfill their role. No more liberated zones. Those who consume should not go to jail, and dealers should be imprisoned.” The flyers calling residents to the rally summarize their point of view: “Enough drugs and deaths in our community. No more liberated zones” (fig. 2).

On Friday, February 18, we march through the streets of Budge carrying placards that read “No more liberated zones,” and we chant songs that claim “Justice for Tolaba.” But the sign that best encapsulates the fear and impotence that overwhelms Budge’s residents is carried by an 8-year-old: “I’m growing up in a neighborhood full of drugs and criminals. What do I do?” The visual testimonies residents make capture the crushing violence that they experience as an inescapable aspect of their daily existence. These visual markers also represent the multiple and at times intertwining ways residents have responded to the proliferation of violence. This recent community response—including that young child’s sign—marks how public and collective demonstrations of personal feelings of paralyzing fear and impotence can redefine violence as a contentious political issue.

Although the residents of Ingeniero Budge describe themselves and their neighbors as too paralyzed by fear to confront violence in their community, there is a multitude of strategies utilized by residents to cope with and counteract
their hostile surroundings. As becomes clear above, at the same community meeting in which people expressed paralyzing fear, a public rally was organized to claim police protection, offering a welcome reminder of the contradiction between what people say and what people actually do. Despite their expressions of fear, impotence, and (perceived) “futility” (Bandura 1982), residents do not stand by passively in the face of widespread violence. They seclude themselves inside their homes, reinforce the supervision of their children, bolster their own precautions when venturing into public space, fortify their homes, and (occasionally) report incidents to the police. They also forcibly confine their children when they perceive that they are “getting in trouble” and beat (actual or potential) perpetrators of violence (including their own children) and those who are thought to be “bad influences.” Furthermore, as we will see in the next section, they might seek to involve the local police (whom they suspect are “in cahoots” with drug dealers) in the domestic sphere in an effort to discipline their own children. All of these practices express an “ordinary ethics” (Das 2012; Lambek 2010) of coping and care—or to borrow the language of Hayder Al-Mohammad and Daniela Peluso (2012), “an ethics of the rough round”—but they vary in their location (the household or the larger community), in the level of coordination they require, and, more importantly, in whether or not they involve the perpetration of physical harm and the actions of the state, the latter incarnated in the intervention of the local police. (For an examination of ethical routines, see Auyero and Kilanski, forthcoming.)

**Fear and Self-Control**

As seen above, a form of community organization is slowly emerging to address widespread violence and to demand state protection. Note, however, the puzzling character of this collective demand: neighbors ask for protection from a police force they know is complicit in and with crime. But interpersonal violence not only generates collective action. It also (and based on our ethnographic fieldwork we could say, mainly) produces fear—a fear palpable at the community meeting I attended. This fear, while at times paralyzing, also leads to the further perpetuation of violence as a form of social control.

After Ezequiel seriously hurt his brother with a paving stone, María went to the local police precinct and pleaded with the agents to, in her words, “take Ezequiel out of the house and intern him in a rehab center… by force if necessary.” A few days later, a police car showed up at María’s house and took Ezequiel to the local rehab center. There, a psychologist at the admissions office denied Ezequiel a place, stating that he could not be admitted “because he was brought here with the use of public force.” While María and the psychologist were arguing about what to do next, Ezequiel escaped through a window of the center. Hours later, late at night, he returned home; according to Alicia, a friend of María, “all drugged up, looking like a zombie.”

Alicia had her own experiences with a son addicted to paco, and her recollections of what happened that night, while she was there “supporting María,” illuminate the spiral of (intimate) physical aggression produced by drug addiction. Her recollections provide further evidence of residents’ reliance on interpersonal harm when the state fails to ameliorate the effects of drugs, crime, and violence on their lives. “When Ezequiel came back, and I saw he was about to smoke another pipe [of paco], I struck him across his face. ‘Son of a bitch,’ I told him, ‘Don’t you see that you are making your mother suffer? She is very worried about you. And don’t you even think about hurting her, because I’ll strike you harder next time.’”

According to Alicia, Ezequiel needs to “respect” his mother, a respect that may be attained, if need be, through the use of physical force. As Alicia puts it: “I was a thief, a dealer, I used to carry guns…but my children always respected me. And when they disrespected me…my son still has the marks of the metal chain with which I hit him on the head.” Alicia not only hit her son, Victor, with that chain but also used it to tie him up: “When Victor was drugged, he would not obey me. He escaped from the house. I chained him to his bed so that he couldn’t leave his room. I cried so many times for him. I told him I didn’t like to hit him, and that I only did that because he was high on drugs.” All the violence did not “cure him,” she admits; he was “rescued” in prison: “He stopped taking drugs when he did time for a robbery….Those three years behind bars did him good. Now he is cured.”

Police brutality is part of the standard operating procedure of La Bonaerense (as the infamous state police are known), especially when poor youth from shantytowns and squatter settlements are involved (CELS 2012; Daroqui 2009). In Ingeniero Budge, this “violent and arbitrary penalization of poverty” (Müller 2011:16) took the form of an infamous “massacre” that many residents still remember and five cases of lethal police violence between 2005 and 2011 (CORREPI 2012).8

However, the many existing instances of mothers who resort to the local police to (re)gain some control over their sons (or who think that prison could “cure” them) should alert us to a different (i.e., not exclusively repressive) kind of relationship between the state and poor youth living at the urban margins. Maria, Alicia, Victor, and Ezequiel (and many others during our fieldwork) illuminate what, paraphrasing Foucault (1980), we could call a productive relationship (in the sense of the positive effects generated) between police, youth, drugs, violence, and destitution.

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8. Two decades ago three youngsters from the neighborhood were brutally murdered by the local police in an episode that came to be known as the “Budge massacre.”
A third way in which interpersonal violence in the area is deeply political thus comes to the fore. As the vignette above illustrates, parents might turn to the police if they detect that their son or daughter is heavily involved in drug consumption. They do so not out of trust in the state police (an institution they all perceive as highly corrupt and brutal) but out of impotence and fear: impotence in the face of the lure of highly addictive substances (such as paco) and fear of having a child either murdered by a drug gang or killed from an overdose. Out of dread and helplessness (“You can’t do anything against drugs.” “I die if he dies.” “You have no idea how much anguish I feel every time I think that he can die because of the drugs.”), many of the parents we spoke with in our fieldwork would summon the punitive arm of a state they distrust to control and discipline the lives of their sons or daughters. From this perspective, the police have the same “sociological ambivalence” that the prison system has for many inmates’ relatives (Comfort 2008).

Conclusions

In Argentina and elsewhere in Latin America, public discourse about urban violence tends to be dominated by those occupying privileged positions in the social structure. They are the ones who talk most about the issue because, presumably, they are the ones most affected by it. And yet any cursory count of the victims of urban violence in the subregion tells us that those who are suffering the most from it live (and die) at the bottom of the sociosymbolic order. But the inhabitants of the urban margins are hardly ever heard from in debates about public safety. They live en la inseguridad, but the discourse about violence and risk belongs to—it is manufactured and manipulated by—others. As a result, the experience of interpersonal violence among the urban poor becomes something unspeakable, and the everyday fear and trauma lived in relegated territories is constantly muted and denied. The urban violence among those who suffer from it the most is banished from public debate, and its deeply political dimensions are occluded from view. In this article I have attempted to unearth the political character of interpersonal violence in the urban periphery of Buenos Aires.

Far from being an instrument useful for tearing down a system of domination, the violence that pervades daily life in marginalized neighborhoods such as Ingeniero Budge instills fear in its inhabitants and serves to stigmatize them and their community. Directed against one another, this violence lacks the redemptive potential that Fanon and others detected in subaltern violence (see Bernstein 2013). But it is not devoid of political meaning. As we have seen, there are three political dimensions of this violence: its connections with the state agents who are part and parcel of its production, its potential to generate community collective action, and the paradoxical ways in which interpersonal violence feeds residents’ reliance on the very same state agents complicit in and responsible for the proliferation of violence.

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