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What might be the conditions of a radical, future-oriented politics in contemporary South Africa? Interrogating the salience of wealth and property, race and difference as central idioms in the framing and naming of ongoing social struggles, Achille Mbembe investigates the possibility of reimagining democracy not only as a form of human mutuality and freedom, but also as a community of life.

Preliminary observations

During the last quarter of the twentieth century we have witnessed the development of modes of ethical reasoning which dealt with the difficult question: what is “the human” – or what remains of “the human” or even of “humanism” – in an age of violence, fear and torture; war, terror and vulnerability. Propelled by the repetition of violent events and human-made catastrophes and disasters, this critique has profoundly shifted the manner in which we used to define law and life, sovereignty and the political. It is now understood that if life itself has become the prime medium for exerting power, power in turn is fundamentally the capacity to control and redistribute the means of human survival and ecological sustainability.

Some of these forms of political and cultural critique are not simply paying incidental attention to the religious. A number of secular intellectuals have moved beyond a time, not so long ago, when generation after generation of leftist revolutionaries denounced religion as a force of alienation which threatened human freedom. To a large extent, this new critique has also taken the form of witnessing. As has long been the case in black radical intellectual traditions, to witness is the attempt to disrupt and destabilize the prevalent order of things. The task of the witness is to reopen the emancipatory possibilities which, as a consequence of the structured blindness and collective self-deception of the age, are in danger of foreclosing the future. Propelled by the belief that history can be made possible again, late 20th-century forms of critique have posited the pursuit of truth as a form of struggle in and of itself. Furthermore, the turn to the politico-theological has been the cornerstone of a renewed drive to expand our definition of “the human” and to re-imagine democracy as a community of life – life itself understood as a relentlessly regenerative force and possibility.

The emergence of late 20th-century forms of theologico-political critique has coincided with our disjointed world experiencing a radical uncertainty. This sense of uncertainty particularly affects three domains of social life: one, the nature of historical praxis; two, the categorical foundations of experience; and three, the moral economies of signification. We no longer have ready-made answers to such fundamental questions as: Who am I? Who is my neighbour? What should we do with our (former) enemies? How should we treat the migrant, the asylum seeker, the stranger or the prisoner, the widow and the orphan? Can we forgive the unforgivable? What is the relationship between the quality of persons on the one hand and material wealth, poverty, hunger and disease on the other? Is there anything that can be considered to be so priceless as to be immune from sacrifice? If the possibilities of utopian thinking have receded, what are the conditions of a radical, future-oriented politics in this world and in these times?

Africa is a particularly revealing site from which to reframe these renewed interrogations of “the human”, of “life” and of “possibility”. Here, under conditions of slavery, colonization and apartheid, brutal forms of dehumanization have raised, in the starkest terms possible, the political and moral dilemmas of human difference. A racially exclusive ideological discourse in the heyday of conquest and occupation, “humanism” was predicated on the belief that a difference of colour was a difference of species. Race in particular did not simply become a crucial,
pervasive dimension of colonial domination and capitalist exploitation. Turned into law, it was also used as a privileged mechanism for turning black life into waste – a race doomed to wretchedness, degradation, abjection and servitude.

This is why, in their effort to vindicate their race, black intellectuals devoted most of their energies drawing complex portraits of themselves as actors in the history of humankind. As a result, two perspectives have historically dominated modern African discourses on “the human”. The first – a substantivist perspective that used blackness as a strategic concept in a broader economy of self-affirmation and reinvention – ended up giving priority to an ontology of difference. To the colonial negation of black humanity, it substituted a narrative of black collective identity born of a common historical experience of subjugation and suffering. But even in the most radical forms of black self-assertion, race consciousness was always a transitional move on the way to universal or planetary humanism. Although always keen to provide a full account of “the lived experience of the black” as Fanon put it, the second – a political and future-oriented perspective – sought to move away from racialism and toward seeing each human being as only a human being in a future shared community. Such a community was usually envisaged as a community of life, freedom and possibility. It included everyone equally and was produced through struggle.

Today, questions concerning the place of race in capitalism and capitalism’s intrinsic capacity to generate “the human” as waste are being raised anew, at a time when radical shifts can be observed in the way neo-liberalism operates. In many places, the Continent is witnessing the consolidation of rapacious and predatory modes of wealth extraction. As Jean Comaroff writes, a new scramble for Africa is underway. Many of the investments currently being made flirt with forms of deregulation that pave the way for criminal economic transactions – trade in blood diamonds, contraband substances, protected species, sex workers, toxic dumping. Privatization is being carried out in the midst of acute levels of material deprivation. Both the logic of privatization and that of extraction are underpinned and buttressed by various processes of militarization. In order to raise profitability levels, capital and power manufacture wars and disasters, feeding off situations of extremity which then allow for “indirect forms of private government” of which “humanitarian interventions” are but the most visible. Where access to wage labor is still a – remote – possibility, it is more and more embedded in a logic of disposability.

The “human” in the South African context

Whether there is anything which is still to be rediscovered or to be reanimated from the term “the human” takes on a paradoxical resonance in contemporary South Africa. With the end of apartheid, South African culture and society was confronted with the urgency of engaging in affirmative politics in lieu of the politics of destruction of the years of racial segregation. Affirmative politics entailed the production of social horizons of hope. At the same time, it meant resisting both the inertia of the present and the nostalgia of the past. To reconstruct what centuries of racial brutality had destroyed, a balance had to be found between the mobilization, actualization and deployment of cognitive, affective and creative possibilities which had not so far been activated, along with a necessary dose of oppositional consciousness.

Critical humanism in this new context would have meant a persistent commitment to the possibilities and powers of life. There is substantial evidence that a return to the question of the possibilities and powers of life as a precondition for the reconstitution of “the human” in politics and culture was recognized as a matter of ethical and political urgency during the first decade of democracy. During this decade, South Africa became a model of how to dismantle a racial mode of rule, strike down race-based frameworks of citizenship and the law while striving to create racial equality through positive State action. The post-apartheid State fostered a normative project with the aim of achieving justice through reconciliation, equality through economic redress, democracy through the transformation of the law and the restoration of a variety of rights, including the right to a dignified life. This normative project was enshrined in a utopian Constitution that attempts to establish a new relationship between law and society on the one hand and law and life on the other, while equating democracy and the political itself with the ethical and the just. This Constitution’s underlying principle is ubuntu or human mutuality. It promises a transcendence of the old politics of racial difference and an affirmation of a shared humanity. Underpinning the Constitution is the hope that, after centuries of attempts by white power to contain blacks, South Africa could become the speech-act of a certain way of being-in-common rather than side by side.

This drive to “re-humanize” society and culture and to institutionalize a new political community that defines itself as an ethical community
is nevertheless unfolding against various odds. Perhaps to a degree hardly achieved in the rest of the Continent, the human has consistently taken on the form of waste within the peculiar trajectory race and capitalism espoused in South Africa. Traditionally, we speak of “waste” as something produced bodily or socially by humans. In this sense, “waste” is that which is other than the human. Traditionally too, we speak of the intrinsic capacity of capitalism to waste human lives. We speak of how workers are wasted under capitalism in comparable fashion to natural resources. Marx in particular characterizes capitalist production as thoroughly wasteful with what he calls “human material” just as it is with “material resources”. It squanders “human beings, living labour”, “squandering not only flesh and blood, but nerves and brain, life and health as well”, he writes.

In order to grasp the particular drama of the human in the history of South Africa, we should broaden this traditional definition of “waste” and consider the human itself as a waste product at the interface of race and capitalism. Squandering and wasting black lives has been an intrinsic part of the logic of capitalism, especially in those contexts in which race is central to the simultaneous production of wealth and of superfluous people.

Today, this logic of waste is particularly dramatized by the dilemmas of unemployment and disposability, survival and subsistence, and the expansion in every arena of everyday life of spaces of vulnerability. Despite the emergence of a solid black middle class, a rising superfluous population is becoming a permanent fixture of the South African social landscape with little possibility of ever being exploited by capital. Only a dwindling number of individuals can now claim to be workers in the traditional sense of the term. How to govern the poor has therefore become one of the biggest moral questions facing the nascent democracy. Behind policy debates on “welfare” and “service delivery” loom fundamental ethical choices that will determine the nature of the South African experiment in democracy – questions of how to right historical wrongs; what is the relationship between personal or collective injury and larger problems of equality, justice and the law; hunger and morality; owning and sharing; or even truth, hope and reconciliation. The urgency of these new moral dilemmas is such that, for the democratic project to have any future at all, it should necessarily take the form of a conscious attempt to retrieve life and “the human” from a history of waste.

How to govern the poor has ... become one of the biggest moral questions facing the nascent democracy.

Wealth and property

Meanwhile, wealth and property have acquired a new salience in public debate. They have become the key, central idioms to framing and naming ongoing social struggles – from imagining the relationship between “the good life” to redefining value itself; from claims of citizenship, rights and entitlements to the definition of the forms of property and the economy itself (whether we should nationalize or not); from matters of morality to those of lifestyle and accountability.

The centrality of wealth in the moral discourse concerning the “human” is not new. In various parts of pre-colonial Africa, discourses on “the human”, or, on “humanity” almost always took the shape and content of discourses about “wealth”, “personhood” and “social multiplicity”. Traditional definitions of wealth usually encompassed “people”, “things” and “knowledge”.

“People”, that is, other human beings, were not only the most important unit of measurement of ultimate value. They also formed the material basis or infrastructure of human life. ‘People’ consisted of interpersonal dependents of all kinds – wives, children, clients and slaves. As Jane Guyer argues, they were sought, valued, and at times paid for at considerable expense in material terms. Kinship and marriage especially were critical components of accumulative strategies. But wealth also covered traded goods, including the imported goods brought from elsewhere. Things could be personalized objects. Goods could be functionally interchangeable with human beings who in turn could in certain
respects be “objectified” or converted into clients or followers.

Wealth – embodied in rights in people – remained a persistent principle of African social and moral life even in the midst of the various shifts induced by the slave trade and colonialism. Knowledge on the other hand was understood as an ever shifting spectrum of possibility. Jane Guyer makes it clear that it was highly valued, complexly organized and plural by definition. There was no social organization of kinship and material life that did not depend, to some extent, on a regime of distribution of knowledge – the arts, music, dance, rhetoric, spiritual life, hunting, gathering, fishing, cultivation, woodcarving, metallurgy. If certain forms of knowledge were specialized, controlled and monopolized by a small cadre of experts or a secret society hierarchy, other forms of knowledge were conceptualized as an open and unbounded repertoire. This unboundedness made it possible for such forms of knowledge to be widely distributed throughout the society and among many adepts on the basis of personal capacity or potentiality.

Indeed, African pre-colonial discourses on the “human” allowed for personal differentiation or singularity. It was believed that certain qualities lived in the individual from his or her birth; which he or she had no need for “magic” to arouse although there was always the indispensable need for magical rites to conserve these. Personal abilities could be augmented, conserved and actualized within the person, making that person a “real person”, recognized as such by the community. Each individual person’s power was itself a composition.

That some of these old tropes might still be at work in current controversies on wealth and property should not be entirely excluded. But that wealth, poverty and property have become essential to the self-understanding of South African society after liberation should also be read against a long history of black dispossession. Indeed, one of the most brutal effects of neoliberalism in South Africa has been the generalization and radicalization of a condition of temporariness for the poor. For many people, the struggle to be alive has taken the form of a struggle against the constant corrosion of the present, both by change and by uncertainty.
In order to reanimate the idea of “the human” in contemporary South African politics and culture, there is therefore no escape from the need to reflect on the thoroughly political and historical character of wealth and property and the extent to which wealth and property have come to be linked with bodily life. If what distinguishes the South African experiment from other such experiments elsewhere in the world is the attempt to establish a new relationship between law and life while equating democracy and the political itself with the ethical and the just, then we have to ask under what conditions can this project of human mutuality result in a broader and more ethical commensality.

Race and difference

Another major challenge to any re-imagination of “the human” in contemporary conditions is race. South Africa’s democracy asserts the equality of all human beings and seeks to derive powers of government from the consent of the governed. Yet, this is a democracy founded on deep and entrenched forms of racial dispossession and inequality inherited from a past of racial brutality. The country’s entire modern history is spliced around and fractured by the question of the relationship between its parts – whether they should exist alone, separate, or whether they should exist with other parts, together. This dialectic between with and without played itself out dramatically during the years of apartheid. It is being played out again, in no less dramatic fashion, between those with and those without property. The end of apartheid has not resolved the old question of difference. It has simply shifted the terms of the difference and of the dispute. To these challenges must be added yet another, represented by the stranger in our midst. In contemporary South Africa, “undocumented” or “illegal migrants” are people whose fundamental rights are in jeopardy. They are halfheartedly protected in the confines of the national territory where they reside. Post-apartheid South Africa has inherited a long tradition of a “politics of separation”. For centuries, this country was ruled according to that principle – to physically separate itself from all kinds of “other humans”; the refusal to share the same space with these “other humans” or to live with them.

Worldwide, a global regime of walling is fast contributing to the manufacturing of entire categories of unwanted people of which the illegal migrant, the undocumented worker, and more and more the refugee and the asylum seeker, are the prototypes. This global regime is characterized by the differential treatment of individuals, groups or communities with respect to movement or circulation. This differential treatment raises, at a deeper level, questions about the way in which the ‘quality of being human’ as such is instituted in a globalized society; the way in which the quality of being human becomes once again categorized and hierarchized so that its selective reproduction can be controlled; so that some human beings can be hunted by the police of certain States and their freedom of circulation subjected to massive controls and restrictions.

The gigantic inequality with regard to the right of circulation and the mobility of persons nowadays constitutes a transnational social relationship in and of itself. It is fuelled by an anthropological crisis of the category of ‘the human person’ as a ‘universal’ category. It is also at the roots of new, global forms of racialization, in the name of security.

The category of the future

The “human” is another name for the future. In the political history of South Africa, the future has always been the term by which the struggle to produce a meaningful life has been named. What gave the category of the future its power was the hope that
we might bring into being – as a concrete social possibility – a radically different temporal experience; that a systemic transformation in the logic of our social life and in the logic of our being-in-common as human beings might happen as a result of historical praxis.

For many, the process of producing life now tends to take the form of a struggle to make it from today to tomorrow, and to cross the boundary from today to tomorrow can no longer be taken for granted. In fact, it has become eminently hazardous, risky. To be alive is to constantly be at risk; to constantly have to take risks because the penalty for not taking risks is to not be able to make it from today to tomorrow.

As the possibility of the Event recedes, South Africa is faced with the “liquid” character both of the present and of the future, their dizziness, their mirage-like qualities, the weakness in our grip on the future.

We should wonder whether there is a direct relationship between the liquidity of the present and the overwhelming feeling of the elusiveness of the future – and therefore the apparent foreclosure of any plausible form of radical politics. In fact, many live as if the present, democracy, the law and the Constitution, had unexpectedly betrayed them. What consequences this feeling of betrayal entails for our imagination of the future is far from having been properly assessed. On the one hand, it manifests itself via the constant re-apparition of the past in almost every single act that aims at bringing a different future into being. On the other hand, it is as if for many people too much has changed and yet not enough has changed. There is a feeling (especially among the poor) that they are now not merely deprived of wealth and power, but even of life possibilities as such. Throughout the entire society, there is a widely shared belief that in order to further one’s claims, it might be better and more efficient to resort to violence rather than to invoke the law. This accelerated turn to an everyday politics of expediency rather than a demanding, disciplined politics of principle is fuelled by the inability to open freedom onto the un-chartered territories of the future.

Many have the feeling that they might never really fulfill their lives; that their lives will always be somewhat truncated; that these lives will never achieve the status of lives that are accounted for, inhabited as they are by a “ghost”. Beyond the repetition of dead paradigms, any new form of radical politics will have to deal with this ghost in life, the pain of disappointment and the sharp experience of defeat, of palpable powerlessness and dashed hopes.

The period after apartheid is a period of ‘reconstruction’ and ‘redesign’. The challenge ahead is nothing less than the re-foundation of democracy as a community of life. The end of apartheid, just as decolonization in other parts of Africa, has opened the door to internal partition. It has not entirely resolved the question of difference; of how to make decisions about issues of redistribution and sharing. Yet the need to experiment with new forms of ethical relations has never been as acute as now. The question this country is therefore facing today as yesterday is under what conditions can South Africa re-imagine democracy not only as a form of human mutuality and freedom, but also as a community of life. In order to confront the ghost in the life of so many, the concepts of “the human”, or of “humanism”, inherited from the West will not suffice. We will have to take seriously the anthropological embeddedness of such terms in long histories of “the human” as waste.
Why should we care about humanism: rejected as it has been so virulently in the academy and the media, co-opted into the service of western military secularists, while simultaneously being rendered empty and compromised by UNESCO-style liberalism? In order to achieve what Sylvia Wynter calls “humanism’s re-enchantment”, Paul Gilroy argues for a return to the non-racial, anti-colonial, and ultimately reparative humanism articulated by Franz Fanon – unfashionable though this may be in many contemporary scholastic circles.

Fanon’s preparedness to speak in humanity’s name is a striking feature of The Wretched of The Earth but his humanism has proved to be a tricky subject. It is discussed only rarely. I would like to consider it because there are ways in which his arguments towards what I want to call a reparative humanism (configured by the overcoming of colonial statecraft and its racial orders), can help with contemporary political problems. In particular, his distinctive figure of the human is able to illuminate some of the difficult issues that derive on one side, from the post-colonial politics of multicultural/alterity and on the other, from the belligerent civilisationism that has lately come to define our geopolitical predicament.

Exploring that figure of the human is deepened by a degree of familiarity with the French intellectual and political scene in which the discussion originally unfolded, but the currency of The Wretched of The Earth shows that the significance of these issues extends beyond that historic setting. I cannot reconstruct that debate in its entirety now, though I should say that it involved arguments about phenomenology, subjectivity, corporeality and temporality that were conditioned by and addressed to the aftermath of war against the Nazis, which left France fractured, and also to the immediate context of the new war with the Vietminh that began in 1945 just as French Foreign Legion was moving into Sétif, Guelma, Kherrata and other Algerian towns to exact punishment for the pro-independence sentiments evident among soldiers returning from Europe’s battlefields – the Thiaroye problem. These different wars were the catalyst for the complacent anti-humanism Fanon’s arguments repudiated. The nature of the connection between them was the trigger for Fanon’s reflections on the human framed by the political morality of anticolonial resistance.

Several other aspects of Fanon’s work related to this distinctive humanism have proved equally untimely and perplexing. They too are usually passed over. His non-immanent critique of race (which is presented, among other things, as a problem of modern political ontology) is fundamental. It counterpointed a vociferous attachment to the idea that this humanism was novel. Like his early identification of what he called “the real dialectic between my body and the world”, that claim has usually either been ignored or, more usually, treated as an embarrassment.

The original formulation of this authentic, dialectical possibility arose in a difficult passage from Black Skin White Masks that repays careful study.
There, Fanon was at his closest to both Merleau-
Ponty (as Sekyi-Otu argues in his 1996 volume
Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience) and Césaire.
A racialised modality of being in the world: “the
corporeal-racial schema” was contrasted negatively
with the altogether different kind of existence evi-
dent in the ordinary operations of bodily schema
outside of – or more accurately, either prior to, or
after – the sociogenesis of racial orders. This alter-
native mechanism for assembling human subjectiv-
ity itself provides a cue for the curiosity that Fanon
invested with revolutionary force towards the end of
that book. It involves selves being composed slowly
as bodies move through time and space.

Manichaeanism, colonial domination and the ra-
cial orders they create and support (their precarious
ensembles of spectacular brutality and extractive
economic activity as well as what we can call their
pseudo-polities and parapolitics) disrupt that pro-
cess which is both natural and social. Their obstruc-
tions culminate in a deep estrangement from the hu-
man, an alienation which differs substantially from
the Hegelian and Marxist understanding of that
idea. In an example of what it meant, practically to
stretch Marxian analysis until it became adequate to
the Hegelian and Marxist understanding of that
man, an alienation which differs substantially from
this profound – we can call its racialised – alienation
shares something with the disturbing work under-
taken on this topic by of one of his African-American
influences, Richard Wright, who had steered similar
paths through Marxism. Both of them acknowledge
the metaphysics of race that is inscribed in the un-
settling process of systematically seeing oneself
being misrecognised and of being coerced into be-
coming reconciled with the object with which one
has become confused: the Negro, nigger or nègre.
Expressed in his book 12 Million Black Voices, this
is how Wright understood the problem in the 1940s
while still fighting his way out of Communist orthodoxy:

The word “Negro”, the term by which … we black
folk in the United States are usually designated,
is not really a name at all nor a description, but a
psychological island whose objective form is the
most unanimous fiat in all American history; a
fiat buttressed by popular and national tradition
... which artificially and arbitrarily defines,
regulates, and limits in scope and meaning the
vital contours of our lives, and the lives of our
children and our children’s children.

This island, within whose confines we live, is
anchored in the feelings of millions of people, and
is situated in the midst of the sea of White faces
we meet each day; and, by and large, as three
hundred years of time has borne our nation into
the twentieth century, its rocky boundaries have
remained unyielding to the waves of our hope
that dash against it.

The resulting damage to humanity accumulates.
Eventually, it creates something like a habitual cul-
ture of its own. For Fanon, as expressed in Black
Skin White Masks, the undoing of those bloody for-
mations could only commence once the liberating
refusal to “accept the present as definitive” became
shared and the door of every consciousness opened by
“the real leap” that introduces “invention into existence”. This great transformation involves deci-
sonistic acts of freedom-seeking that refuse the di-
minished, in terms Fanon offers in The Wretched of
The Earth, the “amputated” or “mutilated” human-
ity offered by Europe’s “constant denial of man” and
its symptomatic accompaniment an “avalanche of
murders”.

The Wretched of The Earth sets out what these
transformative practices involved in the context of
national liberation. Europeans can turn to successor
texts like Sven Lindqvist’s thoughtful intervention
The Skull Measurer’s Mistake to explore what this
commitment means for the division of labour in an
anti-racist politics conducted from the imperial and
colonizing countries.

Structuralist and post-structuralist thought con-
verged around the idea that humanism was, at best,
an anachronism. In different ways, Fanon’s earnest
and today, firmly unfashionable, commitment to
these goals fell foul of their founding presupposi-
tions. Following the viral circulation of the UN decl-
ARATION of human rights and its various vernacular
recodings, the Cold-War era politics of humanism
became extremely complex. It developed in anti-
monic patterns that continue to haunt our own situ-
ation in which the need to reformulate the human
in both human rights and humanitarian inter-
vention has initiated a deeper conflict than Fanon was
able to imagine. The Jamaican philosopher, Sylvia
Wynter, has shown that the pursuit of these aims can
be strengthened by being articulated with Fanon’s
view of race’s sociogenesis and his plan for the
destruction of its psycho-existential complexes. In
the longer term, these battles contribute to what she describes as humanism’s re-enchantment, a process that in Jamaica had been dominated by the creative, Ethiopianist reworkings of Unesco’s poetics by roots artists like The Abyssinians, The Heptones and Burning Spear.

the need to reformulate the human in both human rights and humanitarian intervention has initiated a deeper conflict than Fanon was able to imagine

The avowed antihumanists who voiced the positions that shape today’s campus common-sense, have bolstered unsympathetic interpretations of Fanon masquerading as critiques from the left. His commitments appear to be founded on naïve or incompletely thought-through positions that spill over into empty, compromised humanism of the Liberal and Unesco varieties and remains far too fixated on the redemption rather than the provincialisation of Europe. So far, that absurd verdict has not been tested by any exposure to critiques of racial hierarchy, colonial conquest and imperial power.

During the era of decolonisation and independence, debate on the boundaries of the human was conditioned by the aftermath of the recent struggle against Hitlerism. However, then as now, it was neither respectable nor polite to focus on the constitutive potency of racism and to analyse Nazi statecraft as the governmental implementation of racial hygiene directly connected to the genocidal history of colonial domination inside and beyond Europe.

Old, mid-twentieth century rules still prevail in the abstracted world of scholastic, anti-humanism. The vestigial disciplinary forces mustered by fascism’s philosophical apologists do not sanction any uncomfortable, reflexive consideration of their own relationship to the political ontology of race celebrated and affirmed by the likes of Heidegger, Schmitt and the other colossi of contemporary, scholastic theory. However, the continuing influence of those figures helps to make Fanon’s reparative, anti-racist humanism, like the politics of national liberation, appear facile. If Nazism was, after all, not radical evil but rather a trace of metaphysical humanism that reveals the problems with all humanisms, few brave souls will be prepared to plead guilty to humanism’s folly. Marxian philosophical anthropology has travelled in different directions and a whole variety of feminist pronouncements has raised questions about the relationship of gendered categories to humanity (and citizenship) as well as to the prospects of trans- and post-humanity after the end of our species’ natural evolution.

Why then should we care about humanism? a term that has lately been hijacked and monopolised by militant secularism of the Richard Dawkins type, a dismal formation that is studiously indifferent to the postcolonial re-configuration of our world and significantly refuses to make any gesture that might compromise its view of Islam as what Dawkins on his website recently called “an unmitigated evil”.

How debates over the human and its limits became linked to the struggle against racial hierarchy and to the political ontology of race are not issues of interest to civilisationist secularism or scientistic caricatures of Enlightenment. To follow Fanon’s lead, we must do what they refuse to do and use intimate familiarity with Europe’s continuing colonial crimes and the raciology and xenology that sanction them to orient ourselves. Then, we may ask how a refiguration of humanism might contribute to Europe’s ability to acknowledge its evolving postcolonial predicament. Its relationship with migrants, refugees, displaced people, denizens, racial and civilisational inferiors and others judged infrahuman whose lives have no value even when they fall inside the elastic bounds of the law. This is an urgent matter. The problems associated with it have only been augmented by the
way that security now saturates our fading political institutions. Here in the city of Vico, we cannot deny that these debates have a long and important history. Edward Said mapped a good deal of it towards the end of his book *Beginnings* where, for a tantalizing moment, he placed the legacies of Vico and Fanon in counterpoint.

We may ask how a refiguration of humanism might contribute to Europe’s ability to acknowledge its evolving postcolonial predicament.

That difficult, challenging agenda supplied something like a spine to Fanon’s projects. In developing it, the starting point I favour, requires that we locate the desire to reassemble humanism in relation to his analysis of the alienated modes of social interaction that derive from the racialisation of the world and the Manichaean requirements of the colonial order which underpins it.

We must then consider Fanon’s demands for a new humanism as a key aspect of the non-immanent critique of merely racialised being-in-the-world that he gradually elaborates. His humanism should be understood as a vehicle for the reconstruction of that broken world and the undoing of its characteristic forms of alienation. In other words, his humanism is not a residue of, or throwback to, the nineteenth-century debates over philosophical anthropology that preceded the emergence of a scientific anatomisation of capitalism domination and its human cost. We depart from that agenda when we place racial hierarchy, racial epistemology and the political ontology of race at the centre of a self-consciously post-colonial and firmly cosmopolitan analysis. We may then begin to appreciate that humanism, as Fanon defines it, introduces new problems. There is an opportunity or perhaps an obligation to re-engage/re-enchant the human. It can be defined by the twentieth-century context in which the racial nomos that was established in the process of European imperial expansion was still, steadily being overthrown.

One duty alone: That of not renouncing my freedom through my choices. I have no wish to be the victim of the Fraud of a black world. My life should not be devoted to drawing up the balance sheet of Negro values. There is no white world, there is no white ethic, any more than there is a white intelligence. There are in every part of the world men who search. I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny. I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence. In the world through which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself. I am a part of Being to the degree that I go beyond it.

Franz Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks*

This non-racial, anti-colonial, reparative humanism was licensed by the open antipathy to racism that framed it as well as by its detailed, critical grasp of the damage done to ethics, truth and democracy by the racial discourses that could not be undone even by the grotesqueries Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* dismissed as “the fraud of a black world”.

The liberating decolonisation to which he contributed so much is still far from complete though the terms of its legitimation have been redefined on one side by the political rhetoric of humanitarianism and the articulation of human rights and on the other by a sequence of neo-imperial conflicts over scarce resources: energy, water, minerals etc. many of which have pronounced the tacit re-racialisation of the world in civilisationist terms: a monolithic, despotic Islam is now posed against a simplistic image of Europe as the West.

This old fantasy now comes in two flavours: post-secular Christian or secular Enlightened. The racialisation of the human circulates through the
conflicts it feeds, sometimes with unexpected consequences. Part of the explanation for its durability resides in the fact that postcolonial relations, struggles and wars are no longer narrowly confined to the post-imperial powers. NATO’s expansive new role, like the ISAF’s war in Afghanistan and the global counterinsurgency that accompanies it, make all the contributing military forces into postcolonial actors whether or not they see themselves as having been beneficiaries of earlier colonialism. More than that, there is a high degree of historical and geographical continuity between the wars of imperial decolonisation and today’s global counterinsurgency campaign.

The “smart power” supposedly being deployed has moved on from the airwaves. It includes what the head of the world bank once casually called “facebook diplomacy”. The infowar aspires to complete control of visual culture and through that mastery, to command of human imagination and dreamscape. We should therefore concede the growing inadequacy of older critical approaches based upon the too simple distinction between being seen and being invisible. Instead, we must appreciate the need to contest the terms of visibility and the political, legal and economic conditions within which particular regimes of seeing can be reproduced. The spectacular is only one of these.

Let us recall also that the US government became a private client of the satellite imaging corporation whose digital eyes covered Afghanistan. The war conducted remotely by means of drones has been outsourced to Xe corp. The “Human-Terrain System” now ensures that anthropologists are embedded alongside warriors and info-warriors in the latest sequence of doomed military adventures which are novel only in being warranted by the liberal goal of redeeming gender equality.

Europe’s vulnerable gays and young women are to be protected with cluster bombs, depleted uranium shells and a new system of banking based on mobile phones that can double as cameras and screens for photographing yourself instead of circulating video clips of the latest war crimes and collateral damage. A May 2010 dispatch by Nathan Hodge from the Afghan frontline posted on www.wired.com captured this situation neatly:

Things reached a chaotic peak when soldiers spotted a young man with a neatly trimmed goatee, apparently snapping photos with a cell phone camera. They stopped him, made sure the pictures were deleted from his phone and digitally scanned his irises and fingerprints with a BATS (Biometric Automated Tool Set) scanner. The young man was not detained, but now he was in the system.

The proliferating digital products of what one of their architects calls “armed social work” cannot be consumed innocently. One more recent example of these convergences and continuities suffices here. It centres, unsurprisingly, on torture and its recurrent utility in fighting the new kinds of conflict that re-specify the human in some rather antique cultures of impunity. The torturer becomes hostis humani generis but torture is rebranded and routinised, spun and banalised in the networked patterns of a military diplomacy that we cannot escape.

The “Arab Spring” highlighted how the old colonial double standards rooted in Victorian racial theory, are still operating. The UN resolution justified intervention to protect civilians while the same civilians were being bombed by their European champions. The unsustainable repression in Libya and Syria was sharply distinguished from the bloody events.
The securitocracy of that gulf state had been designed and implemented by a highly-decorated British security-policeman, Ian Henderson, who has been repeatedly and consistently accused of being a brutal torturer both during the Kenyan emergency and in subsequent litigation as well as in Bahrain where he earned the nickname “The Butcher of Bahrain” for the steel and energy with which he organised the government’s response to the 1990s revolt (see: http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2002/jun/30/uk.world).

The revolting crimes of which Henderson has been accused are played down, justified and garlanded with flowers in a self-serving memoire (Man Hunt In Kenya) he penned in 1958 with the assistance of the Conservative politician, Philip Goodhart. What Henderson’s career as a hammer of subversion and national liberation in Africa and the Gulf tells us now about the political geography of Europe’s postcolonial statecraft cannot be adjudicated here. However, his text has other uses, not least of which is its figuration of the ambiguities intrinsic to racial hierarchy. For example, he describes what he takes to be the characteristic features of his many encounters with MauMau prisoners captured during Kenya’s emergency while hunting for the Kikuyu leader Dedan Kimathi. Kimathi, like Fanon, had served in a European army fighting against the axis powers. Here is Henderson:

“I often saw terrorists a few moments after their capture. Some would stand there wide-eyed, completely speechless, and shivering violently from shock and cold. They would think of the moment of death, and that moment seemed very near. Others would be past the stage of thinking at all. Mad with shock, they would shout and struggle or froth at the mouth and bite the earth. Under these circumstances it was not easy to remember that they were fanatics who had enjoyed killing children and slitting open the stomachs of pregnant women. They were savage, vicious, unpredictable as a rabid dog, but because they were now cornered, muzzled, powerless, and terrified, one felt like giving them a reassuring pat.”

There is much to say about this passage and the text from which it has been extracted. Of course, the deeper ambiguities in its presentation of the native as savage, primitive and effectively infrahuman, belong to the moral prescriptions associated with systems of racial classification in general. I have addressed those issues before. (In Between Camps I argue: The distinct order of “racial” differentiation is marked by its unique label, by the peculiar slippage between “real relations” and “phenomenal forms” to which it always corresponds, and by a special (a) moral and (anti)political stance. It has involved not only reducing “nonwhite” people to the status of animals or things, but also reducing European people to the intermediate status of that lowly order of being somewhere between human and animal that can be abused without the intrusions of bad conscience.) Now, my attention is caught by Henderson’s hint that reducing the enemy to an animal creates a confusing range of different obligations and moral pressures in the mind of his capturer cum torturer. Similar material can be found in the record of Africans and Caribbeans captured on European battlefields by the Nazis or shot down and incarcerated by them in POW camps where their fellow prisoners may also have sought the comforts of racial hierarchy and segregation as partial compensation for their loss of freedom.

For all the self-evident character of race as natural difference, the boundary lines between human and infrahuman, human and animal, human subject and object are not in the least bit obvious. Even, or perhaps especially, those who monopolise violence have to specify and determine that boundary in a difficult psychological setting where torture, castration and other highly sexual acts of brutality had to compete with “a reassuring pat” as the most appropriate outcome.

Though Henderson’s impunity has been sanctioned repeatedly by several different sovereign powers, a complex and multi-sited sequence of litigation has arisen from this case as a result of applying the contemporary legal standards defined indirectly by the language of human rights and the concept of crimes against humanity. This intervention continues to move slowly through the upper reaches of postcolonial Britain’s judicial system.

I must note that, apart from the effects that these cases have on the litigants and governmental actors involved, it is clear that they also impact upon our nation’s understanding of its colonial history and deeper still upon the idea that British people have of themselves as a political body imbued with civilised values. David Anderson, an Oxford professor of African politics who specialises in the Kenyan “emergency” recently told the BBC that a new batch of previously secret files about to be released by the government as a result of the continuing court action would prove to be of “enormous significance”.

underway in Bahrain where US and British strategic interests specified a different geopolitical ethics.

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He continued:

“These are a set of selected documents withheld for their sensitivity. We will learn things the British government of the time didn’t want us to know. They are likely to change our view of some key places ... (their release) will clarify the last days of Empire in ways that will be shocking for some people in Britain.”

According to a damning internal review carried out by Anthony Cary for the Foreign Office, these documents were regarded as a “guilty secret” and simply hidden (http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/britains-secret-colonial-files/). How they came to be secret and how they acquired the capacity to shock people to this rare extent, raises a number of questions that deserve detailed historical answers beyond those I offered in After Empire. Here too, part of what is really shocking, is the way that disturbing instances of inhuman brutality can generate a painful acknowledgement of where the boundaries of the human should fall — the same lesson that is not being learned in the Mediterranean at this very moment (http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/may/08/nato-ship-libyan-migrants).

Disturbing instances of inhuman brutality can generate a painful acknowledgement of where the boundaries of the human should fall.

Following the classic contours of debate with regard to the human, a second instance of how the human is being contested in post- and neocolonial kinds of political and juridical conflict can be helpful. It relates to the future rather than the past. I want to suggest that Fanon’s sense of how colonial conflict marks out new definitions and boundaries for the human can be applied to the new technological, legal and moral environments involved in the deployment of robotic military systems.

The US-manufactured General Atomics Reaper is currently the RAF’s only armed unmanned aircraft. It can carry up to four Hellfire missiles, two 230kg (500lb) bombs, and 12 Paveway II guided bombs. It can fly for more than 18 hours, has a range of 3,600 miles, and can operate at up to 15,000 metres (50,000ft).

The Reaper is operated by RAF personnel based at Creech in Nevada. It is controlled via a satellite datalink. Earlier this year, David Cameron promised to increase the number of RAF Reapers in Afghanistan from four to nine, at an estimated cost of £135m.

The MoD is also funding the development by BAE Systems of a long-range unmanned aircraft, called Taranis, designed to fly at “jet speeds” between continents while controlled from anywhere in the world using satellite communications.

Richard Norton-Taylor and Rob Evans, Observer, 17 April, 2011

Automated and autonomous weapons will operate without immediate human control in changing circumstances deemed too complex and rapid to be amenable to human decisions. Peter Singer’s book Wired for War provides an excellent introduction to this topic. Though Britain’s Ministry of Defence “currently has no intention to develop systems that operate without human intervention in the weapon command and control chain”, it chose to spell out relevant legal and ethical issues in a recent briefing note: The UK Approach to Unmanned Aircraft Systems which was prepared for senior officers in all branches of the military service by the MoD “think-tank”, the Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre (DCDC):
Automated and autonomous weapons will operate without immediate human control in changing circumstances deemed too complex and rapid to be amenable to human decisions.

In his recent work, Achille Mbembe has approached these and related dilemmas through a meditation on what appears to be their animating political theology. It has assembled new forms of theologico-political criticism and turned to the ethico-juridical in order to answer the unsettling effects of a “radical uncertainty” prompted less by civilisational conflict and technological transformation than the steady reordering of the world that has been consequent upon its decolonisation. He continues:

“…we no longer have ready-made answers to such fundamental questions as: Who is my neighbour? What to do with my enemy? How to treat the stranger or the prisoner? Can I forgive the unforgivable? What is the relationship between truth, justice, and freedom? Is there anything that can be considered to be so priceless as to be immune from sacrifice?”

It is difficult to see how the history of race as political ontology, aesthetics and tekhne; of racism and its racial orders, can be made to count as part of how this crisis is to be answered. However, once again Fanon can help us with that difficult work. Indeed, his approach to the human and, in particular his final alignment of self and humanity in the transcendence though not the redemption of Europe remains suggestive. Perhaps it is best to say that approaching the human outside of the alienated and alienating configurations demanded by Manichaeism delirium and the racial-corporeal schema can contribute to Wynter’s re-enchantment and what we might call the healing or reparative element in Fanon’s thinking. That proposal, in one form or another, has been a goal common to every major political thinker of decolonisation and racial democracy. All of them turned in that direction seeking ways that art, culture, science, music, war or technological expertise could enforce a mode of human recognition that had been consistently denied and thwarted. Fanon’s is the loudest clearest voice in that unhappy congregation for precisely the reasons that irritate the unassailable conventions of “identity politics” and its sophist tribunes.

Fanon had begun his first book by warning his readers that its truths were not timeless. From the start, he emphasized that the racial order of the colony would bring out the very worst in anyone whose life was distorted by its founding mirage. All of the shadowy actors populating the “epidermalised” world stood to lose something precious because racial hierarchy delimited their humanity and depleted the psychological well-being of perpetrator and victim alike. Of course, those different parties (dominant and subordinate, coloniser and colonised) were not affected in exactly the same ways, but the damage done to both of them appeared in comparable, “relational” forms. It always involved significant losses at the human level where the decay of species life that had been prompted by imperialism, opened up a path towards authentic, human history.

I hope that the unfashionable, reparative humanism he affirmed might start to appear less facile in the context of global emergencies arising outside of the historic dualities of colonial power reconstituted as the foundation for contemporary securitocracy.
ARE TROUT SOUTH AFRICAN? OR: A POSTCOLONIAL FISH?

Duncan Brown
(University of the Western Cape, Cape Town)

Gazing at a river from the window of his writing retreat, flyrod and flybox to hand, Duncan Brown wonders what fish reveal about the historical borders of indigeneity, about legitimacy in the landscape, about belonging in the postcolony.

Where trouts the size of salmon throng the creeks

In a discussion with his colleagues on the breakfast show of the national radio station 5FM about indigeneity and national symbols, and what could characterise the ‘indomitable South African spirit’, the DJ Gareth Cliff asked the newsreader Mabale Moloi what fish was to be found in every piece of freshwater in the country. “Trout”, she answered. Cliff corrected her, saying that it was the humble, hardy and almost indestructible barbel, which can cross land and survive drought by burying itself in mud for periods when the water dries up completely, which he claimed (semi-ironically) was a worthy emblem. As there are rapidly-increasing numbers of ‘trout farms’ around Gauteng where 5FM is based, and trout are widespread in the waters (and tourist literature) of Mpumalanga, which is a prime leisure area for Gautengers, Moloi’s error may be understandable.

It does, however, raise interesting questions about fish and their place in the landscape and the national imaginary. In this piece, which is from the Introduction to a book-length project, I focus specifically on the introduction of trout to South Africa, and debates about their continued presence here. There have been many studies which use animal and plant species – herrings, cod, salmon, horses, cattle, maize – as ciphers in the writing of economic histories. While I refer to the economics of trout at various stages, this is not my focus: rather I am interested, in line with my background as a literary studies scholar, in the cultural and social issues around species like trout in South Africa, and more broadly the place of that which is termed ‘alien’ in the postcolony.

There are two major species of trout in South Africa: the brown trout (*Salmo Trutta*), which is indigenous to Europe, parts of Asia, and Morocco, and

Several ‘exotic’ fish have historically been introduced into South Africa: various carp species; largemouth, smallmouth and spotted bass; bluegills; rainbow and brown trout; and with less success, or more limited range, some salmon species and ‘golden trout’ (largely into stillwaters in Mpumalanga as unusual ‘trophy’ species). Twenty alien fish species are reputed to have been introduced. Of these species, the carps, basses and trouts have adapted best to local aquaclimes, and become an integral part of the sport of recreational angling in the country (and to a lesser extent subsistence angling, some of it ‘illegal’), sustaining between them a host of magazines devoted entirely to their pursuit. The carp – notwithstanding the 5FM newsreader’s assumptions to the contrary – has established itself across the length and breadth of the country, and the complexities of its capture (involving patience, jealously-guarded and hotly-debated recipes for baits of various textures, colours and scents, and apparently a great deal of beer) becoming almost a national pastime, especially in inland areas. In some circles, the carp probably has the unofficial status of national fish (the galjoen actually having this official status). To complicate matters, while Cliff’s answer about the omnipresence of barbel is correct, the species known as the sharp-toothed catfish (*Clarias Gariepinus*) is a voracious predator which, while indigenous to parts of South Africa, does not occur ‘naturally’ in waterways across the subcontinent, to which it has nevertheless spread – partly through human intervention – with devastating consequences for endemic fish species: the Western Cape is a case in point.

There are two major species of trout in South Africa: the brown trout (*Salmo Trutta*), which is indigenous to Europe, parts of Asia, and Morocco, and
the rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus Mykiss*), which comes from the Pacific coast of North America. Both were introduced to South Africa in the late nineteenth century by colonial settlers with considerable effort (involving the transporting of unhatched ova in ice chests by ship). There were also attempts to introduce salmon and American brook trout, but these proved unsuccessful. Trout can only breed in running water, which must be cool and clean, so their presence is restricted to areas of suitable altitude or with a cool climate, and the presence of healthy, breeding trout populations, especially of rainbow trout, is a good indicator of water health. Adult trout can withstand temperatures of up to 25 degrees Celsius, but their ova die if temperatures rise above 16 degrees Celsius. Trout were introduced into the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Kwazulu-Natal, Mpumalanga, Free State Province, Lesotho and Swaziland, and the trout populations which have established themselves in the upper reaches of the rivers in which they breed have – over many years – developed genetically to their habitats, including often exhibiting physical features which differ markedly from one river to the next (the trout in the Lourens River are regarded as amongst the prettiest in the country, and have a yellow hue to their fins). Stillwater trout tend to be less genetically varied, as they begin life in an artificial hatchery environment (with the exception of the few dams which have suitable feeder streams up which the trout can migrate to breed).

My interest in trout is threefold. At the outset I must admit that I am a flyfisher, with memories of learning to flyfish for trout with my father which stretch back more than thirty years, when there were no dedicated flyfishing shops in the country, and fishing with a fly was some sort of obscure, fringe activity. Being a flyfisher has been part of who I am for much of my life; it is constitutive of my identity in fundamental ways. From my rods unfurl lines into past and future generations. The Osprey 5/6 weight with which I most often fish stillwaters is a present my siblings and I bought for my father on his seventieth birthday, and which I inherited from him on his death in 1998. In the days when as an adolescent or young adult I frequently bumped heads with him, fishing always remained a way of talking about other things. In the faded, gentle, floral surrounds of the hospice in which he died, towards the end he hallucinated about catching two four pounders, which – with some awkwardness and self-consciousness – I pretended to release for him off the end of the bed. His face showed the combination of pride and humility which always characterized his landing a good fish. On my second fishing trip after his death (on the first I blanked), I looked down in wonder at the two four pound trout on the stripping apron of my float tube, which I landed at Triangle dam in Underberg using his rod. (If truth be told, they may have been closer to five pounds, but perhaps they looked smaller from where he was.) On the pinboard beside my desk at home is a picture of me holding that rod, arced with a weight of one of the dozen trout I caught, along with a bout of severe bronchitis, float tubing in sub-zero temperatures in mid-winter on a dam outside Mooi River with my brother-in-law. Using the same rod, along with the reel and line which were given to my father as farewell presents from his last position as headmaster, my son Michael last month landed a fine fish at Lourensford.

My other rods all have, or are accruing, their own stories, of fish, people and places, including the four-weight four piece which I built myself, and which now spends most of its time in the hands of my son, and with which he learned to flyfish in the KwaZulu-Natal midlands, and the Orvis T3 – a Porsche amongst the Golfs which make up the rest of my stable of fishing rods – which my wife Tracey gave me as a present, and which is exquisite both to look at and fish with. Even here, on my writing retreat at Groot Brak during which I wrote this section (as well as another unrelated and more conventionally ‘academic’ piece), I look out over the river, and have
a flyrod, flybox and polarized sunglasses to hand, in case a tailing grunter or charging garrick appears to lure me away from more mundane research matters.

My second reason is more academic. Questions of indigeneity, and of the right to belong or be part of, raise themselves with greater or lesser degrees of complexity, aggression or insistency in public and private discourses in South Africa and many other postcolonial societies. Whether framed in terms of what one should plant in one’s suburban garden, who has the right to ‘speak for’, what the priorities of state policy should be, who may work or reside in the country, or what is the basis for land claims, questions of who or what is ‘natural’ or indigenous to an area consistently return, despite abundant evidence that the putative essentialisms and selective histories which often underlie such arguments do not withstand even the most cursory scrutiny. Environmental discourses of ‘indigenous’ and ‘alien’ can cross very quickly into the human-political domain. Mulcock and Trigger cite Stephen Jay Gould in this regard – “How easy the fallacious transition between a biological argument and a political campaign” – and they note, “Subtle linguistic assumptions and linguistic slippages such as those that are commonly found in discourses about nativeness, naturalness and belonging can have significant implications”.

Thirdly, and related to the second (and perhaps first) reason, is the increasing attention paid in literary and postcolonial studies to issues of environment and ecology, and especially the environmental transformations which colonial and imperial histories have wrought upon the (post)colony. There have been horrifying and hubristic interventions made by colonial authorities, whether in terms of the introduction of species (rabbits in Australia, black wattle, brambles and prickly pears in South Africa), physical alterations such as building dams or irrigation schemes, or the unintended introductions of species (such as khaki-bos and black jacks in the animal fodder brought into South Africa).

Leaving aside the more extreme and obvious problems such as those mentioned above, my question is: at what point do changes to landscape, fauna and flora become historical – for better or worse part of the history of human settlement in the region? Humans have always impacted on the environment (and despite how we may feel about this emotionally, extinctions have also been part of the biological history of our planet). Amongst many possible examples, one can mention the leafy vegetable Corchorus Olitorius, which originates in tropical Africa, and whose seeds were carried across the globe by slaves: its distribution is literally a vegetative narrative of imperial and colonial atrocity and survival. It has been grown in Egypt, under the name Mloukhia, for so long that many regard it as the national dish.

At what point do changes to landscape, fauna and flora become historical – for better or worse part of the history of human settlement in the region?

In terms of what we classify as indigenous, how far back do we turn the clock? And does the trout, which I am using partly as metonymy for settler history and whose forebears arrived in South Africa at around the same time as mine, have a legitimate place in the landscape: has it become (like so many other species which have their origins outside the subcontinent but which are part of our everyday register of South Africanness – Nguni cattle, Africanis dogs, mealies, bushpigs, pumpkins, and for the 5FM newsreader apparently trout) if not indigenous, then at least indigenised? About the tension between ‘indigeneity’ and ‘ settlerdom’, Dan Wylie says in his Introduction to the fascinating volume entitled Toxic Belonging: Identity and Ecology in South Africa: “This aspect of belonging provides the impetus behind a vast amount of South African historiography: indeed, it would not be too much to say that this tension is South African history”. Specifically in relation to environmental debates, how and where do we factor in the complexities of the cultural-social-symbolic, which are integral to human understandings of their interactions with all forms of life, in many cases to their very sense of being and belonging?
IS MONEY THE LANGUAGE OF THE HEART? LESSONS FROM LIMPOPO

Bjarke Oxlund
(University of Copenhagen)

Much has been written about transactional sex, gender and power in South Africa, while too little has been done to examine the meaning of money and exchange in intimate relations. Bjarke Oxlund argues that there is a lesson to be learned from his ethnographic studies in Limpopo; namely that in true mutuality romance and finance tend to intertwine.

Doing away with dirty money and pure love

In most capitalist societies money usually stands for alienation, detachment and the impersonal society. We therefore find it difficult to embrace money, which is seen as belonging to an impersonal sphere. The supposedly alienating capacity of money as a generalized means of exchange is therefore also what is behind the tendency to insist on a grand divide between the altruistic sphere of pure love and the strategic and calculative realm of rational economics. Too often money is understood as the root of all evil, as death, and as a means of exchange that erodes the community basis of people’s lives. In short, money has a bad name. In their edited volume, Money and the Morality of Exchange, ethnographers Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry have done a good job of showing that money is not necessarily impersonal, transitory, amoral or calculating. As they point out, it is particularly in Europe that monetary exchange linked to sexual or familial exchange is either seen as immoral or becomes a source of humour. Similarly, in an essay titled “Marginalia: Some Additional Notes on the Gift”, Pierre Bourdieu writes that it is exactly because the economic field has been constituted as a separate field that westerners have been so successful at dividing passion and interest. It is thus business and economic culture – not money itself – that require us to suspend ordinary humanity to keep the personal and the impersonal apart.

Curiously, just as in the economic field, the notion of love is often singled out and placed in a separate sphere. Pure love is thus understood to belong to a sacred realm untouched by the breath of death that money supposedly carries with it. ‘Love me for a reason and let that reason be love’ was a truism that was often cited by students who organised a weekly Lovetalk show at the Turfloop Campus of the University of Limpopo in South Africa’s northern province, when I did fieldwork there in 2006 and 2007. This proverb in many ways speaks to the changing semantics of love in seventeenth-century Europe, where – according to German sociologist Niklas Luhmann – the autonomy of intimate relations was established and raised to the level of reflection, which meant that it became possible to justify love simply by stating that one was in love.

Yet, another proverb that I picked up from the Lovetalk shows in Limpopo was one that spoke directly against the autonomy and separate status of love and relationships, since it reads: ‘A successful man is a man who can earn more than a woman can spend, while a successful woman is a woman who can attract such a man.’ The reiteration of this saying was a rather obvious testimony to the intertwining of romance and finance, since, in relationships among students (and between students and outsiders), it was common for there to be an undercurrent of material and immaterial exchange. Love and money thus tend to become intertwined in one framework, in which commodities are transformed...
into gifts and expressions of emotion, while money becomes a vehicle for the expression of gendered identities. To view material exchange in relationships as a tangle of emotion, things and power permits an appreciation of the combined agency of both males and females, as is clearly evidenced by the extensive vocabularies used to describe the differences in status and value of lovers and sexual partners.

“A successful man is a man who can earn more than a woman can spend, while a successful woman is a woman who can attract such a man.”

**Ubuntu and bridewealth**

At the University of Limpopo students speak euphorically about the right one and romantic love one minute, only to talk about additional lovers and material exchange the next minute. The different concepts that students use to designate a variety of relationships of love and sex are all related to material exchange and socio-economic status. During my ethnographic fieldwork I quickly learned that it is enormously important for students to be in one or more relationships of love or sex, since it is through these relationships that one most significantly enters into the social process of becoming a person. The Southern African maxim of *ubuntu/botho* stipulates that the individual has to realize his or her self through relationships of mutuality, which in the view and praxis of the Limpopo youths I worked with is defined as the exchange of both material and immaterial stuff. This also means that relationships of love and sex are understood as open, fluid social processes rather than as fixed categories, and that the material exchanges that take place in these relationships have an important bearing on the emerging gendered identities of both giver and receiver.

In South Africa, the well-documented tradition of *lobola* (bridewealth payments) should alert any analyst to the importance of material exchange in relationships of love and sex. In his seminal work on bridewealth, *Wives for Cattle* (1982), the South African anthropologist Adam Kuper showed how the system of marriage rests on the ineluctable principle of reciprocity, where “Cattle were exchanged for wives, wives for cattle”. Kuper argued that among the Sotho-Tswana each gift necessitates a fresh counter-gift, the exchanges of wives-for-bridewealth-for-wives-for-bridewealth ideally stretching from generation to generation, which implies a certain open-endedness in the exchange process over time. In *lobola* practices there is no finality because it is a lifelong process of development and becoming. Today, *lobola* is usually paid in money rather than cattle, and one of my interlocutors summoned up the huge *lobola* that he and his kin would have to pay for his girlfriend should they take their relationship to the next stage: “Close to a hundred thousand [Rands]. She is cute, man. She’s a woman. She’s worth a lot. [...] Like she’s intelligent. She’s studying computer science. She is pretty. Yeah – those things together – they are expensive.”

Many male students were quite worried about *lobola* payments, and this was often a point of heated discussion between male and female students. Outside one of the main halls at the University of Limpopo, somebody had painted a graffiti message: ‘Lobola, aish!!!’. Since *aish* is a common exclamation indicating surprise, worry or sorrow, I suspect that the graffiti was the work of a male student, and that it indicated the difficulty that many a young man experiences in raising the funds required to marry the woman he desires. On many occasions, I have witnessed girls provoking youths over the enormous *lobola* payments that they would urge their fathers to demand for them in view of the fact that they were educated and thus had the prospect of earning money for the rest of their lives. An alternative interpretation of the graffiti message may be that it is, instead, the work of a young woman who has difficulty marrying a boyfriend of no means. Either way, the message highlights how important material exchange is for the forming of the conjugal bond – and for many other bonds for that matter. For instance, one female student said to me: ‘My uncle loves me; he sends me money’.

**Towards a reciprocity of love and money**

The French sociologist Marcel Mauss famously argued in *The Gift* that the giving of an object creates
an inherent obligation on the part of the receiver to reciprocate the gift. The range of exchanges that result from this obligation is potentially endless because the individual gift can never be fully recovered, and the mutual obligations therefore come to form the basis of human solidarity. Given the significance attached to giving and sharing under the moral idiom of ubuntu/botho, the South African context calls for attention to be given to the obligation to give in the first place. Thus, early 20th century ethnographers stressed the entitlements to gifts, hospitality and assistance that were held by kin among black South Africans. Actually, Mauss himself recognized that the obligation to give is no less important than the obligation to reciprocate, although his famous book mostly focused on the latter. It seems perhaps a minor detail, but I hold that, as an idiom for local morality, ubuntu/botho includes the imperative to be generous and that in many respects the obligation to give therefore features more prominently than the obligation to reciprocate. Overall, these dynamics resonate with Bourdieu’s observation that generosity is not an individual calculus, but forms part of the habitus. According to Bourdieu, the major characteristic of the gift is therefore its ambiguity, which emanates from the pretence of generosity that is followed by the logic of the obligation to reciprocate (1996). This leads Bourdieu to conclude that it is the time lapse between the gift and the counter-gift that makes it possible to mask the inherent contradiction.

It is therefore not surprising that the temporal dimension and the explicitly negotiated transaction was a determining factor in how students at the University of Limpopo responded to my questions about how they would define prostitution. They explained that the immediacy and the specificity of the transaction is how prostitution sets itself apart from all other short- or long-term relations. Therefore, I would like to advocate an interpretive approach that focuses on the reciprocity not just of romance and finance, but also of the exchange of love, sex and materiality. Firstly, a focus on reciprocity enables love, sex and relationships to be viewed as phenomena that are always in process, rather than fixed and commoditized entities. Secondly, the concept of reciprocity opens up a path to the exchange of everything, from care and comfort, kisses and body fluids, presents and money, SMS’s and love letters, to academic support and sexual pleasure.

The right one and the other ones

My interest in the overlapping idioms of romance and finance was initially sparked by a familiarization with the flourishing township lingo of consumption-based metaphors of lovers and relationships. The ideal marriage partner is known as the regte, Afrikaans for ‘the right one’. Informants translated this as a steady boyfriend or girlfriend in English. You may keep a regte in your home area, while at the same time engaging in more or less steady relationships on campus. Alternative concepts offered by the male students for the right one were: ‘the madam’, ‘mother of the nation’, ‘the number one’, ‘the first lady’ or ‘the Mercedes’. The less steady relations are known under a variety of concepts and metaphors, the main ones being course pushers, cherries (makhuwapheni), cheese-boys and cheese-girls, ministers and chickens. The different partner concepts are not mutually exclusive, and the statuses of relationships are fluid and vary over time, which ties in with an understanding of relationships as always in process, developing and becoming.

In the literature on transactional sex one can detect a gendered assumption being made about who is the giver and who is the receiver. Yet, it is quite possible for the gendered expectations of relationship exchanges to be reversed because of the greater socio-economic status of the girl. Indeed, in some cases, female students were better off than their male peers in terms of money because they came from families with resources, and sometimes because they were dating older business men. The latter came to campus in their vehicles to pick up the girls in order to take them to town or the local mall, where they would provide for them. Meanwhile, many of the male students dated younger girls from the secondary schools in the surrounding township area, who were easier to impress with petty cash and their status as university students. Paradoxically, even though there was a fairly equal distribution of wealth within the student community itself, in a way both male and female students produced the inequality in their relationships by intentionally going with persons of a different age and socio-economic status than themselves. This asymmetrical view of relationships in no way made up a totality, since for both male and female students it was not uncommon to have relationships both on and off campus. Further, in the education context of campus, academic skills and knowledge also became important.
as social capital and entered into the dynamics of relationships.

**Course pushers, cheese-boys and ministers**

The most frequently evoked partner category at the University of Limpopo was probably that of a ‘course pusher’, which refers specifically to the university context in which this study takes place. At first I understood the concept exclusively as a relationship between a first-year female student and a second- or third-year male student, who could show her around on campus and help her out with her academic assignments and preparations for exams. According to other, later explanations, I came to understand course pushing as a more equal exercise in terms of gender dynamics. Since opportunities for leisure time activities on campus were minimal, many students claimed that campus life was so monotonous that they needed to have a course pusher to be able to cope. This implies that the emphasis is on satisfying each other’s emotional, physical and material needs while trying to move ahead with one’s studies. At the University of Limpopo – as in most other places I would argue – it is often difficult to divide one need from the other at all sharply, and consequently the different relationship categories came to be overlapping and fluid.

The trends concerning reciprocity in relationships were most vividly confirmed by the allegories used by some of the female students when they talked about their male providers. The most common concept was that of a Minister: the Minister of Transport (often a taxi-driver or somebody with a car), the Minister of Telecommunications (the one who can buy airtime for the cell phone), the Minister of Finance (the one who dishes out cash) or the Minister of Education (the one who assists with academic work, or a boyfriend who is a lecturer). Another widely used metaphor is that of the chicken, which refers to men who can be ‘plucked’ for food or other daily necessities. Female students would often refer to the need for the three Cs: a car, cash and a cell phone (sometimes clothes), which has also been noted by other scholars in South Africa.

Quite often, students would also talk about another figure beginning with a C – namely that of the cheese-boy or the cheese-girl. In a literal sense, the concept of the cheese-boy refers to young men from well-resourced backgrounds who could afford to eat cheese for breakfast if they so chose. In his relationships there will be a clear emphasis on material exchanges, since he can afford to take his girlfriends to the local mall and spoil them at cafés and at the cinema. On campus a cheese-boy usually takes on the more moderate role of someone who has ‘everything in his room – a PC, a TV, a stereo’, as one male student phrased it, but it can also be someone who has the means to buy airtime vouchers for his girlfriend (which may eventually make him the Minister of Telecommunications). In most descriptions cheese-boys sound like superficial guys who only take an interest in image and material consumption, and who spend their resources in ways that will provide access to sex and add symbols of status to their social standing. Nonetheless, many youths talk of the image of a cheese-boy with envy in their voices, and even more complain that their poor socio-economic status makes it difficult for them to get a girlfriend because the girls have become so materially demanding.

Not everybody agrees that there is such a person as a cheese-girl. To some, though, a girl who is well off in socio-economic terms automatically becomes a cheese-girl in a relationship involving love or sex. According to a somewhat stereotypical account of the cheese-girl, she does not live up to prevailing standards of beauty and is slightly marginal in social terms, since girls are supposed to be ‘normal’ and subservient, while guys must have status and achieve prominence. Therefore it is potentially emasculating for a guy to date a cheese-girl, but that does not necessarily mean that it is a bad thing after all. Three of the male students whom I knew claimed to have dated cheese-girls and that ‘it was good.’ Furthermore, they said that their male peers fully understood and accepted their activities due to the comforts of love, respect and material benefits that they enjoyed in these relationships.

**Towards a reciprocity of love**

When we look to theories of exchange and reciprocity it appears that in most cases it would be
inappropriate to talk of transactional sex when interpreting relationships that are underpinned by material exchange amongst students in Limpopo. In fact, if scholars in Europe and North America were more willing to launch studies of exchanges of material and immaterial goods in so-called ‘love-marriages’ in the west, it would probably be quite easy to demonstrate that there is much more ‘transactional stuff’ going on than we are often led to believe. Whereas students at Turfloop campus talk endlessly about the material exchanges involved in their relationships, many westerners would probably make an attempt to under-communicate such dynamics, which are not seen as appropriate from a moral point of view due to the prevailing understanding of money in western culture.

Furthermore, as a general rule, the social benefit schemes from which people living in welfare states stand to benefit in times of crisis are seldom available in South Africa. Hence, one would always expect the focus on material comfort to be more explicit in intimate relationships in contexts without such benefit schemes. Not only does this highlight that the intertwining of romance and finance has particular social meanings over and above the cynical and strategic exchange of sex for money. It also points to the capacity of money to convey and communicate emotions of love and respect. Whereas much gender research in South Africa has treated the material exchanges involved in relationships as transactional dynamics that serve to underscore the power of men only, the concept of a reciprocity of love points to broader definitions of exchange that involve differing notions of personhood, identity creation and social becoming.

Students thus find it very easy to distinguish between prostitution and other sorts of relationships that involve material exchange. Interestingly, the majority of exchange processes alluded to here involved female as well as male agency, and it should be understood that among peers it is a regular occurrence that it is the woman who has the upper hand financially. Based on these insights one can easily appreciate how students juggle different interpretations of what the exchange processes of a specific relationship make of them. In this regard it is not simply a question of becoming ‘a man’ or ‘a woman’, but rather that one emerges as a minister, a course pusher, a cherry, the regte, a chicken or a cheese-boy (or something else), depending on whether it was money, respect, academic assistance, sex or something else that was exchanged at the time of definition. It also tells us that in order to get ahead in his or her social becoming, a young person must be able to engage in relationships that involve the reciprocity of the material and the immaterial. It is exchange that makes for social relationships in the first place, and the continued reciprocity that keeps the relationship going. Therefore, are we not right to say that ‘money talks’ and that money is like a language that can be used to communicate matters of the heart? Quite clearly, students in Limpopo are not afraid of the intertwining of love, sex and money – what about you?

Gate Three: The student entrance of the Turfloop Campus, University of Limpopo
Photo: Courtesy Bjarke Oxlund
How are lives lived with art? Why do people buy works of art, and what roles do the works play in collectors’ lives? What are the relationships between private and public collections with regard to the curatorship of national heritage?

Cobi Labuscagne visits private art collectors and their collections in Johannesburg and discovers a network of private activity that may constitute the nation’s future archive.

In 2009 a collective called, ‘Empty Office’ embarked on a project that they called, ‘Joburg Art Bin’. It was an initiative aimed at encouraging corporate and private art collectors to ‘give back’ their art to a version of a public. For this collective the buying of art and the hanging of art in private spaces was an assault on that art work’s integrity because it no longer had a life in the public realm. The name of the project’s close resemblance to the Joburg Art Fair, a trade fair for buying art from galleries, is, I believe, no coincidence. I came upon the Joburg Art Bin project during my ethnographic research on the company that produced and owned the Fair. Along a, perhaps, similar trajectory, a Wits academic remarked in a newspaper article leading up to the first Joburg Art Fair that “elitist yuppies” are sure to buy the works at this event. While I was not that interested in debates around art works either as goods for private consumption or as a public good, these two responses led me to focus my research into the

Powell proposes that a person’s private art collection is at once about the collector, and allows for a recontextualised version of periods in history of art, or the history of a place. Thus, while the work naturally refers back to the artist, it also speaks of a time in ‘history of art’, a place where it was produced, and, once bought, of the person who made the purchase. Both Jean Baudrillard and Mieke Bal have theorised this relationship between collection and collector; between the act or impulse to collect and social traits.
Baudrillard writes within a tradition that attempts to see acts of consumption as fundamentally social and referential. He makes an analytical distinction between ‘objects’ and ‘utensils’ to denote the dimension of ownership as he understands it. In an essay published in the 2009 volume The Object Reader, Baudrillard explains: “[i]f I use a refrigerator to refrigerate, it is a practical mediation: it is not an object but a refrigerator. And in that sense I do not possess it. A utensil is never possessed, because a utensil refers one to the world; what is possessed is always an object abstracted from its function and thus brought into relation with the subject”. The main point here is the notion that the collector is perpetually in a process of ‘collecting’ versions and ideals of the self – the objects exist within the realm of inter-subjectivity.

Bal, in an attempt to come at the concept and process of ‘narrative’ from a different angle (narrative being one of her core and long-held conceptual interests), reads the process of collecting as a story with a beginning, middle and end. She quickly realises that collecting has no beginning, since the first few objects might be argued to serve functional roles. In the 2006 anthology of her work Bal asserts in response to this realization that, “the beginning, instead, is a meaning, not an act. Collecting comes to mean collecting precisely when a series of haphazard purchases or gifts suddenly becomes a meaningful sequence. That is, the moment when a self-conscious narrator begins to ‘tell’ its story, bringing about a semiotics for a narrative of identity, history, and situation.” Her point is thus similar to that made by Baudrillard in that what she sees as the fundamental dynamic at work within collecting is the telling of personal stories, searching for ever more authentic meaning structures within which to better understand the self – the self as reflected, narratively, through objects within a choreographed series.

These explanations of the power and function of collecting art works were both corroborated and questioned by collectors I interviewed in Johannesburg. In one discussion, for instance, a young independent journalist explained her enthusiasm for art and her “logic” of art buying as one “led by a personal mythology”, and asserted that she would sometimes spend up to half her salary or more on buying art. After having done a couple of interviews with buyers, this had become a familiar register for me and I was no longer surprised by how seldom my respondents bought art as a result of having read particularly favourable reviews or art critical comments on the work, or because they had some money lying around.

The journalist lived, at the time, in a cottage-style house in Melville, Johannesburg, with walls covered in many small artworks. Standing in front of her art collection, she pointed to two prints by Fiona Pohl. She explained that while one of the reasons she had bought these works was because of ‘the strong line and color’, primarily it was because they reminded her of Paris: “I just love Paris”, she added. This set the tone of our art discussion, which followed a fairly lengthy theoretical dialogue on the state of art in South Africa, the place of the Joburg Art Fair and her analysis of the country more broadly. After passing a small oil painting of a giraffe, which she bought from a Zimbabwean curio shop, she pointed to two other works: a print by Claudette Schreuders and another by Lisa Brice. “Both”, she explained, are of “woman drinking on their own. This one very awkwardly at a cocktail party, which reflects all my art openings – terrible awkward standing, but also about autonomy – sitting in bars on their own.” Her attractions to these two works, both by well-established and successful South African artists, lay in their ability to capture or demonstrate an experience central to her life. In this way this collector’s life with art reflects what Mieke Bal describes in her essay on collecting: “If I try to integrate my professional interest in narrative with the private one in collecting, I can imagine seeing collecting as a process consisting of the confrontation between objects and subjective agency informed by an attitude”. Bal goes on to interpret collections as made up of objects, each of which have
been “turned away, abducted from itself, its inher-
ent value and denuded of its defining function so as
to be available for us as a sign”.

Her attractions to these two works ... lay in their
ability to capture or demonstrate an experience
central to her life.

Another interview took me to the eastern
Johannesburg suburb of Benoni, to the house of
a successful surgeon. Inside, the house had many
different reception areas, each with it’s own inte-
rior decorating identity and filled with works of art –
mostly South African, but some seemingly from
Cuba (the doctor later confirmed that he had visited
the Havana Biennale on two occasions) and one or
two by artists from other areas in Africa.

The room in which I was stationed had dark,
un-plastered face-brick walls, black slate tiles, a
very large flat-screen television and bed-sized black
leather sofas. On the wall opposite the television
hung one of Sam Nghlengethwa’s ‘jazz’ works span-
ing almost the entire wall area – also in dark purple
and grey tones, so adding to the general murkiness
of the room.

In contrast, the room next door was brightly
painted, sported a purple and green carpet and was
decorated with small, drawing room-style chairs.
On one wall hung a series of medium-sized Robert
Hodgins’ paintings. And opposite, all on the same
wall, a relatively large William Kentridge print, a
similar-sized Johann Louw drawing and small col-
laborative prints between Zwelethu Mthethwa and
Nghlengethwa that I had never seen before.

During the course of the interview, I asked the
doctor to point out one work that he would like to
discuss; one which for him held special significance.
This had become one of my standard question to
buyers and, as was the case with every one of them,
the doctor had to give it serious and considerable
thought. Eventually, he led me to the other side of
the house past a series of bedrooms to the main
bedroom at the end of a corridor. Along the way we
passed early Johannes Phokelas, Santu Mofokengs,
and a remarkable, signature Joachim Shonefeldt
wood and paint piece that the doctor had commis-
sioned from the artist depicting his mother’s grave
and his childhood home. But the doctor pointed to
the piece right above the bed and explained:

This work by Nhlanhla [Xaba], he was a very
visionary artist; he was kind of before his time.
I bought it some seven years ago, it was during
the height of the genocide in Rwanda, and I was
so touched. This is a river, full of ... you don’t see
the river actually it is corpses in the reeds and
even the refugees that are running away from
the genocide. And you can see there is nothing
growing here; it is all scorched earth. And these
are the little kids trying to run away. And these
were unfortunate; they were not able to make it;
they died. And this is a messenger of death; it is
a person who has been decapitated; no head. And
these were the ones who were able to, who were
fortunate to cross over, and it is a passage. And
after that Nhlanhla died in a fire, he died in his
studio in Newtown, and it was so –.And it is in my
bedroom: I think about life and I think about the
transition and how easy it is to move from a point
of comfort to nowhere; and the recent xenophobic
attacks in South Africa reminded me so much of
this painting.

It is clear from the doctor’s own description of the
work that he finds it eternally moving and evocative
despite having bought it some time ago. He feels a
very strong connection to the artist, who had been
a friend of his, and equally so to the subject matter
depicted. At first sight and for the briefest of seconds
the work appears abstract and pleasantly colorful. It
is a medium-sized oil painting, yet he never men-
tioned this fact, nor the fact that it is brightly col-
ored and painted in a loose, expressionist style. For
him this piece, and many others that we discussed,
were first and foremost important as texts reflect-
ing his thoughts, or his life, or his beliefs. His was an
interest in content rather than form. Asked why he
bought art, he replied that it served two purposes:
for “embellishing” his house and, more importantly,
for a “spiritual” purpose.

The work that the journalist decided to fore-
ground as one to discuss specifically for the inter-
view was the first work she bought and hung in her
study above her writing table. Her chosen work was
a medium sized (about 1m by 1,2m) charcoal drawing depicting the face of a woman in extreme close up, where the whole picture-frame consists of the upper part of her face (eyes and nose only), with the words ‘Good Vision Should be Maintained’ written at the bottom quarter of the canvas in large font. It is a work by South African artist Mark Hipper who recently passed away (http://www.artthrob.co.za/News/Artist-Mark-Hipper-dies-at-49-by-Rat-Western-on-17-August.aspx). She explained:

It just always makes me think. I just love that phrase: ‘Good vision should be maintained’, it is such a strange term. I often think about it, because if you take it un-ironically, I totally agree, firstly literally, you know, you need good vision, you need to see, you know, especially if you like art, but then there is also good vision needs to be maintained, like you have to maintain a good vision in this world, but then there is the irony as well as the fascism of the statement, you know it is a fascist statement as well, because what is good vision? It is like, moralistic and it could be pure fascism, like good vision should be maintained, it could be nationalistic. And then she is wearing glasses, I love … that is another theme that I am into, spectacles, because I love that whole idea about vision and refracted vision.

Another buyer explained to me that he found himself only interested in buying works on paper – which he mused might be connected to his profession as writer. He described in detail how he could still, after years of having acquired certain pieces, place a chair in front of a work and just stare at it, “the way one listens to music”. A comparable experience was related by a young, art-buying advertising executive who remarked: “when I bought this piece [a Conrad Botes] I could just sit there for hours and just stare at it, it is amazing”. The writer’s art collecting philosophy was that a work has to be jarring and ‘difficult’ initially for it to sustain its spell over the collector throughout a lifetime. A similar sentiment emerged in conversations with other buyers who often mentioned that when one buys an ‘easy’ work, one risks getting bored with it.

Echoing some of Bal’s ‘collecting’ theories, the writer I interviewed quoted Roland Barthes to explain that the buyer of art picks up the process of art-making where the artists left off to ‘kyk dit klaar’ (to complete the work by looking at it). For him this is an active process, a responsibility even, that the buyer takes on.

I came across many other art works in private or office spaces during my fieldwork period. In gallerist Linda Givon’s house, for example, is a display of all manner of art objects, hung in salon-style from floor to ceiling. She pointed to them in relation to biographical information and as markers of specific times or events in her life, as others might page through photo albums. Many of the works in her office, where we had our discussion, were small sketches that told the narrative of political struggle during the years when she was one of the few gallerists to show work by black artists locally and abroad. These were gifts, or pieces that she had specifically bought. Should one look for Powell’s re-conceptualised or re-contextualised history of this country, Givon’s study, bedroom, sitting room, and kitchen would provide ample material.

Perhaps it is appropriate that Linda Givon has the final word: as one of South Africa’s leading gallerists, and as an avid personal collector, she stands at the nexus between public and private ownership and consumption. She is well placed to pronounce on the collecting of art within the very particular context of early twenty first century South Africa. Significantly though, many other people that I interviewed expressed similar sentiments. For Givon it is the duty of the private sector to buy art at this time and so
treasure national heritage. As a student of history of art, one becomes used to this role being performed by the state of the day, and so, at first it was defamiliarising for me to see well known art works, and works by well known artists inside the thoroughly domestic environments that constituted the homes of the collectors I interviewed. For instance, an exemplary jolt was produced by my encounter with a black and white Andrew Tshabangu photograph of two black figures standing in the mist by a grave site, hanging above a rose-coloured, marble counter-top in a kitchen next to the toaster.

it is the duty of the private sector to buy art at this time and so treasure national heritage

Nevertheless, at a time and in a country where national museums are given miniscule acquisition budgets, the job of archiving the present through art is primarily taking place within the private spaces of people’s homes – and not only those of “elitist yuppies”. What results is a dynamic process whereby the private versions of the self reflected in the choices and series formulated by individual collectors, is also a curated version of the memory of our present.

Editors’ note on choice of visual material

We have chosen to juxtapose the text of this article with works by the USA-South African artist Nathaniel Stern because he interrogates a number of issues the article raises through his art making and dissemination. In particular Stern challenges the boundaries between creating and owning art in the internet age (see: nathanielstern.com/2009/wikipedia-art). Further, much of his work is available on the internet under a Creative Commons license: Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0). His flickr name is Nathaniel s. However, if art collectors should wish to buy his work, it is available from Gallery Art on Paper in Johannesburg (galleryaop.com).
COSMOPOLITANISM FROM BELOW: SOME ETHICAL LESSONS FROM THE SLUMS OF MUMBAI

Arjun Appadurai
(New York University)

Inspired by the successes of the Alliance of housing activists in Mumbai and their global networks, Arjun Appadurai identifies the existence of ‘cosmopolitanism from below’. For the world’s urban poor, he suggests, this form of cosmopolitanism, together with the structures of deep democracy and the conditions for developing the capacity to aspire, constitutes the raw materials of a politics of hope.

When cosmopolitanism is debated in scholarly circles, as it has intensely been in the last decade, slums, urban poverty and global deprivation rarely enter the picture, except to remind us that cosmopolitanism is an elite privilege, and debating it is likewise an elite luxury. There are reasons for this bias, and they are to be found in our common understandings about what cosmopolitanism actually is. Most definitions of cosmopolitanism, either directly or indirectly, assume that it is a certain cultivated knowledge of the world beyond one’s immediate horizons, and is the product of deliberate activities associated with literacy, the freedom to travel, and the luxury of expanding the boundaries of one’s own self by expanding its experiences. For this reason, cosmopolitanism is usually contrasted with various forms of rootedness and provincialism, the latter associated with attachment to one’s own friends, one’s own group, one’s own language, one’s own country and even one’s own class, and a certain lack of interest in crossing these boundaries. The cosmopolitan is often identified with the exiled, the traveler, the seeker of the new, who is not content with his or her historically derived identity, biography and cultural values. In today’s world, cosmopolitanism is loosely associated with post-national sensibilities, a global ethos, multicultural politics and values and a generalized openness to cultural experimentation, hybrid identities and international cultural transfers and exchanges. This set of associations is hardly the same as the universalism of the Enlightenment, but it has some affinities with it, in its common interest in an expanded idea of humanity which transcends the boundaries of nation and ethnos.

I wish to suggest that a rather different sort of cosmopolitanism can be discerned in the world of internally generated forms of activism incubated among the world’s poorest populations, more or less independent of advanced education and privileged access to the means of travel, leisure and informed self-cultivation. Nevertheless, what I call “cosmopolitanism from below” has in common with the more privileged form of cosmopolitanism the urge to expand one’s current horizons of self and cultural identity and a wish to connect with a wider world in the name of values which, in principle, could belong to anyone and apply in any circumstance. This vernacular cosmopolitanism also resists the boundaries of class, neighborhood and mother-tongue, but it does so without an abstract valuation of the idea of humanity or of the world as a generally known or knowable place. This is a variety of cosmopolitanism that begins close to home and builds on the practices of the local, the everyday and the familiar, but is imbued with a politics of hope that requires the stretching of the boundaries of the everyday in a variety of political directions. It builds towards global affinities and solidarities through an irregular assortment of near and distant experiences and neither assumes nor denies the value of its universality. Its aim is to produce a preferred geography of the global by the strategic extension of local cultural horizons, not in order to dissolve or deny the intimacies of the local but in order to combat its indignities and exclusions. It is thus closely tied to the politics of hope and the promise of democracy as a space of dignity as well as of equality. It is indeed correct to call this style of life cosmopolitan, but it is cosmopolitanism driven by the exigencies of exclusion rather than by the privileges (and ennui) of inclusion.

Urban Housing as a Window to the World

The housing movement which I have been associated with for almost a decade has been the subject
of two prior essays by me (in 2000 and 2004). In the first of these, I take a close look at the local practices and strategies of the Indian anchor of this global network, which consists of three rather different organizations. One is a facilitating and catalyzing organization which was originally created by a group of middle-class women activists, dissatisfied with conventional social work strategies for helping the poor in urban Mumbai in the early 1980's, and is called SPARC (Society for the Protection of Area Resource Centers). Originally housed in the inner-city neighborhood of Nagpada, this organization has grown into the civil society arm of a triad of organizations, all based in India.

The second organization in this triad, of special significance for this essay, is called Mahila Milan (roughly meaning Union of Women) and was created by a group of self-radicalized sex workers, also in the general vicinity of Nagpada, who were typically homeless and had begun to occupy long-term pavement dwellings in this area. This group of poor women represents in many ways the cultural heart of the Alliance (as the triad describes itself in India), for it combines direct experience of urban exploitation, insecure and often undocumented street living and gradual political evolution through various strategies. These strategies have produced small savings groups, collectively organized domestic security, locally developed relations with police officials and municipal authorities, growing skill in working with elected officials and bureaucrats and increased sophistication in dealing with local, regional, and national policy shifts and crises. The members of Mahila Milan and their families, over the last two decades, have borne the brunt of slum demolitions, anti-poor police and municipal policies, and severe discrimination in terms of access to basic services such as water, electricity, food ration cards and police protection. They have also survived natural catastrophes such as floods and monsoon deluges, and social catastrophes such as the regular Hindu-Muslim riots that have periodically brought Mumbai to a standstill.

The third organization which constitutes the Alliance is the NSDF (National Slum Dwellers Federation) an organization which comes out of a rather different history, also intimately connected with the efforts of slum-dwellers in Mumbai to gain political recognition and civic voice in matters of housing, basic services, land and legal rights in Mumbai and also in a host of other cities in urban India. The NSDF has been a predominantly male organization, whose strongest and most experienced members have come from the poorer classes of Tamil migrants to Mumbai, who are concentrated today in the famous mega-slum of Dharavi, as well as in the adjoining neighborhoods of Sion, Matunga and Wadala.

This triad of Indian organizations, all with strong roots in Mumbai, evolved a collaborative relationship in the course of the early 1980s, and in the early 1990s developed links with an important movement of slum-dwellers in South Africa as well as in Nepal, the Philippines and Thailand. These global links, steadily fortified by shared strategies of internal mobilization (such as daily savings), internal discipline (such as self-surveys and censuses), and house-building techniques and strategies, has gradually evolved into the most important global alliance of community-based housing activists, who share a common commitment to local organization, internal financial savings, and community-based toilet and house-building strategies. Their main organizational methods are global exchanges for learning and knowledge-sharing, and a coordinated strategy for educating and pressuring city and state governments, international funders and multilateral agencies, and national governments. This international network, called the Slum / Shack Dwellers International (SDI) has also evolved its own funding capacity, based on a sustained commitment to gain independence from the vagaries of global funding agencies and fashions, has played a major part in global campaigns to oppose slum demolition, achieve secure tenure for the urban poor and build credit and finance capacities for member communities of the network by cooperating across almost thirty countries, primarily in Asia and Africa, but also in Latin America and the Middle-East. The SDI today is recognized as a major global voice for the urban poor by a variety of major multilateral organizations, including the UNCHS, The World Bank,
The striking successes of this global network cannot be attributed to any single circumstance, factor or historical trend. The global spread of the ideology of human rights since the middle of the twentieth century is certainly one factor. The recognition that democracy, as a worldwide value, is not just a matter of votes and representation but also of dignity and livelihood is another major factor. The worry about the relationship between extreme poverty, disease, disenfranchisement and terror (especially in recent decades) is also relevant. The worry that the world’s increasingly networked financial growth engines, and its exploding service economy, cannot subsist in a world of impoverished cities, angry slums and rotten urban cores (a planet of slums, in Mike Davis’ colorful phrase) is also a contributing element. Last, but hardly least, the increased availability of the Internet, especially to the more socially active among the world’s poor, has created a galactic growth in what Keck and Sikkink have called “activisms without borders”, a remarkable efflorescence of popular efforts to harness the energies of the very poor, both in cities and in the countryside, to unite across national boundaries. In so doing, they have been able to influence national and multilateral policies in regard to the environment, human rights, labor rights, trade equities, intellectual property or sexual traffic. And so it is with the objection that Mumbai has also been the home of India’s most powerful movement for linguistic monoculturalism and the dominance of a single regional culture, the culture of Maharashtra, especially after the linguistic reorganization of states, which allowed regional politicians to claim a separate state for Maharashtrians in 1956 and to claim Bombay for this state rather than for the adjoining state of Gujarat. The political party known as the Shiva Sena was an urban by-product of this linguistic separatism and has been a major force in Mumbai politics since at least the late 1960’s; and it is still a force to be contended with. Much has been written about the rise of the Shiva Sena, its success in killing few decades, powered by the spread of new information technologies, have combined to encourage the greatest diversity of popular and transnational civil society movements that we have witnessed in the history of mankind.

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The Alliance of housing activists that is my focus here and the global network of which it is a part can only be seen in the context of this worldwide widening of the boundaries of civil society, and the parallel broadening of the range of issues with which poor people have come to be politically concerned. It also true that each of these movements has a specific history and geography which is deeply connected to its special focus, be it housing or AIDS, pollution or big dams, agricultural prices or women’s rights, intellectual property or sexual traffic. And so it is with housing activism among the very poor, which has its own special characteristics and historical sources.

Here I am not concerned to tell the bigger story about the broad global profile of such transnational activisms or of their range and variety, a story which is now beginning to attract widespread scholarly attention. Rather, I want to focus on a cultural dimension of these movements, one which can be captured in the idea of “cosmopolitanism from below” and to get a close look at this sort of cosmopolitanism, I start with the shape it takes in Mumbai.

Mumbai as a Cosmopolitan Space

Cosmopolitanism is, in some ways, Mumbai’s self-governing cliché. Both rich and poor emphasize the ability of people who live in Mumbai (“Mumbaikars”) to live with, and even enjoy, cultural and linguistic difference. And cosmopolitanism in Mumbai is rarely identified with self-cultivation, universalism, or with the ideals of globalism with which it is historically linked in Enlightenment Europe. Rather, it is primarily identified with cultural co-existence, the positive valuation of mixture and intercultural contact, the refusal of monoculturalism as a governing value, and a strong sense of the inherent virtues of rubbing shoulders with those who speak other languages, eat other foods, worship other gods, and wear their clothes differently.

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This proposal could reasonably be greeted with the objection that Mumbai has also been the home of India’s most powerful movement for linguistic monoculturalism and the dominance of a single regional culture, the culture of Maharashtra, especially after the linguistic reorganization of states, which allowed regional politicians to claim a separate state for Maharashtrians in 1956 and to claim Bombay for this state rather than for the adjoining state of Gujarat. The political party known as the Shiva Sena was an urban by-product of this linguistic separatism and has been a major force in Mumbai politics since at least the late 1960’s; and it is still a force to be contended with. Much has been written about the rise of the Shiva Sena, its success in killing
socialist consciousness among Mumbai’s Marathi-speaking working class, its ability to capture the attention of Mumbai’s lumpen Maharashtrian youth, of large parts of its police force and lower level government bureaucracy, and of its success in linking neighborhood social service functions with rabid Hindu nationalism and Marathi chauvinism. The Shiva Sena has rightly been seen as the single major force behind the Hindu-Muslim riots of the last three decades, and especially of the brutal pogroms that followed the destruction of the Babri Masjid in December 1992 by Hindu fundamentalism cadres. But the Shiva Sena is increasingly internally divided and weakened, as its aging leader and supreme ideologue, Bal Thackeray, loses his charismatic force and control, and it shows every sign of being in a struggle for its very political life. The Marathi-speaking working and poor classes of Mumbai showed remarkable restraint after two major flashpoints in Mumbai’s more recent political history: the burning of a train coach which resulted in the death of a group of Hindu activists in February 2002 near Godhra in Gujarat, and the coordinated carnage of a series of train bombs which paralyzed the city in July 2006. In both cases, there were strong allegations of the involvement of Muslim radical activists, possibly in cahoots with extra-national Islamic forces and support, but Mumbai’s working classes refused to be drawn into major retaliatory violence against Muslims. Thus, it is important to understand the broad sources of Mumbai’s cosmopolitanism before we return to examining how it relates to the strategies of the housing activists of the Alliance.

Mumbai is a city with a history built around contact, commerce and conquest. The presence and struggles of the British and the Portuguese around the set of islands that later became the island city of Mumbai makes Mumbai a city of “outsiders” from the start. Apart from its few coastal fishing communities, virtually every community in Mumbai has a relatively short local history, and the variety of these communities – which includes Jews, Muslims, Parsis, Christians (both foreign and local), and many dozens of communities that might loosely be considered Hindu and Muslim – gave the city a character which was inherently cross-cultural, negotiated and built on brokerage and translation. Many of these groups were tied up with trade and commerce between themselves, with various local and foreign rulers, with various inland empires and, above all, with the wider world of commerce in the Indian Ocean, and especially in the Persian Gulf. This made Mumbai as much a part of the maritime world of the Arabian Sea as a part of the Indian subcontinent from the very beginnings of its modern history.

In general, Mumbai’s cosmopolitanism has long been tied up with its commercial fortunes, and until the 1980s, the textile manufacturing world of Mumbai was built on a working social contract between the largely Marathi-speaking factory labor force of the mills and the largely Gujarati-speaking class of textile mill owners. Yet the working class of Mumbai was never entirely Marathi-speaking, since it was always also populated by poorer farmers and others who migrated to Mumbai from the South, from the Hindi heartland, from tribal Gujarat, and in smaller numbers from virtually every other part of India. In addition, the petty moneylenders of Mumbai were often Pathans from the Northwest provinces, the guards and watchmen of many homes and office buildings were often from Nepal and some of the most important buildings on the regal Marine Drive were owned by the ruling families of Kuwait. The railway staff in Mumbai, as throughout India, always had a significant number of Anglo-Indians, and the Catholic population of Mumbai retained strong links with their Portuguese ancestors and rulers in their native Goa. As Mumbai evolved into a major commercial and financial center in the twentieth century, with a powerful industrial base in the thriving textile industry, its ruling classes included wealthy Gujaratis, Marwaris, Parsis, Sindhis, Bohras and Ismailis, as well as a small number of Marathi speaking entrepreneurial families such as the Garwares, the Kirloskars and the Dahanukars. No major social class in Mumbai was mono-lingual or mono-religious, from the financial elites to the toiling classes of the Mumbai docks.

In an earlier essay (2001) on the cultural dynamics of violence in Mumbai, I described it as the “city of cash”: the flow of money – liquid and abstract, in coins and checks, as gold and shares, as loans
and debts, as pay-offs and commissions, as bribes and gifts— is virtually the circulatory substance that holds the entire economy of the city together. Of course, such cash flows are important in all major cities, especially in financial centers like Mumbai. But Mumbai’s mythology and its everyday life places an especially heavy emphasis on the centrality of cash, as an object of desire, of worship, of mystery and of magical properties that far exceed its mere utility. And Mumbai’s defining industry, the film industry known globally as Bollywood, is the major engine through which the cosmopolitanism of enterprise, hustling and cash is kept alive and magical. And Bollywood is, in various other ways, a key to Mumbai’s cosmopolitanism and special in this context.

From its very beginnings, the Bombay film industry was the primary business in which Mumbai’s many linguistic groups and religious communities learned to collaborate in a machinery of money-making and a mythology of celebrity, prosperity and pleasure that retains its distinctive signature today. Gujarati financiers and producers, Bengali singers and scriptwriters, Maharashtrian editors, singers, and cinematographers (harking back to the film industry of Kolhapur and the Prabhat studios) came into contact with the great courtesan families of the Muslim North which yielded stars like Nargis and singers like Noor Jehan, as well as poets and scriptwriters like the great Saadat Hasan Manto. In a slightly later period, the Urdu progressive movement of the Gaetic heartland created an exile class of song and script writers (such as Kaifi Azmi, Sahir Ludhianvi, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Hasrat Jaipuri and others) who permanently infused the film-going public with their version of Hindustani, deeply steeped in the Urdu and Persian traditions of the small royal courts of North India. Their songs, which became the hallmark of Hindi films and the primary source of popular music throughout India in the 1950s, 1960s and until the present (along with the small printed chapbooks on which the lyrics were printed for those who wished to know them well) infused Bombay film fans with a deep appreciation of a certain lyric Hindustani vocabulary and style which lives in the street Hindi even today. At the same time, the great radio song shows, such as the Binaca Geet Mala of the 1950s and 1960s played and replayed these songs while the movies were being shown in theatres and long after, so that, as Peter Manuel shows in his 1993 book on north Indian popular music, the soundscape of Mumbai’s streets literally echoed with the poetic lyrics of these songs, often derived from courtly Northwestern poetical and lyric traditions such as the ghazal. On the other hand, the news on the radio was in a form of Hinduized Hindi, shorn of its Persian and Urdu elements and heavily infused with Sanskrit roots and neologisms. Thus Bombay’s film-viewers and radio-listeners grew up in a strangely bifurcated Hindi world, absorbing the courtly words and lyrics of Urdu and Persian poetry through the songs and scripts of the Hindi popular film, and the very different, classicized and de-Islamized Hindi of the radio news and the major Hindi newspapers and magazines.

Thus, what is sometimes lampooned as Bambaiyya Hindi (especially by the educated gentry of Delhi) is a fascinating linguistic formation, of which the most noted fact is its penetration by lexemes, grammatical forms and various minor grammatical and syntactic features derived primarily from Marathi (such as the famous “kayko” instead of “kyon” for the English “why”) or the equally famous “khali-pili” meaning roughly “for no good reason”, as well as various less noticed semantic and syntactic features from the Gujarati of Mumbai, itself drawn into the language stereotype comic voice of Parsis in many Hindi films. The “unmarked” ethnicities of Hindi cinema for its golden decades (from 1950 to about 1980) were always vaguely North Indian (Panjabi peasants, Rajput princes and warriors, Mughal emperors, Lucknow courtesans, cowbelt landlords and the like) while the “marked” ethnicities, (often figures of humor) were often Catholic,
Anglo-Indian, Tamil, Sikh or ostentatiously Baniya (Gujarati or Marwari), and were frequently associated with their stereotypical occupations. The great Johnny Walker played almost every one of these “marked” comic ethnicities in his illustrious career. In an odd way, the figure of the Maharashtrian was frequently absent, neither figure nor background, indexing the strange absence of any linguistic hinterland for Bombay, except of course in the small but interesting Marathi film industry which never dominated the imagination of the city as the Hindi film industry did. Thus the films and songs produced by Bollywood created the basic idiom of Bombay Hindi, something which has itself changed in subtle ways through the five decades after 1950, but was always a more interesting hybrid than has been conceded by Hindi speakers from the North, who tend to lampoon Bombay Hindi from the point of view of some absurd idea of the authenticity of the their own forms of Hindi. The latter, of course, are serial hybrids of Urdu, Hindustani, numerous varieties of Khari-Boli, and the numerous earlier spoken languages of North India, ranging from Marwari in Rajasthan to Maithili in Bihar.

The idea of some sort of “standard” North Indian Hindi, by comparison with which Bambaiyya Hindi is a proletarian and ridiculous hybrid, is a fatuous act of regional chauvinism parading as high linguistic propriety. It ignores not only the complex ways in which various North Indian forms of Hindustani have help to form Bombay Hindi, but also assigns to the Khari-Boli of the North a privilege which is denied to languages such as Marathi and Gujarati. The irony, of course, is that both Marathi and Gujarati owe a much larger lexical debt to Urdu and Persian in the pre-colonial period than do many folk languages of the Hindi heartland. But that history is not critical to my argument here.

Today, the combination of commerce, cash and cinema, along with other forms of industry, manufacture and enterprise, creates an enormously complicated multilingual universe, unified by a constantly evolving form of Bombay Hindi, which both shapes and is shaped by the songs and scripts of Bollywood. At the same time, Mumbai’s Marathi is hardly simple, single or homogenous, as shown by path-breaking ground-level research by the Marathi Public Sphere Project of a Bombay research group called PUKAR on the enormous variety of Marathi dialects in the greater Mumbai area. The combination of commerce, cash and cinema, along with other forms of industry, manufacture and enterprise, creates an enormously complicated multilingual universe, unified by a constantly evolving form of Bombay Hindi.

One final observation which returns us to the tension between Mumbai’s film-centered linguistic cosmopolitanism and the power of the Shiva Sena which has historically emphasized the ownership of Mumbai by Maharashtrians, the cultural dominance of Marathi as a language and the priority of the history of Maharashtra as a region in the textbooks, street names and religious life of the city, nowhere better expressed than in the cult of the warrior-king Shivaji in the political theology of the Shiva Sena. Furthermore, as Rahul Srivastava brought to my attention, even this Marathi chauvinist party has been forced to make concessions to the linguistic diversity of Mumbai by publishing Hindi and Gujarati versions of its main propaganda newspaper, Saamna, to reach audiences that may be susceptible to Shiva Sena ideologies in their nationalist Hindu fundamentalist aspects but have no interest in abandoning their own linguistic loyalties. It is in this extremely interesting and layered linguistic world that we need to place the specific cosmopolitan strategies of the communities and organizations that compose the Alliance of housing activists in Mumbai and their global networks.

The Cosmopolitanism of the Urban Poor

We return now to the cultural strategies of the urban poor who have mobilized themselves: by organizing themselves into Federations, primarily through the work of the National Slum Dwellers Federation; by building on the street experiences of the women who formed Mahila Milan in the aftermath of their earlier struggles as sex-workers in the variety of neighborhoods that fan out from Bombay Central, one of Bombay’s two major railways stations; and by taking advantage of the middle-class resources of the women who built up the NGO known as SPARC. (The story of this collaboration, which begins the early 1980s in Bombay through a series of accidental encounters, has been told in numerous published accounts by myself (2000) Satterthwaite, D’Cruz, Patel and Burra, among others.)

Today, in 2011, the poor women and men of Mahila Milan and NSDF have come a long way from their beginnings as self-organizing urban activists struggling to gain secure housing, minimum civil rights and minimum protection from the depredations of police, criminals and the municipal authorities in Mumbai. They have learned to speak directly to banks, engineers, architects, developers,
politicians, academics and multi-national celebrities. They have learned to document, survey, monitor and regulate their own communities, through techniques of surveying, enumeration and mutual information. They have evolved sophisticated forms for articulating their own savings circles and assets with official and quasi-official banking and credit institutions. They have become the principals in a major construction company (an independent private company called NIRMAAN) through which they handle capital, loans, planning and execution of building projects centered on housing and sanitation in Mumbai and in many other Indian cities. They have vastly improved their capacity to deliver built infrastructure up to the standards of municipal and private lending authorities, and have been asked by state and federal authorities to extend their experiences and strategies to cities in India which have been struggling with housing and infrastructure for the poor for decades without success. They have learned to deal with the constant movement and transfers of civil servants working for city and state agencies whose support they have learned to cultivate and husband over decades. They have mastered the art of presenting their numerical strength as an asset for the support of often cynical and corrupt politicians without conceding to the constant pressure to become passive vote-banks for specific politicians or political parties. They have earned the envy (and the respect) of commercial builders and land-developers for whom all housing markets in Mumbai are a zone for unhindered profit-making; and the grudging regard of politicians and quasi-criminal interests who tend to dominate the real-estate and development world of Mumbai. Above all, they have had steady and growing success in eroding the view that the street and slum-dwelling poor are non-citizens and parasites on the economy of Mumbai, and in forcing politicians, bureaucrats, planners and various urban elites to recognize that the poor cannot be treated as a cancer on the body of the city, and are citizens who deserve the same rights as all others and that they are in numerous ways vital to the service and production economies of Mumbai. In short, the various communities and leaders who are at the core of the Alliance have created an irreversible dynamic of “recognition” (in Charles Taylor’s sense), which today makes it impossible to ignore their massive numerical presence and their legitimate rights to housing, to infrastructure and to political voice in the life of the city.

The cosmopolitan practices of the Alliance have much to do with these hard won successes. And it can be seen in the most humble as well as the most dramatic of forms. It can be seen in the housing and toilet exhibitions that I discussed in earlier essays (2001 and 2004) on this movement. In these events, which combine festivity, learning, dialogue and solidarity-building, women (and men) from different cities and regions encounter each other and make the effort to encompass some of India’s linguistic and cultural diversities. They discuss their hopes about domestic space, their experiences with different building materials and techniques, their practices of savings and credit, and more generally their hopes for permanent housing and political security in their streets and cities. Friendships are formed, tragedies are shared, stories are exchanged, and experiences of urban struggle are framed to be understood by women for other women who come from different spatial worlds of poverty. Often these exchanges involve linguistic negotiation, as when women from Nepal or Orissa talk to women from Pune or Tamil Nadu, often through the bridging efforts of the polyglot women of Mahila Milan from Mumbai. A single extended collective conversation could involve the use of several varieties of Hindi and Marathi, or Kannada and Oriya and Tamil, and even some English (if visitors from overseas networks of funders are present). Translation is a continuous background activity as participants gloss and explain exchanges to each other, and older and less literate members are told about new social and technical issues. Language in these settings is both medium and message, background and foreground, tool and horizon. It is rarely articulated as a site of conscious negotiation or effort. Yet it is the first and

Clean drinking water! Flickr: Joe Athialy

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most critical site of the effort to stretch the cultural horizons of these poor women and men. It cannot be underestimated as the basis for all other forms of translation, learning and exchange in the work of the global network.

These inter-city occasions within the Indian framework cannot, however, be seen as the main context in which the membership of the Alliance learns the strategies of cosmopolitanism. In fact, the daily struggles to self-organize in Mumbai over the decades from the early 1980s to the present cannot be seen outside the context of the steady will of the poorest members of the Alliance to negotiate and transcend a variety of critical cultural boundaries and thus to create an expanded sense of their own cultural selves. For example, the poorest women who constitute the senior core of Mahila Milan are largely Muslim women from the Telugu-speaking region of Andhra Pradesh, who entered the sex-trade as sex-workers in Nagpada and the adjoining areas of Central Mumbai. Their already complex linguistic and cultural worlds (quite different from the world of the quasi-courtesans of the Muslim North) encountered in Mumbai, the brutal world of multilingual male sex-shoppers, corrupt Marathi-speaking policemen and toilers and brokers speaking every variety of Hindi, Tamil and Gujarati. As they organized themselves into the self-help group called Mahila Milan to escape their previous professions, learn other modes of livelihood and achieve housing security, they remained for decades confined to pavement dwellings in their original working neighborhoods. But they also learned to work and cooperate with the largely male membership of the National Slum Dwellers Federation, many of whom are Tamil-speakers from Dharavi and its nearby Tamil-dominated neighborhoods far to the North of Nagpada. These Tamil-speaking men represented a different set of histories and trajectories, often less than sympathetic to the sex workers (as most Mumbai males would be) and were also further advanced in the strategies of Mumbai housing politics and civic survival. Emerging from the complex occupational and political world of Dharavi and its environs, they were already fairly skilled in dealing with their own Tamil underworld, with its Muslim extensions, (since some of the most prominent members of Mumbai's underworld in the period from 1950 to 1980 were Tamils, both Hindu and Muslim). They were likewise deeply experienced in operating in the fringe world constituted in the nexus of ward politics, crime, police and slum landlords and thus brought a more sophisticated set of political assets to the Alliance. The transactions between these two micro-cultures in Mumbai (the Muslim female ex-sex-workers of Mahila Milan and the largely male Tamil-speaking working class men of the NSDF) already required more than a modest negotiation of cultural styles and gaps in the mosaic of Mumbai's class, language and sexual politics. This on-going negotiation, which has direct implications for the overall strategies of the Alliance in Mumbai, is one example of the daily struggles to negotiate cultural differences among the poorest of the urban poor in Mumbai. Such cosmopolitanism is hard won, unsupported as it is by the apparatus of literacy, cultural privilege or by the practices of leisure and self-cultivation.

Such cosmopolitanism is hard won, unsupported as it is by the apparatus of literacy, cultural privilege or by the practices of leisure and self-cultivation. This micro-cosmopolitanism of the urban poor underwrites and supports numerous wider arenas and contexts for the practice of cosmopolitanism. Perhaps the most important of these pertains to the periodic and catastrophic episodes of violence between Hindus and Muslims in Mumbai, notably in December 1992 and January 1993, after the destruction of the Babri Masjid by Hindu fundamentalist mobs in the city of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh. In these bloody riots, which largely produced death and destruction among the poorest members of Mumbai's Hindu and Muslim slums, the areas dominated by the defeated communities of the Alliance were able to minimize street violence and harm to the Muslim minority, were active in distributing aid and support to riots victims from both communities and were vital contributors in the efforts to resist inflammatory propaganda and to cool the embers of inter-communal enmity. This remains a marked strength of the Alliance in a city that has grown increasingly susceptible to the volatile nexus that links urban poverty, local fundamentalist politics, nationalist Hindu politics, anti-Pakistan hysteria and the constant stimulation of the global “war on terror.” This grass-roots secularism, documented by many observers, means more in a city in which almost half the population of almost sixteen million lives in slums composed of Hindus and Muslims living cheek by jowl, than the high-level hand-wringing of the high theorists of Indian secularism, for whom secularism has less to do with constitutional values and modernist respectability, not easily graspable by India’s poor and illiterate masses in their abstract forms.
Nor does local cosmopolitanism among the urban poor begin and end with grassroots secularism. It also extends to public rallies, political oratory and linguistic traffic with local, national and international elites. When Hilary Clinton or Colin Powell or Prince Charles have paid visits to the homes and offices of NSDF and Mahila Milan in Mumbai, they have been drawn into the spaces and discourses of the poor and though linguistic translation is an ever present activity, the terms of the traffic have been so designed as to foreground the voices of the poor, with their stories and experiences foregrounded in preference to the voices of experts and other mediators. These encounters, which have been numerous over the years, have brought leaders of every variety into contact with the poorest men and women of the Alliance, to discuss their plans, their hopes, their strategies and their list of real needs for support and assistance. These encounters build on the experiences of the micro-cosmopolitanism of daily life in Mumbai that I have briefly described, and on the confidence developed in the efforts of these men and women to negotiate their own diversity of worlds in Mumbai.

But these encounters also build on another form of encounter which has been described elsewhere and is vital to the transnational politics of the global network of urban communities to which the India alliance belongs. These are the learning exchanges between members of these communities, in small groups, who travel to each other’s communities across Africa, Asia and even England, united by a common concern with homelessness and urban housing security. In these encounters, the urban poor of immensely diverse communities (from Cape Town and Johannesburg to Mumbai, Manila and Bangkok) share stories, songs, strategies and public oratory with each other, sometimes in intimate and informal contexts and sometimes in large-scale political and public events, in which politicians, policy-makers and urban elites are drawn into a space of cross-national cosmopolitanism which they neither define nor control. The cultural politics of these large-scale events is subtle and multi-layered for they combine local, national, regional and global traffic and creative negotiation. Speeches and songs might switch across two or three local languages or dialects, dances might celebrate three of four countries or continents, cultural performances might present slum-dwellers’ interpretations of high cultural dance or song forms (such as Zulu dances in Durban or Koli fishing community dances in Mumbai). These public dramas always foreground the presence of leaders from the poor communities themselves, thus pulling various middle-class elites, global celebrities, or civil society intelligentsia (such as myself) into a completely non-theorized, non-elite form of cultural imagination, performance and negotiation.

Many elements of these practices of micro-cosmopolitanism and transnational cultural bridge-building were caught in an extraordinary event in New York in 2001, Istanbul +5, in which I was privileged to participate. The context was a major meeting about global urban housing hosted by the United Nations at its global headquarters in New York, in the heart of the most sophisticated cosmopolis in the world. The world of non-governmental organizations was not granted much space in this event, which was dominated by official country delegations and recognized multilateral bodies such as the UNCHS. Yet the members of Slum/Shack Dwellers International managed to stage an extraordinary piece of guerrilla theater by securing permission to build a model house and a set of model toilets right in the lobby of the United Nations building, with informal materials and their own labor, in the very presence of the hundreds of official delegates from many countries. The core participants from the Alliance were a group of fifteen or so men and women from the India and South African nodes of the network and a handful of civil society activists associated with them. The small model house and the children’s toilets attracted so much attention from everyone who passed through the lobby of the UN that, in the midst of the conference, there was a tidal movement from the corridors of the UN: all of a sudden Kofi Annan, the Secretary General of the UN, and Anna Tibaijuka, the Executive Director of UNCHS, were in the midst of the informal exhibits surrounded by a dancing, singing, ululating group of women from South Africa and India, and an even larger crowd of curious delegates and visitors in suits, who followed this spontaneous political drama through the lobby of the UN. Some short speeches were delivered and the luminaries swept away but for a few brief moments, the political power and magic of the UN had been drawn into the space of the urban poor and the highest representatives of the United Nations were surrounded by the voices, the songs, the dances and the physical exhibits of the
poorest of the poor – their true constituency. They knew it was a magical moment and so did everyone else. It was a fully cosmopolitan moment, staged by the poorest women and men from slum communities in Africa and India, who had the long experience of their own micro-cosmopolitanisms to draw on when the opportunity presented itself – however briefly – to capture the charisma of the United Nations on their own terms. And in such events can be found the significance of cosmopolitanism from below, the topic of my concluding reflections.

Cosmopolitanism and the Politics of Hope

In my earlier work on the communities and organizations that constitute the Indian node of this global network of the urban poor, I stressed the local practices and values that underlie what I called the “deep democracy” of this movement, and subsequently of the ways in which the Alliance was able to build among the urban poor what I called “the capacity to aspire”. In this concluding section, I connect my account of “cosmopolitanism from below” to the structures of deep democracy and the conditions for developing the capacity to aspire, since together these are the raw materials of the politics of hope for the world’s urban poor.

Cosmopolitanism tends to be seen as a practice relevant to cultural identity and individual self-enhancement. Consequently, it is not often tied to the broader political economy of rights, resources and recognition. This is an impoverished view of cosmopolitanism, for among the many ways in which the poor are excluded from the benefits of participation, especially in multicultural democracies, is by their exclusion from the institutions of education, career-building, expertise, and the opportunities to expand their sense of their own possibilities for self-development. This deficit has, of course, long been recognized in national and global policies of development and modernization, especially those associated with the movements for economic modernization in the new nations that emerged after World War II. Similar impulses to draw the poor into mass politics through the mechanisms of mass education also had some precedents in the great social revolutions of Russia and China in the twentieth century, and in a more modest way in the social revolutions of the eighteenth century in England, France and the United States, all of which helped to deepen the links between popular sovereignty and the elimination of poverty. But this historical trend towards mass education, itself certainly a product of the Enlightenment emphasis on the link between the ideals of knowledge, education and social equality, has generally involved a greater emphasis on technical skills, basic literacy and formal educational capacities at various levels, as the keys to democratization. This emphasis is not in itself mistaken, but it tends to underestimate the political significance of cosmopolitanism as a tool of enfranchisement in its own right.

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Let us think again about the kinds of practice through which the urban slum dwellers I have described struggle to extend their cultural worlds, starting near their own worlds in (and even within) Mumbai. These practices require them to imagine their everyday worlds, and the conditions of their own daily survival and security, initially and always, in a multilingual and multicultural space. That is because in a city like Mumbai, it is never easy to separate language, caste and religion from matters of class, power and spatial privilege. And nor is it that these differences map neatly on to one another so that one’s peers are cultural familiaris (in one or other way) and the powers that be are one’s cultural others. Difference of some sort is both horizontal and vertical and the poor (eight million strong, one must recall) are as divided from one another in terms of language, religion and caste as they might be from the eight million citizens of Mumbai who are better off than they are. Thus all cultural transactions require negotiation and all negotiation has a cultural dimension. Language is the most visible (and audible) arena for this negotiation but it also serves as an example for other sites of difference, such as region of origin, religion or caste, none of
which are without relevance to the urban poor, however destitute they may be.

Thus the struggle to extend one’s cultural horizons, linguistically and otherwise, is non-optional and that too in two regards. It is compulsory in the effort to build horizontal solidarities, for example, between the Muslim women of Mahila Milan and the Tamil men of the NSDF, but it is also compulsory in their efforts to deal with the police, the banks, the municipal authorities, and the middle classes that dominate urban policy. Most important, the extension of one’s cultural horizons in a democratic society is compulsory for the urban poor because the language of mass democratic politics is rarely singular across all political parties, candidates and constituencies, especially in cities like Mumbai but to some extent even in cities in more linguistically homogenous areas (such as Bangalore in Karnataka or Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh). Even in a city like Surat in Gujarat, the closer one gets to the political reality of actual neighborhoods, wards and political constituencies, the greater the variety of dialects and languages, even in a broadly mono-linguistic world. To some extent, this is the nature of large cities, which frequently grow through migrations over large distances over long time periods.

The compulsory nature of cosmopolitanism for the urban poor also makes it a more reliable resource for the practices of deep democracy. Deep democracy is democracy near at hand, the democracy of neighborhood, community, kinship and friendship, expressed in the daily practices of information-sharing, house and toilet-building, and savings (seen as the foundation of federation-building all across this global network). Deep democracy is the democracy of suffering and of trust; of work and of slum defense (against demolition and displacement); of small-scale borrowings and repayments; and, above all, of the daily recognition in every organized activity of these communities that women are the most vital sources of continuity, community, patience and wisdom in the struggle to maintain everyday security in the face of constant crisis and threat from many directions. Deep democracy precedes what happens at the ballot-box, the political rally and the government office, though it supports and energizes all of these. Deep democracy – especially in India, where poverty is mostly expressed in the form of abjection, subordination and mechanical deference to all and sundry, especially to the rich and the powerful – is the transformation of constitutional bourgeois ideals into daily forms of consciousness and behavior, in which debate can be respectfully conducted, the voices of the weak, the very poor and women especially is accorded full regard, and where transparency in the conduct of disputes and differences becomes a habitual practice. Deep democracy is public democracy as it is internalized into the lifeblood of local communities and made into a part of the local habitus, in the sense made famous by Pierre Bourdieu.

All these practices and expressions of deep democracy rest on new habits of communication, and since even the smallest communities of the urban poor involve accidents that bring people with different cultural backgrounds and regional histories into the same pavements or informal settlements, compulsory cosmopolitanism is the absolute condition for keeping deep democracy alive. For without the daily extension of one’s linguistic and cultural horizons, how can an organized group of poor men and women debate the choice of a Hindu woman and neighbor to spend some of the money she borrowed from community savings on saris for her daughter’s wedding? Or the pressure on a Muslim grandmother with an early history as a sex-worker to celebrate her grandson’s wedding with as much pomp and public expenditure as possible, in the drive for respectability? Or the merits of a Railway construction worker’s claim on community small-group savings to support travel to his father’s funeral? In every case, compulsory cosmopolitanism and deep democracy require and sustain one another since the stretching of one’s cultural and linguistic horizons is the sine qua non of engaged debate on these vital matters of trust, scarce collective resources and obligations. Such democratic debate also reinforces the virtues of cultural self-extension, in the harsh, often emergency conditions of slum life.

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And this leads us to the topic of the capacity to aspire. In my earlier discussion, I referred to the capacity to aspire as a navigational capacity, unequally distributed among wealthier and poorer communities, that allows people to make their way from more proximate needs to more distant aspirational worlds. I argued also that this capacity was less developed among poor communities (both rural and urban) precisely because the archive of experiences and stories through which wealthier communities were able to build the sinews of the imagination
which underlie the capacity to aspire is precisely what the poor lack, this experiential deficit being virtually the hallmark of poverty. Thus, I proposed that the struggle between individuals and communities over the terms of recognition, an essential part of the effort of poor families to improve their place in local economies of dignity, could only be improved by enhancing the capacity to aspire. This set of connected arguments about the capacity to aspire rested on the view that for any durable change to occur in the distribution of resources, the poor needed to be empowered to gain and exercise “voice”, a fact that has been widely recognized by development scholars and practitioners. What has not been adequately recognized is that for “voice” to be regularly and effectively exercised by the poor, in conditions of radical inequalities in power and dignity, required permanent enhancements of their collective capacity to aspire. In this proposal, I suggested that the daily organizational work and public rituals of the Alliance were an excellent example of organized communities of the poor who had discovered numerous ways to strengthen their own capacity to aspire and, in the process, had found ways to draw those in power into various formal and informal agreements to cooperate in this process.

If we can retain the idea that changes in the distribution of the capacity to aspire could dramatically affect the terms of recognition for poor communities of every type, then compulsory cosmopolitanism becomes a vital source of energy for this objective. For both the micro-cosmopolitanism of the federated communities of the urban poor which I have discussed above and the practices which enhance the capacity to aspire draw on the habit of imagining possibilities, rather than giving in to the probabilities of externally imposed change. Imagining possible futures, concrete in their immediacy as well as expansive in their long-term horizons, inevitably thrives on communicative practices that extend one’s own cultural horizons. As these horizons are extended by poor families and communities, they gain plausible access to the stories and experiences of others, not just of adversity and suffering but also of movement and accomplishment. In a multilingual and multicultural world, the expansion of this archive, through the dynamics of compulsory cosmopolitanism, adds speed and depth to the strengthening of the capacity to aspire, whose main fuel lies in credible stories (from one’s own life-world) of the possibility to move forward, outward and upward, even as one tends a leaking roof or a sick child in a fragile pavement dwelling on the streets of Nagpada.
SHARING THE PIE IN TIMES OF HUNGER: A TANA TALE

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Examining the ongoing dispossession of subsistence agriculturalists in the Tana region of Kenya, Lara Allen suggests that radical new legal mechanisms that work outside of capitalist notions of private property are needed to protect such communities from the present onslaught of land, water, and resource-grabs.

“People are already hungry. They still smile and talk to you, but you can see it in their eyes. Their lips too. The hunger is there now. It will get worse.”

These phrases, uttered during our final conversation by the man who had assisted me daily through two months of field work, return recurrently as I try to make sense of those months. The people concerned are Wardei pastoralists and Pokomo agriculturalists who have subsisted for centuries by following the rains with their livestock or farming in the receding floods of the lower reaches of the Tana River in north-eastern Kenya. How is it that proud and effective farming communities come to be hungry? How is it that this is not a state of exception; that such people have had to rely on food relief for more than fifteen years?

The acute reason for the hunger is the failure of the rains. Again. The Horn of Africa is experiencing its worst drought in 60 years: 2.4 in Kenya. Just across the border in Somalia armed conflict has exacerbated the situation such that the United Nations has officially declared a famine. Dadaab – the largest refugee camp in the world with a population of over 400 000 people – is less than 150 kilometers away from Tana.

The chronic reason is that the twice yearly floods that provided Pokomo farmers with the water and nutrients to farm productively no longer occur. Five dams have been constructed upstream on the Tana River; the last was completed in 1989, and a sixth dam is proposed. Together these dams produce over 70% of Kenya’s electricity. In good rainfall years farmers in Tana now plant rain dependent crops such as maize, but invariably waters are released from the dams producing unseasonal floods and these crops are washed away. The people are returned to dependence on insufficient food aid.

In a functioning liberal democracy – which Kenya purportedly aspires to be – with foundations in capitalist notions of property and a legal system that protects property almost above anything else, this would not be possible. It would not be possible for people’s property to be destroyed year after year without recourse; it would not be possible for people’s means to a livelihood to be taken away without compensation. According to a 1994 study by Lucy Emerton, over a million people depend on the Tana River’s flooding regime for their livelihoods: 200 000 live permanently alongside the River, while 800 000 nomadic pastoralists and their 2.5 million livestock are seasonally dependent.

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The people of Tana have, without recourse or compensation, been dispossessed of their water sources (rain and floods), and therefore of their means to provide themselves with food, but this is not the only dispossession they face. The burning issue – the one that preoccupies local people the most – is land. Subsistence agriculturalists and pastoralists depend directly and exclusively on land; loss of that land means utter impoverishment.

While land ownership in many parts of Kenya was adjudicated shortly after independence, much of the land in the Tana River and Tana Delta Districts is still communally owned: it is held in trust by the County Council on behalf of the people living there. Unfortunately, though, all too often such land is held without trust by County Councils who make deals to the significant detriment to the people living there. Ndera Location is a case in point. Ndera’s present
residents live in the shadow of three land disputes: together these cover 90% of their Location. The people of the neighbouring Location of Gwano are marginally better off: only about 60% of their land is presently vulnerable.

The most high profile land dispute in the area is between the Pokomo people of Gwano and Ndera and Kenya Wildlife Service over the Tana River Primate National Reserve. In response to the ‘discovery’ by international primatologists of two critically endangered non-human primates (the Tana River red colobus, *Procolobus rufomitratus*, and the Tana River mangabey, *Cercocebus galeritus*), 169-km² of communal trust land in the Locations of Gwano and Ndera was gazetted in 1976 to create the Tana River Primate National Reserve. The intention was to protect the 13 km² of riverine forest patches that constitute the habitat of these primates, and that are now part of the internationally recognized ‘east African coastal forests global biodiversity hotspot’. The argument for removing humans from the Reserve is that Pokomo people practice shifting agriculture and therefore are bound ultimately to cut down all the riverine forests in order to devote the forest lands to agriculture. Therefore Pokomo agricultural practices are seen as antithetical to conservation of the primates’ habitat. The Tana River colobus and mangabey monkeys are the only mammals exclusively endemic to Kenya, and the Primate Specialist Group of IUCN recognizes both species as endangered, ranking them among the world’s top 25 most endangered primates.

Over the past 35 years, however, the populations of both species have been in decline and have gone extinct in some of the forest patches. This period has seen an ongoing struggle between Kenya Wildlife Service, which is intent on removing humans from the Reserve, and Pokomo farmers who do not wish to leave their ancestral lands. The tension escalated during the 1990s when pressure for the people to move was increased under the auspices of a World Bank/GEF conservation project. In response, funded by an international development organisation, the communities filed a law suit against the Government of Kenya in which they asserted that the procedures stipulated by law regarding attainment of consent from community members for the conversion of trust land to public land (which is what the gazettement as a National Reserve entailed) were not followed. The gazettement, contended the communities, had occurred despite widespread and publicly-declared non-consent. In 2007 the High Court of Kenya ruled that the Tana River Primate National Reserve was not established in accordance with the law, and therefore must be de-gazetted.

What happened in response to this landmark ruling was nothing – at least on the surface. Nothing was done to degazette the Reserve in Parliament. Kenya Wildlife Service remained stationed at their Headquarters and continued to run the Reserve as if the law suit had not occurred (except that all maintenance of infrastructure was put on hold). Nothing was done when community members living within the bounds of the Reserve continued to live there, and no restraints were put on individuals who mis- or over-used forest resources by community leaders, as had been the case prior to 1976 when the communities self-regulated forest resource use.

Under the surface, however, important changes were occurring and strategic re-alliances were being forged. Most positively, pro-conservation community youth groups formed and started mobilising towards their goal of establishing community-run conservation management and eco-tourism projects in the Reserve area. Unfortunately these groups faced opposition from virtually all quarters: many of their community elders rejected any mention of conservation on principle; Kenya Wildlife Service largely declined to support any pro-conservation moves from within the Pokomo communities that had attempted to oust it from the Reserve; national and international conservationists and conservation organizations and funders avoided assisting Pokomo community initiatives, usually citing the premature closure of the World Bank project as their reason for withholding support.

One particular alliance born in the post-court case era brought a second land dispute to the fore. About ten years ago the District of Ijara has notified the Boundary Commission of their claim that the district boundary between Ijara and the Tana River and Tana Delta Districts should be the Tana River itself, as opposed to its present position, which is ...
three to five miles to the east of the River. The Tana Districts contend that the present boundary is appropriate as it is defined by the edge of the flood plain, which in turn recognises the extent of Pokomo ancestral lands: a traditional system of hereditary land ownership that recognises all flood plain lands as belonging to specific Pokomo clans has been in place since pre-colonial times.

This decade-old boundary dispute took on a new significance for the communities of Ndera and Gwano in the light of an alliance formed in the post 2007 period between Kenya Wildlife Service and a community conservancy in Ijara. The main aim of this conservancy is to provide secure protected habitat for the endangered Hirola antelope (*Beatragus hunteri*). This conservancy is supported by a Trust that runs many well-regarded community conservancies throughout Kenya, funded by international donors. In 2011 this Trust started supporting a conservancy in Ndera. However many people in Gwano and Ndera became concerned that an attempt was being made to dispossess them of the east bank of the Reserve, a fear exacerbated by the patrolling of this area by the Ijara conservancy’s scouts. For a few months these fears were somewhat allayed by the Trust’s new financial and logistical support of the Ndera conservancy, only to be strongly escalated by a proposed Memorandum of Understanding between the two community conservancies and Kenya Wildlife Service that proposes to give one tourism lodge contractor exclusive use of the most desirable part of the Reserve: the east bank.

Or does it sign away half to two thirds of its most viable (perhaps the only viable) tourism site? In the arrangement outlined in the Memorandum, while the land itself is not directly appropriated, the benefits and control of the resources on the land is. Given the history of Pokomo resistance to dispossession, it is unlikely that this arrangement will be accepted. In their attempt to slice up the eco-tourism pie that the Tana forests could represent, and in their bid to take large slices of this relatively small pie to service their own particular interests, ultimately – and most ironically – it could be conservationists who destroy the possibility of the long term survival of the Tana forests and the endangered primates.

In the third land dispute faced by Ndera residents, whole Wardei and Pokomo villages find themselves inside a Group Ranch belonging to Orma people from a neighbouring Location. The Group Ranch is a legal mechanism enabling groups to gain title for previously communal trust land. The obvious primary problem with this mechanism – that some residents could gain title while others become dispossessed – has manifested so often, and has caused so much trouble, that Group Ranches are being phased out under the new Constitution. A second problem, and the one that troubles Ndera, is that the surveying of such ranches has often proved a corrupt process such that much larger portions of land are incorporated than initially agreed. Thirdly, once land is alienable, once a title deed exists, it is possible for that land to be sold – usually to the benefit of a few individuals and to the deep disadvantage of everyone else living there. The extent of the dispossession and trauma that this can cause, particularly when international capital becomes involved, is now
becoming devastatingly apparent in the Tana River Delta. Europe’s increasing appetite for green energy in order to meet its CO2 reduction targets is creating a voracious market for biofuels. Kenya’s relative geographical proximity to Europe makes it a prime site for biofuel production, with the result that an international biofuels company with the cooperation of the Kenyan government proposes to turn over the whole of the Tana River Delta to sugar cane.

The extent of the environmental degradation and destruction of livelihoods that this green desert would cause is well documented elsewhere, as is the struggle of civil society to protect the Delta. However, one aspect of the struggle for the Delta is pertinent for the people and environment upstream: the biofuels company concerned is reputed to have acquired large swathes of land from the Delta hundreds of kilometres inland by purchasing group ranches, including the group ranch that ‘owns’ much of Ndera Location. The intention is to convert this land, which presently is predominantly used by nomadic pastoralists, to the farming of *Jatropha curcas*, an oil-rich plant commonly used to produce biofuels in arid places. This issue has not yet been taken up by civil society, and no one has explained what is to become of the 800 000 pastoralists and their 2.5 million livestock. They will become superfluous: waste, in Achille Mbembe’s conception. Will they take their new superfluity quietly? Where will they go? What will they eat? In this volume Filip De Boeck offers insight into the challenges faced by contemporary African megalopolises: what is gained nationally by the sale of biofuel to Europe worth the socio-economic pressure created by adding nearly a million destitute pastoralists to the slums of Nairobi or Mombasa? Or perhaps the people superfluous to the project of making their rangelands more economically productive will find themselves in white tents provided by the UN for internally displaced persons. Perhaps Dadaab will shortly lose its status as the largest refugee camp in the world.

Apart from the environmental and human disaster that hundreds of square kilometres of *Jatropha* in north eastern Kenya would create, it would seem that the last remaining riverine forest patches outside of the Reserve, which do still constitute important habitat for the Tana’s endangered non-human primates, could be sacrificed for biofuels.

What the contests over land and water in Tana reveal are fundamental deficits between what is claimed and what is enacted in several registers: philosophically and ideologically, legally, and in terms of policy.

At the deepest level, that of the fundamental philosophical and ideological foundations of social life, there would seem to be a mismatch between the egalitarian ideals and basic humanitarian standards enshrined in the new Kenyan Constitution and the treatment of the country’s more marginalised peoples. Born in reaction to the horror unleashed by the violence following the elections in 2007, and the ensuing political, economic, and humanitarian crisis, the new Kenyan Constitution generated in many citizens a fresh politics of hope. Many others, however, have reacted with cynical disbelief that the powerful who benefit so much from the status quo will ever let justice prevail, or any sort of meaningful equality manifest.

It would seem that there is a lack of substantive action to address the needs of the poor and marginalised on the part of the country’s political and economic elite. This is likely to have two roots: ideological and opportunistic. Ideologically many fall short of adopting what Paul Gilroy in this volume argues formed the core of Franz Fanon’s vision for ‘redemptive humanism’: a fully encompassing humanism that does not produce infra-humans by applying its standards to some people while excluding others. The attitudes and actions of educated elite urbanites all too often reveal that they do not believe that uneducated rural peasants are their equals, and are deserving of the same rights, opportunities and respect as themselves – as humans or citizens. Such hegemonic notions of the inferiority of certain groups of people function to justify and facilitate access to significant material opportunity for the privileged.
In the case of the Tana River’s hydro-electric dams, for instance, the livelihoods of a million peasant farmers and pastoralists continue to be sacrificed so that people in urban areas may have access to electricity. The lack of acknowledgement of this fact, let alone redress or compensation, demonstrates that all Kenyans are not equal. In practice, neither citizenship nor the law protects the marginal from dispossession by the more powerful.

The gap between policy and practice is particularly evident in the disconnect between the new Constitution and the law, particularly with regard to land. The three land disputes in the Locations of Gwano and Ndera reveal an underlying ideological struggle between capitalist notions of private property ownership and local traditional systems of land use. Political independence in Kenya did not bring with it a new ideological and legal apparatus that either recognised pre-colonial systems of governance and economics or instituted appropriate post-colonial forms. And the contemporary situation is greatly exacerbated by the onslaught of neocolonial neoliberalism that has structurally readjusted the economies of much of the ‘third world’ over the past three decades. While the new Kenyan Constitution recognises the validity of traditional forms of governance, and enshrines the right of people to their ancestral land, there is no effective legal mechanism to enable communities to secure their lands from predation by outsiders and to continue to allocate land for use according to customary law. In Gwano Location community leaders believe that attaining a ‘block title deed’ will protect them, but their efforts to achieve such a deed are being systematically blocked by the County Council. Furthermore, the dangers of a title deed, however defined, have been clearly demonstrated by the problems associated with group ranches. A new legal mechanism is needed: one that works beyond the notion of title deeds and private ownership such that resale would not be an option. The lack of such a mechanism is making it impossible for communities either to move forward with their own development plans or to protect themselves effectively from land grabbing investors.

With regard specifically to the conservation-related land disputes in Tana, the recent turn of events represented by the proposed Memorandum of Understanding gives credence to the communities’ analysis of the fundamental nature of the disagreement. The interpretation widely circulated by the conservation establishment is that the people of Tana are obstructionist anti-conservationists who intend to cut down all the forests in order to farm the riverine lands. In turn local people contend that conservation in its imported form is just a ruse by outsiders to dispossess them of their ancestral lands, and any benefits that might accrue from the resources and opportunities that these lands offer. Community members argue that they are not, and never have been, anti-conservation per say, and have no intention of destroying the forests. Sustainable use of forest resources has been core to Pokomo culture for hundreds of years, and, as they point out, the sustainability of their traditional resource management system is evidenced in the fact that the forests still exists in Pokomo areas, whereas these have disappeared elsewhere. Community members understand that population growth means that individuals cannot use forest resources or lands to the extent that was possible for former generations, but they also understand that there are new and sustainable ways in which their communities could make use of the forests, particularly through the opportunities promised by eco-tourism.

The communities’ analysis suggests that to describe the conflict as ‘communities versus conservation’,
or ‘monkeys versus people’, is to misrepresent the terms of the debate and obscure the real issue in a manner beneficial to outside interests. The problem is caused by conflicting interests and priorities between people. The people of Tana could live very well with the monkeys. In fact if the interests of the local people and the endangered primates of Tana were the only interests being taken into consideration, it would be relatively easy to achieve a long term sustainable solution that would be mutually beneficial for both groups. The pie that the riverine forests constitute is big enough to sustain both: in fact, using and conserving this pie together would constitute a very productive mutualism. The problem is that other people – non-community members – want this pie, and continue to employ whatever powers they have at their disposal to take what they can of it. It is the past and present attempts of outsiders to exploit the forests for their own benefit that is at the base of the extreme underdevelopment and ineffective conservation that presently characterises the Tana Forests area. This suggests that only when outsiders relinquish their attempts to take what is not rightfully theirs will it be possible to move forward and achieve positive results for both conservation and human development.

Socially just, environmentally sustainable solutions to all the disputes discussed above are possible. But it is going to require significant political will and legal imagination to create, legislate and enact mechanisms that makes it possible for groups of people to share ‘pies’ (whether these be land, water, or eco-tourism opportunities) justly between those – and only between those – to whom each pie should belong. It will probably require a mechanism that works ideologically and materially outside of the capitalist regime of private property. It’s also going to require unilateral recognition that it is not possible to abscond with the whole pie unnoticed and unchallenged in a time of hunger.

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The Incalculable

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The most revolutionary aspect of the current wave of revolutions in the Middle East is the absence of traditional revolutionary politics. If the future is to be at all calculable, argues Faisal Devji, it is necessary to look beyond violence, militancy and all inherited forms of politics: the limits of these mechanisms have been exposed by the ‘Arab spring’.

While commentary on the Middle East’s season of revolts and revolutions constantly refers to their radically unforeseen character, the analyses proffered don’t cease gesturing towards precedents and models that might make them historically comprehensible. If it isn’t a regional history of Arab rebellion against authority that is invoked, then we are offered an international one having to do with anti-monarchism, anti-colonialism or anti-capitalism. And in all this our initial surprise at these extraordinary events is shunted aside as indicating nothing more than a deficit of knowledge about the societies and peoples involved in such uprisings. At most the previously unimaginable and therefore incalculable element in the Middle Eastern revolutions is reduced to a “spark” that, in the acts of a Tunisian suicide or his Egyptian and other mimics, ended up setting the region on fire.

However accurate the genealogies proffered by analysts to make sense of these revolts, surely their surprise was due not to a lack of knowledge but its irrelevance. For the events still unfolding before us in North Africa and elsewhere in the Middle East are revolutionary not in any conventional sense, involving political parties, ideologies and historical utopias, but precisely because they lack such traditional political forms. Indeed those most surprised by this revolutionary wave appear to have been the very people who made it possible. So if there is one sentiment that these men and women voice over and over again, it is wonder at their own transformation. Most revolutionary about these events, in other words, might be the sudden fearlessness that took the Middle East’s protestors aback. And such fearlessness, I want to suggest, may have something to do with the absence there of a revolutionary politics in its traditional sense.

Of course it is true that revolutions in other times and places have also been marked by a sense of wonder, but the meaning and possibilities of its surprise have rarely been examined. Instead commentary on the Left as much as the Right is dominated by the “logic” of history, whose narrative of precedents and genealogies makes events calculable after the fact. And yet this appeal to history often ends up denying the change that is its essence, as when analysts of one political hue see in the rebellions only another anti-imperialist movement, one that is opposed by imperialism in the form of coalition forces bombarding Libya. Isn’t this explanation similar in some ways to the avowedly unhistorical one that would make the movement entirely dependent on the West, whether in the form of democratic desire or social media? At least the latter explanation doesn’t make of today’s events merely the latest instance of a struggle that has been going on for some three centuries now.

The absent militant

In their still ambiguous and unformed reality, the region’s revolutions probably belong to a number of possible genealogies, of which one is surely provided...
by global Islam and its militant form in particular. In the wake of Arab nationalism and Marxism, after all, what other movement has possessed such a pan-Arab dimension? Add to this a decentralized and media-informed politics, though one with neither a party nor ideology to back it, and the comparison is complete. The Left in Europe and America has kept this comparison at bay, seeing it as being characteristic of a fear-mongering Right. But my point in drawing it is not to claim that militancy remains a possibility in these rebellions, but instead to demonstrate that it has been overcome. What else do the protestors’ imitations of sacrificial and even suicidal practices across the region signify if not the occupation and indeed conquest of militant forms?

Even the inability or unwillingness of Islamists to dominate protests wherever they occur in the Middle East may be attributed to global militancy more than to a resurgence of secularism. For not only has Al-Qaeda provided the revolutions with their individualistic modes of organization and dissemination, it had already displaced the centralized parties and ideologies of old-fashioned Islamism at the forefront of Muslim protest globally. But Al-Qaeda had ceased to represent a popular cause in the Middle East well before the Tunisian revolution, as indicated by the sudden loss of interest in militant web forums. This surprising decline caused some anxiety to Western intelligence agencies, which were interested in monitoring and tracking such discussion rather than shutting it down, and now we know where at least some of these energies were transferred. Having little if anything to do with the “success” of the War on Terror, this rapid transformation offers us yet another example of the incalculable in politics.

With almost all of Al-Qaeda’s “near enemies” in the Middle East toppled or threatened, militancy’s self-proclaimed task is in the process of being fulfilled by the region’s revolutions, and so the war against the “far enemies” of the West has become irrelevant for the moment. If anything these latter have to find themselves a new role and place in a Middle East they were incapable of remaking of their own accord. It is global militancy, then, that has contributed to the establishment of a post-Islamist Arab world, though in this respect as in so many others Iran led the way. Despite its temporary lack of success, the Green Movement of 2009 set the seal on Iran’s Islamic Revolution, which in its own day had initiated the Islamist moment in Middle Eastern history. Characterized by many of the same themes and practices as the Arab revolutions, the Green Movement nevertheless differed from its successors in being a post-revolutionary phenomenon, given Iran’s achievement in overthrowing the regime of a dictatorial Western ally in 1979.

Abandoned politics

The Green Movement’s post-revolutionary credentials were made evident in its ability to lay claim to the Islamic Revolution itself, having, after all, inherited the extraordinarily nonviolent forms of protest that had characterized its predecessor before the establishment of the Islamic Republic. And apart from Libya, where an opposition forced by a dictator into violence has made Western intervention possible, the revolutions of the Arab world have been marked by nonviolence. Interesting in this respect have been the many references not to any model provided by the West, but to the kind of civil disobedience represented by Gandhi, whose portrait can sometimes be seen borne aloft by crowds of demonstrators in places like Bahrain. The thing about nonviolence, of course, is that its practices cannot be confined to the institutional politics that characterizes parties and states, but always spills out to remake society at every level. And to my mind what is important about the nonviolence of these revolutions is not simply their tautological lack of violence, but instead the abandonment and transformation of politics itself.
appropriated its symbols. This was particularly the case in Egypt, with flags, anthems and slogans abundantly deployed by the protestors. But in the process these symbols of nation and state were also evacuated of their political content and joined up with explicitly civilian forms of celebration. Thus the sloganeering and revelry in Tahrir Square borrowed freely from the chants and other practices of football fans, including dancing and face painting. And indeed what could the old-fashioned words “people” or “revolution” mean in a post-Cold War global arena? The relatively superficial use made of such terms in the protests, then, might well suggest their attenuation as political categories. Such an interpretation becomes more convincing when we consider the remarkable forms of self-organization and indeed self-rule that suddenly emerged in the square after decades of centralized and oppressive government, none of which bore any similarity to traditional political forms.

By taking them over, the revolutions have in some ways given the old categories of Middle Eastern politics a new reality. So, for instance, the revolts imitating each other across the region have made Pan-Arabism into a popular reality for the first time, but only in a negative way, without any ideology to match. Even the solicitude for the nation displayed by Egyptians eager to do things like clean the streets of Cairo, absorbs such categories of the state into everyday practices and non-political forms. Similar
Popular uprisings in the Middle East over the last months have transformed the political landscapes and possibilities of the region’s diverse nations. The hope engendered by popular uprisings against long-term dictators has darkened as repression and violence has continued in the region. Uruguayan intellectual and journalist Raúl Zibechi gives us a South American perspective of the momentous changes taking place in North Africa.

Raúl Zibechi is one of the foremost political theorists writing on and working with social movements in Latin America. His work combines acute, generative and ethical analyses of socio-political developments in Latin America with collaborative efforts to support grassroots transformation in the region. He is international section editor of the acclaimed Uruguayan weekly Brecha, a lecturer and researcher with the Multiversidad Fransiscana de América Latina and a regular contributor to the Americas Policy Program and to La Jornada in Mexico. His recent books include Dispersing Power (2006, English translation 2010) and Territorios en Resistencia (2008). In order to contextualize the following interview with Zibechi in his wider body of work, our conversation begins, pauses midway and ends with selected translations from some of his essays previously available only in Spanish. The interview was conducted in July 2011 in Spanish.

As we seek to stimulate dialogue between analysts in Africa and in Latin America, we also offer a Spanish version of this article. Comments are most welcome and selected comments will be translated between languages.

**From “The Revolutions of Ordinary People”**

(First published in La Jornada on 3 June 2011. Translation of the entire article available [here](#).)

The inherited and still hegemonic conception of revolution must be revised, and in fact is being revised by current events. Revolution as exclusively focused on the capture of state power is being replaced by another concept of revolution, more complex and integral, which does not exclude a state-centered strategy but supersedes and goes beyond it. In any case, the conquest of state power is a bend in a far longer trajectory, one which seeks something that cannot be achieved from within state institutions: to create a new world.

Traditional politics – anchored in forms of representation that replace collective subjects with managerial professionals, professionals of deception – are of little use in the creation of a new world. Instead, a new world that is different from the current one implies rehearsing and experimenting with horizontal social relations, in sovereign, self-controlled and autonomous spaces, in which no one imposes on or directs the collective.

[To understand that spaces are] “spontaneous in a profound sense” … we must acknowledge that there is not one single instrumental and state-centered rationality. Rather, each subject has his or her own rationality, and we can all be subjects when we say “Enough already!” It is a matter, then, of understanding alternative rationalities, a process that can only take place from within and in movement, starting from the immanent logic emerging from the collective acts of subjects from below. It is thus not a matter of interpreting, but of participating.

Beyond their diverse circumstances, the Tahrir Square and Puerta del Sol movements in Cairo and in Madrid, form part of the genealogy of “All of them must go!” declared in the 2001 Argentinian revolt, the 2000 Cochabamba Water
War, the 2003 and 2005 Bolivian Gas Wars and the 2006 Oaxaca commune, to mention only the urban cases. These movements all share two characteristics: the curbing of those in power and the opening of spaces for direct democracy and collective participation without representatives.

These movements all share two characteristics: the curbing of those in power and the opening of spaces for direct democracy and collective participation without representatives.

Cristina Cielo: Is such a concept of revolution based on horizontal relations similar to Hardt and Negri’s concept of the multitude? What is the difference between their multitude and your idea of dispersed power?

Raúl Zibechi: Hardt and Negri’s multitude is linked to post-Fordism and to non-material work in cognitive capitalism. This mode of production is still in the minority in Latin America and I believe in the Arab world as well. So while it is interesting, their idea of multitude cannot be employed to understand what is happening here. My take on the collective is quite different. We live in societies that are “variegated”, an interesting concept developed by the Bolivian René Zavaleta Mercado to describe social relations in his country. These are societies in which many different types of traditional and modern social relations co-exist, as do formal and informal modes of work, ways of life, and a long etcetera, all of which assumes a superpositioning of links defined by competition, cooperation, reciprocity, solidarity.

The best example of this is the Andean market, or the urban market in the peripheries of cities like Buenos Aires. These are spaces in which many families live together in a small area, with various businesses that combine production and sales in different fields, with diverse modes of employment – familial, salaried, in kind, commissioned – that is, a “variegated” mode that implies diverse and complex social relations that are interwoven and combined. In this way, if one of these relationships is modified, the rest are as well ....

My proposal of “dispersing power” is rooted in communities in movement, non-formal communities, which, once set into motion, can disperse state power. How? Simply because they are composed of mobile powers, rotational, as as found in Andean Aymaran and Quechuan communities, as well as in Mayan and many other communities... There are, then, two issues. One is the internal power of communities, that in some cases may be more vertical; the other is how communities confront the State. They cannot confront it frontally, because they are annihilated. They surround it, embrace it, paralyze it, penetrate it subtly. That is what we saw in Tahrir when protesters slept under tanks, when women approached soldiers.

Cristina Cielo: The press has emphasized the role of women and of youth in the Arab mobilizations. Is this also a characteristic of Latin American mobilizations?

Raúl Zibechi: There has been a brutal destructuring of the family in Latin America. Families have broken up, mothers are left with children without fathers, because adult men are the hardest hit by neoliberal structural adjustments. In working-class neighborhoods, there are two generations of children without parents, children almost alone .... Sometimes mothers can barely cope with caring for their children, finding support only in grandmothers. It is very common to see families where the mother has five or six children, each by different and now absent fathers.

These mothers and their children are among the first to turn to urban mobilizations of the unemployed, because there they find a space of social safeguards, of support that is both material and affective. The youth also turn to mobilizations because they find in them a sense of belonging, they fit in, they are respected. The same reasons that families turn to pentecostal churches are often the same exact reasons that they might join popular mobilizations. What I mean is that there is a need .... The alternatives seem to be the church or the movements. I’ve read that in some Arab countries the mosque may play this role. The point is that among the poor and vulnerable, many are women and youth.

Cristina Cielo: Reports on Tunisia and Egypt’s uprisings emphasized the use of Facebook, Twitter and the internet as media for the horizontal organization of the protests. Your own work has focused on the territorial character of Latin American social movements. What are the implications of the differences between the virtual spaces of Arab mobilizations and the physical territories of the Latin American movements?

Raúl Zibechi: I don’t believe in virtual spaces, spaces are always material as well as symbolic. It’s another matter to speak of virtual media of communication among people in movement. Not knowing
the reality in the Middle East, I can tell you what I see in Latin America, and from that point perhaps some points of comparison can be established.

The territories of social movements are those spaces that were created by collectives, particularly in cities, but of course also in rural areas. Over the last 50 years, urban popular sectors have appropriated peripheral lands, they have collectively occupied it and built homes, schools and social and health centers. The main actors have been peasants emigrating to cities and the unemployed who lived in formal urban areas but left these areas once they lost their jobs and were unable to continue paying rent. It’s something like the urban “landless,” who have sometimes occupied urban land individually and other times have carried out collective settlements that involved violent conflicts with the police.

At this point, I would like to differentiate between spaces and territories. Spaces are, for example, the premises used by a union or a cultural association. Movements can meet in these spaces for long periods, and sometimes quite often, as do counter-cultural youth groups. These are spaces that are occupied for limited amounts of time, even though some call these territories as well. For me, territories are those places in which life is lived in an integral sense, they are settlements, as we say in Latin America. These have existed for a long time in rural areas: indigenous communities or settlements of Brazil’s Landless Movement, ancestral lands or other times have carried out collective settlements that involved violent conflicts with the police.

What was new in the 1970s onward was the proliferation of urban land occupations. In some cities, more that 70% of urban land, and therefore of households, are illegal yet legitimate occupations. In some cases, this marks the beginning of another type of social organization, in which semi-craftwork production – including urban gardens – is combined with popular markets and informal modes of distribution. In the decisive moments of struggles against the State or at times of profound crisis, these territories become “resistor territories,” that is, spaces that are in some senses liberated from state power and from which challenges to the system may be launched.

Cristina Cielo: What is the importance of urban spaces in popular mobilizations in both regions?

Raúl Zibechi: There is a double use of spaces. One is the daily spaces of the neighborhoods, the markets, all the spaces of daily socialization. The other is the space of protest, the mega-space such as Tahrir Square in Cairo or the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. These spaces are occupied for a time, sometimes for longer periods such as the Puerta del Sol in Madrid, but they are not permanent spaces in which people live their daily lives, because they have to go to work, go home to sleep, etc.

It seems to me necessary to make this distinction and at the same time to establish links between both kinds of urban spaces. I agree with James Scott’s point that people tend to “rehearse” their public actions in spaces that are distant from power, spaces that they can control and in which they feel secure. In contemporary cities, those spaces are the markets, the churches or mosques, social or cultural clubs, youth gangs. Sometimes universities or high schools can play those roles. It is important to understand what is happening in those spaces, because it is from there that people come out to take Tahrir Square. It is in those spaces that powerful rebellions are spun, that is why they are so important. And, of course, the family. The changes in family, the role of women, of children, the number of children, all of these are indications of what is to come. I don’t believe that great popular uprisings can take place without some shift in the role of patriarchy in the home.

**From “This is No Time to be Given to Distraction”**

(First published in *La Jornada*, 25 February 2011. Translation of the entire article available [here](#).)

With the Arab revolts, the global systemic crisis enters a new phase, more unpredictable and increasingly beyond control. Until now, the main actors have been the financial oligarchs, the powerful multinationals and the leading governments, particularly the United States and China, followed at some distance by institutions such as the G-20. Now, as popular sectors around the world – particularly the mobilized populace of the Middle East – enter the scene, a momentous shift has taken place. It implies a deepening and speeding up of the global transformations taking place ....

The activation of popular sectors modifies our analytic axes, and above all, imposes ethical choices. The scenarios of inter-state relations will increasingly collide with the scenarios of emancipatory struggles. Concretely: popular struggles for freedom may bring down governments and regimes that seemed poised against imperialism and the unipolar world headed by the United States and Western multinationals. When popular revolts
threaten governments that are friendly to the West, as in the case of Egypt, wide fronts against tyranny are formed by the most diverse lefts. But when those same revolts take aim at tyrannies that are more or less anti-US, that front is fractured and calculations of convenience emerge, as with Gaddafi’s regime.

We are entering into a period of systemic chaos that at some moment will shed light on a new order, perhaps better, perhaps worse than the capitalist order. This system was born with the demographic catastrophe of the Black Plague, which killed a third of the European population over the span of a few years. It will not surrender on tiptoes and with fine manners, but rather in the midst of chaos and barbarity, as with Gaddafi’s regime.

From “The Arab Revolts and Strategic Thinking”
(First published in América Latina en movimiento, 4 February 2011. Translation of the entire article available here.)

It is a matter of understanding the lines of force, the relations of power, the strong and weak points in international relations understood as a system. It is like understanding which bricks in a wall sustain the structure; if those bricks are removed or affected, the whole building – despite its appearance of stability – could tumble ....

To say we are traversing a systemic crisis, however, is not to say that the capitalist system is in a terminal crisis. The point, rather, is that the international system will not continue to function as it has since its last great re-structuring, which took place more or less in 1945, at the end of the Second World War. While systemic analyses do not pretend to specify exact dates for such profound changes, they do indicate stages characterized by important tendencies. For example: the crisis of U.S. hegemony. [Some of these systemic shifts include] not only the decline of U.S. power, but also the growth of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China, to which South Africa has now been added). Turkey’s geopolitical shifts have also been noted, as it has slowly abandoned Washington’s sphere of influence. But the Arab revolts constitute a pronounced turn of the screw.

Cristina Cielo: Why does the coverage and analyses of events in the Middle East portray these as ‘revolts’, ‘rebellions’ or ‘uprisings’ rather than as social movements, as popular mobilizations in Latin America tend to be portrayed?

Raúl Zibechi: Social movement is a Eurocentric concept that has been useful in describing what happens in homogeneous societies that revolve around the capitalist market, in which there is one basic form of social relations. In Latin America, the concept has and is used by academic intellectuals whose perspective is external to popular sector organization. If they were on the inside, they would see that in fact there are two societies: the official one, of the upper and middle-upper classes, and the other society, the informal one, of use values and of the popular sectors. When I say that there are two societies, I mean to say that each of these is shaped by different types of social relations, and as such, by diverse relationships of power. That is why when the alternative, popular society sets itself into action, it makes more sense to speak of societies in movement, or alternative societies in movement, rather than of social movements. The difference is critical.

In any case, I suspect that in the Arab case the international media has not spoken of social movements because of issues of racism, of colonialism, as if it takes some level of modernity – which they don’t consider the Middle Eastern people to have achieved.
– to have a so-called civil society, which is also a Eurocentric construction. I prefer to speak, along with Partha Chaterjee, of political society, because it is only by doing politics that it can exist.

Cristina Cielo: If socio-political transformations in both regions point to a global systemic crisis, how do particular events in one region influence the processes or possibilities in other regions? That is, are there ways in which such diverse and disperse forces can transform each other, or transform into something else?

Raúl Zibechi: Fundamental processes and situational junctures respond to different logics and views. There is no mechanical relation between the two, rather we must focus our attention on the longer processes, and insert events into those, as Braudel taught us. The fundamental tendency is: a crisis of the center-periphery relationship, a crisis of U.S. domination and of the unipolar world, and now, also, a crisis in Western hegemony. In this transition, which has been taking place over the last four decades, we must insert current processes.

What I mean to say is that the Arab and Latin American revolts disrupt previous equilibriums, or rather said, they accelerate the processes of the crises of older structures.

From “Everything Solid Melts into the Street” (First published in América Latina en movimiento, 15 February 2011. Translation of the entire article available here.)

The people in the street are a spanner in the works in the accumulation of capital, which is why one of the first “measures” taken by the military after Mubarak left was to demand that citizens abandon the street and return to work. But if those in power cannot co-exist with the streets and occupied squares, those of us below – who have learned to topple Pharaohs – have not yet learned how to jam the flows and movements of capital. Something much more complex is needed than blocking tanks or dispersing anti-riot police. In contrast to state apparatuses, capital flows without territory, so it is impossible to pin down and confront. Still further: it traverses us, it models our bodies and behaviors, it is part of our everyday lives and, as Foucault pointed out, it shares our beds and our dreams. Although there is an outside to the State and its institutions, it is difficult to imagine an outside to capital. Neither barricades nor revolts will suffice to fight it.

Despite these limitations, the hunger revolts that became anti-authoritarian revolts are a depth charge to the most important equilibriums of the world system. These will not remain unscathed by the destabilization in the Middle East. The progressive Israeli press was right in noting that what is least needed in the region is some kind of stability. In Gideon Levy’s words, reported in Haaretz on 10 February 2011, “stability encompasses millions of Arabs living under criminal regimes and evil tyrannies .... Maintaining Middle East stability means perpetuating the intolerable situation by which some 2.5 million Palestinians exist without any rights under the heel of Israeli rule”....

the hunger revolts that became anti-authoritarian revolts are a depth charge to the most important equilibriums of the world system

We are entering into a period of uncertainty and increasing disorder. In South America, the emergent power of Brazil has assembled a regional architecture as an alternative to the one that has begun to collapse. The Union of South American Nations is a good indicator of this. Everything suggests, however, that things will be far more complicated in the Middle East, given the enormously political and social polarization in the region, the ferocious interstate competition and because both the United States and Israel believe that their future depends on sustaining realities that can in fact no longer be propped up.
The Middle East brings together some of the most brutal contradictions of the contemporary world. Firstly, there are determined efforts to sustain an outdated unilateralism. Secondly, it is the region where the principal tendency of the contemporary world is most visible: the brutal concentration of power and wealth. Never before in the history of humanity has just one nation, the United States, expended as much in military spending as the rest of the world combined. And it is in the Middle East where that armed power exercises its supreme force to buttress the world-system. What’s more: a small state of some seven million inhabitants has twice as many nuclear weapons as China, the second world power.

The Arab revolts may open a fissure in the colossal concentration of power that has been manifest in the region since the Second World War. Only time will tell if what is brewing is a tsunami so powerful that not even the Pentagon will be able to surf its waves. But we mustn’t forget that tsunamis make no distinctions: they sweep up rights and lefts, the just and the sinners, the rebels and the conservatives. Nevertheless, they are in many ways similar to revolutions: they leave nothing in their place and they provoke enormous suffering before things return to some kind of normalcy, better perhaps than before, or maybe just less bad.

For the complete texts in English of Raúl Zibechi’s essays that are extracted above, go to:

- The Revolutions of the Ordinary People
- This is No Time to be Given to Distraction
- The Arab Revolts and Strategic Thinking
- Everything Solid Melts into the Street
Los levantamientos populares en el Medio Oriente estos últimos meses han transformado la panorama y las posibilidades políticas de las diversas naciones de la región. La esperanza engendrada por las movilizaciones exitosas en contra a dictaduras prolongadas se ha ensombreado por la violencia y represión que sigue teniendo lugar en la región. El escritor y analista uruguayo Raúl Zibechi nos da una perspectiva latinoamericana de los cambios transcendentes que atraviesa el Norte de África.

Raúl Zibechi es uno de los más importantes teóricos políticos escribiendo sobre y trabajando con movimientos sociales en América Latina. Su trabajo combina análisis perspicaces, innovadores y éticos de acontecimientos políticos en América Latina con colaboraciones para apoyar en la transformación de la región desde abajo. Es editor de la sección internacinal del destacado semanal uruguayo Brecha, docente e investigador de la Multiversidad Franciscana de América Latina y contribuidor al Americas Policy Program y el La Jornada de México. Sus libros incluyen Dispersar el Poder (2006) y Territorios en Resistencia (2008), entre otros. Para contextualizar esta entrevista en su obra y en los conceptos que ha ido desarrollando, mi conversación con él empieza, pausa a mitad del camino y acaba con selecciones de algunos de sus ensayos ya publicados.

Con la meta de fomentar diálogo entre analistas en África y en América Latina, también publicamos una versión de este artículo en inglés. Se invitan comentarios y se traducirán algunos comentarios entre ambos idiomas.

De “Las revoluciones de la gente común”
Primero publicado en La Jornada, 03 junio 2011.

El concepto heredado y hegemónico aún de revolución debe ser revisado, y lo está siendo en los hechos. Frente a una idea de revolución centrada exclusivamente en la conquista del poder estatal, aparece otra más compleja pero sobre todo más integral, que no excluye la estrategia estatal pero que la supera y desborda. En todo caso, la cuestión de conquistar el timón estatal es un recodo en un camino mucho más largo que busca algo que no puede hacerse desde las instituciones estatales: crear un mundo nuevo.

Para crear un mundo nuevo, lo que menos sirve es la política tradicional, anclada en la figura de la representación que consiste en suplantar sujetos colectivos por profesionales de la administración, y del engaño. Por un contrario, el mundo nuevo y diferente al actual supone ensayar y experimentar relaciones sociales horizontales, en espacios autocontrolados y autónomos, soberanos, donde nadie impone y manda el colectivo.

el mundo nuevo y diferente al actual... donde nadie impone y manda el colectivo.

[Para entender estos espacios como] “espon-táneas en el sentido profundo” ... hay que aceptar que no hay una racionalidad, instrumental y estadocéntrica, sino que cada sujeto tiene su racionalidad, y que todos y todas podemos ser sujetos cuando decimos Ya Basta. Se trata, entonces, de comprender las racionalidades otras, cuestión que sólo puede hacerse desde adentro y en movimiento, a partir de la lógica inmanente que develan los actos colectivos de los sujetos del abajo. Eso indica que no se trata de interpretar sino de participar.

Por encima de las diversas coyunturas en que surgieron, los movimientos de la Plaza Tahrir en El Cairo y de la Puerta del Sol en Madrid, forman parte de la misma genealogía del “que se vayan todos” de la revuelta argentina de 2001, de la guerra del agua de Cochabamba en 2000, de las dos guerras del gas bolivianas en 2003 y 2005 y de la comuna de Oaxaca de 2006, por mencionar sólo los casos urbanos. Lo común son básicamente dos hechos: poner un freno a los de arriba
y hacerlo abriendo espacios de democracia directa y participación colectiva sin representantes.

la comunidad en movimiento... tiene la capacidad de dispersar el poder estatal... lo rodea, lo abraza, lo paraliza, lo penetra sutilmente.

**Cristina Cielo**: ¿Es esta concepción de revolución de relaciones horizontales parecida al concepto de la multitud de Hardt y Negri? Cuáles son las diferencias entre esa multitud y tu concepto de la “dispersión de poder”?

**Raúl Zibechi**: La multitud de Hardt y Negri está ligada al posfordismo y al trabajo inmaterial en el capitalismo cognitivo. Creo que ese modo de producción y de vida es aún muy minoritario en América Latina y creo también que lo es en el mundo árabe. De modo que, aún siendo interesante, no creo que se pueda utilizar para comprender lo que está sucediendo entre nosotros. Mi idea de multitud es otra. Vivimos en sociedades “abigarradas”, un concepto muy interesante creado por el boliviano René Zavaleta Mercado, para describir las relaciones sociales en su país. Se trata de sociedades donde conviven varios tipos de relaciones sociales, tradicionales y modernas, de modos de trabajo, formales e informales, de modos de vida, y un largo etcétera que suponen una superposición de vínculos de competencia, cooperación, reciprocidad, solidaridad.

El mejor ejemplo es el mercado andino, o el mercado urbano de ciudades como la periferia de Buenos Aires. Espacios en los cuales en una pequeña superficie conviven varias familias, con varios negocios que combinan producción y venta en rubros diferentes, con modos de empleo diversos, familiares, por salario, por especies, a destajo, en fin, un modo “abigarrado” que quiere decir relaciones sociales diversas y complejas entremezcladas y combinadas. Pero de tal modo, que una de ellas se modifica el resto son afectadas....

Mi propuesta de “dispersar el poder” está anclada en la comunidad en movimiento, una comunidad no formal, que cuando se pone en marcha tiene la capacidad de dispersar el poder estatal. Por qué? Sencillamente porque están conformada por poderes móviles, rotativos, como las comunidades andinas aymaras y quechuas, pero también en las mayas y muchas otras.... Ahí hay dos temas. Cómo es el poder interno en la comunidad, que supongo que en otras partes puede ser más vertical, y cómo se enfrenta cualquier comunidad con el Estado. No lo puede hacer de modo frontal, porque es aniquilada. Lo rodea, lo abraza, lo paraliza, lo penetra sutilmente, y es lo que vimos en Tahrir cuando se ponían a dormir debajo de los tanques, cuando las mujeres se acercaban a los soldados.

**Cristina Cielo**: ¿La prensa ha destacado el rol de las mujeres y los jóvenes en las movilizaciones árabes. Es esto una característica de las movilizaciones latinoamericanos también?

**Raúl Zibechi**: En América Latina tenemos una brutal desestructuración familiar. Las familias se han roto, quedan las madres con sus hijos y una ausencia de padres, porque los varones adultos son los más golpeados por la reestructuración neoliberal. En los barrios populares tenemos dos generaciones de hijos sin padres, hijos casi solos, aunque a veces los padres están en las casas no se ocupan de ellos, hay una enorme desmoralización que ha llevado a que esos chicos estén en las calles todo el día y ahí suelen vincularse con las redes delincuenciales. Las madres a veces no dan abasto para atender a sus hijos con apoyo sólo de las abuelas. Es muy común ver familias donde la madre tiene cinco o seis hijos, cada uno de hombres diferentes que se fueron.

Esas mujeres con sus hijos suelen ser las primeras en acudir a los movimientos urbanos de desocupados porque allí encuentran un espacio de contención, de apoyo no sólo material sino afectivo. Los chicos también, suelen ir a los movimientos porque les dan un sentido de pertenencia, se sienten a gusto, son respetados. Pero esas mismas familias también acuden a las iglesias pentecostales exactamente por las mismas razones que pueden acudir a un movimiento. Lo que quiero decir es que hay una necesidad... He leído que en algunos países árabes ese papel lo puede jugar la mezquita. Lo importante es que entre los más pobres, la mayoría son mujeres y niños.

**Cristina Cielo**: ¿También se ha hecho hincapié en el uso de Facebook, Twitter y el internet como medios para la organización horizontal de las protestas. Muchos de tu trabajo se enfoca en el carácter territorial de movimientos en América Latina. Que implican las diferencias entre los espacios virtuales de las movilizaciones árabes y los territorios físicos de los movimientos latinoamericanos?

**Raúl Zibechi**: No creo en los espacios virtuales, los espacios son siempre físicos, materiales además de simbólicos. Otra cosa es lo virtual como comunicación o mejor inter-comunicación entre la gente en movimiento. [Como] no conozco la realidad árabe, sólo puedo decir lo que veo en América Latina y a
partir de ahí tal vez se puedan establecer semejanzas.

Los territorios de los movimientos son aquellos espacios creados por los colectivos sobre todo en las ciudades pero por supuesto también en el campo. En nuestras ciudades, en los últimos 50 años los sectores populares han tomado tierras, las han ocupado colectivamente y han construido viviendas, centros sociales, educativos y de salud. Los actores han sido campesinos que emigraron a las ciudades y desocupados que vivían en la trama urbana formal y debieron dejarla porque no podían pagar los alquileres al quedar desocupados. Se trata de algo así como “sin tierra” urbanos, que en ocasiones han ocupado tierras urbanas de modo individual y en otros han hecho invasiones colectivas enfrentando grandes conflictos con la policía.

En este punto quiero diferenciar entre espacio y territorio. Espacio es por ejemplo el local de un sindicato o de una asociación cultural. Allí los movimientos se reúnen durante unas horas, a veces de forma muy seguida como los grupos juveniles contra-culturales. Son espacios donde se está un tiempo breve, aunque algunos le llaman territorios también. Para mí los territorios son aquellos lugares donde se hace la vida de modo integral, son asentamientos de los Sin Tierra de Brasil. Tierras ancestrales o tierras recuperadas en la lucha. Es lo mismo.

La novedad de los años 70 en adelante es cómo se generalizan las ocupaciones de tierras urbanas. En algunas ciudades más del 70% de la tierra urbana, y por lo tanto de la vivienda, son ocupaciones ilegales pero legítimas. En algunos casos, es el comienzo de otra organización social, donde se combina producción semi artesanal, a veces incluso huertas urbanas, con mercados populares y formas informales de distribución. En los momentos álgidos de la lucha contra el Estado o de profundas crisis, estos territorios se convierten en “territorios en resistencia”, o sea espacios que se lanzan desafíos profundos al sistema.

Cristina Cielo: ¿ Que importancia tienen los espacios urbanos en las movilizaciones populares en las dos regiones?

Raúl Zibechi: Hay un doble uso de los espacios. Uno son los espacios cotidianos en los barrios, los mercados y todos aquellos espacios de socialización diaria. El otro es el espacio de la protesta, el megaespacio como la Plaza Tahrir en El Cairo o la Plaza de Mayo en Buenos Aires. Estos espacios se ocupan por un tiempo, a veces largo como en la Puerta del Sol de Madrid, pero no son espacios permanentes donde la gente haga su vida cotidiana porque tienen que irse a trabajar, a sus casas a dormir, etc.

Me parece necesario hacer esa distinción y a la vez establecer vínculos entre ambos espacios urbanos. Coincido con James Scott en que los de abajo suelen “ensayar” sus acciones púbicas en espacios alejados del poder, espacios que pueden controlar y donde se sienten seguros. En las ciudades actuales esos espacios son los mercados, las iglesias o mezquitas, los clubes sociales o culturales, las pandillas juveniles... A veces ese papel lo juegan las universidades o los colegios secundarios. Me parece que lo importante es detectar lo que sucede allí, porque es desde esos espacios que se sale a tomar la plaza Tahrir. Allí se tejen las grandes rebeliones, por eso le damos tanta importancia. Y, por supuesto, la familia. Los caminos en la familia, el papel de las mujeres, de los niños, el número de hijos, son todos indicadores de lo que está por venir. No creo que pueda haber grandes rebeliones populares sin antes haber desbordado el papel del patriarca en el hogar.

De “No es el momento de hacernos los distraídos”

Primero publicado en La Jornada, 25 febrero 2011.

Con las revueltas árabes la crisis sistémica global ingresa en una nueva fase, más imprevisible y cada vez más fuera de control. Hasta ahora los principales actores venían siendo las oligarquías financieras y las grandes multinacionales, los principales gobiernos, en particular los de Estados Unidos y China, y, bastante más atrás, algunas instituciones como el G-20. Ahora se ha producido un gran viraje con el ingreso en escena de los sectores populares de todo el mundo, encabezados por los pueblos árabes, lo que supone la profundización y aceleración de los cambios en curso....

La activación de los sectores populares modifica los ejes analíticos y, sobre todo, impone elecciones éticas. El escenario de las relaciones interestatales chocará cada vez más con el escenario de las luchas emancipatorias. En concreto: las luchas populares por la libertad pueden destituir gobiernos y regímenes que parecían jugar en contra del imperialismo y del mundo unipolar encauzado por Estados Unidos y las multinacionales occidentales. Mientras las revueltas de los de abajo amenazan gobiernos favorables al Occidente, como sucedió en Egipto, suelen formarse frentes
muy amplios contra la tiranía donde destacan las más diversas izquierdas. Pero cuando esas mismas revueltas enfilan contra tiranos más o menos anti-estadounidenses, ese frente se fractura y aparecen los cálculos de conveniencias. Es el caso de Libia.

Estamos ingresando en un periodo de caos sistémico que en algún momento alumbrará un nuevo orden, quizá mejor, quizá peor que el capitalista. Este sistema nació vinculado a una catástrofe demográfica como la peste negra, que mató un tercio de la población europea en un par de años. No va sucumbir en puntas de pie y con fines modales, sino en medio del caos y la barbarie, como el régimen de Kadaﬁ.

De “La revuelta árabe y el pensamiento estratégico”

Primero publicado en America Latina en movimiento, 4 febrero 2011.

Se trata de comprender las líneas de fuerza, las relaciones de poder, los puntos fuertes y débiles de las relaciones internacionales entendidas como un sistema. Algo así como detectar qué ladrillos del muro son los que sostienen la estructura, de modo que si son retirados o se ven afectados puede venirse abajo toda la construcción, por más sólida que sea en apariencia....

Sin embargo, cuando se insiste en que estamos atravesando una crisis sistémica no debe entenderse, como suele suceder muchas veces, de que es el sistema capitalista el que está en crisis terminal. Lo que se pretende enfatizar es que el sistema internacional tal y como venía funcionando desde su última gran reestructuración – punto que podemos fijar en 1945 al finalizar la Segunda Guerra Mundial – no seguirá existiendo durante mucho tiempo. Los análisis sistémicos no suelen precisar fechas exactas para que los cambios sucedan, sino apenas indicar que se ha ingresado en una etapa signada por algunas tendencias de fondo. Por ejemplo: la crisis de la hegemonía estadounidense... Además del declive del poder de los Estados Unidos, se ha enfatizado en el crecimiento del BRIC (Brasil, Rusia, India y China, a la que ahora se suma Sudáfrica). También se ha detectado el viraje de Turquía, país que viene abandonando la esfera de influencia de Washington. Sin embargo, la revuelta árabe es un giro de tuerca pronunciado.

Cristina Cielo: ¿Por qué piensas que la prensa y los análisis de los eventos en el Medio Oriente no han descrito a las revueltas árabes como “movimientos sociales”, mientras movilizaciones latinoamericanas parecen apropiarse de la etiqueta rápidamente?

Raúl Zibechi: Movimiento social es un concepto eurocéntrico que ha sido útil para describir lo que sucede en una sociedad homogénea, centrada en el mercado capitalista y donde sólo hay un tipo de relaciones sociales. En América Latina el concepto es y ha sido usado por intelectuales académicos que no conocen desde dentro lo que sucede en los sectores populares. Si están allí, verás que en realidad hay dos sociedades: la oficial, la de las clases altas y medias altas, la del empleo formal y los valores de cambio, y la otra sociedad, la informal, la de los valores de uso, la de los sectores populares. O sea, cuando digo que hay dos sociedades, quiero decir que cada una de ellas está formada por relaciones sociales diferentes, y por lo tanto por relaciones de poder diversas. Por eso digo que cuando la sociedad otra se pone en acción, es mejor hablar de sociedades en movimiento, o si prefieres de sociedades otras en movimiento. La diferencia aquí es fundamental.

De todos modos, sospecho que los medios no han hablado de movimientos sociales en el caso árabe por una cuestión de racismo, de colonialismo, como...
si pensaran que no son lo suficientemente modernos como para poder tener lo que ellos llaman sociedad civil, que es también una construcción eurocéntrica. Prefiero hablar, con Partha Chatterjee, de sociedad política, porque sólo haciendo política puede existir.

Cristina Cielo: ¿Si las transformaciones recientes en ambas regiones apuntan a una crisis sistémica global, cómo afectan eventos en una región a procesos o posibilidades en otras partes del mundo? Es decir, hay maneras en que fuerzas dispersas y tan diversas pueden transformarse uno al otro o articularse en algo otro?

Raúl Zibechi: Los procesos de fondo y las coyunturas responden a lógicas y miradas diferentes. No hay una relación mecánica entre ellas, pero el punto donde hay que focalizar la atención es en los procesos largos, y allí encajar los hechos, como nos enseñó Braudel. La tendencia de fondo es: crisis de la relación centro-periferia, crisis de la dominación estadounidense y del mundo unipolar, y ahora también crisis de la hegemonía occidental. En esa transición, que ya lleva cuatro décadas, debemos insertar los procesos actuales.

Lo que digo es que las revueltas árabes y latinoamericanas rompen los equilibrios anteriores, o mejor, aceleran los procesos de crisis de las viejas estructuras.

De “Todo lo sólido se desvanece en la calle”


La gente en la calle es el palo en la rueda de la acumulación de capital, por eso una de las primeras “medidas” que tomaron los militares luego de que Mubarak se retirara a descansar, fue exigir a la población que abandonara la calle y retornara al trabajo. Si los de arriba no pueden convivir con la calle y las plazas ocupadas, los de abajo que hemos aprendido a derribar faraones, no aprendimos aún cómo trabar los flujos, los movimientos del capital. Algo mucho más complejo que bloquear tanques o dispersar policías antimotines, porque a diferencia de los aparatos estatales el capital fluye desterritorializado, siendo imposible darle caza. Más aún: nos atraviesa, modela nuestros cuerpos y comportamientos, se mete en nuestra vida cotidiana y, como señaló Foucault, comparte nuestras camas y sueños. Aunque existe un afuera del Estado y sus instituciones, es difícil imaginar un afuera del capital. Para combatirlo no son suficientes ni las barricadas ni las revueltas.

Pese a estas limitaciones, las revueltas del hambre devenidas en revueltas antidictatoriales son cargas de profundidad en los equilibrios más importantes del sistema-mundo, que no podrá atravesar indemne la desestabilización que se vive en Medio Oriente. La prensa de izquierda israelí acertó al señalar que lo que menos necesita la región es algún tipo de estabilidad. En palabras de Gideon Levy, “estabilidad es que millones de árabes, entre ellos dos millones y medio de palestinos, vivan sin derechos o bajo regímenes criminales y terroríficas tiranías” (Haaretz, 10 de febrero de 2011)...
el empeño en sostener un unilateralismo trasnochado. Segundo, es la región donde más visible resulta la principal tendencia del mundo actual: la brutal concentración de poder y de riqueza. Nunca antes en la historia de la humanidad un solo país (Estados Unidos) gastó tanto en armas como el resto del mundo junto. Y es en Medio Oriente donde ese poder armado viene ejerciendo toda su potencia para apuntalar el sistema-mundo. Más: un pequeñísimo Estado de apenas siete millones de habitantes tiene el doble de armas nucleares que China, la segunda potencia mundial.

Es posible que la revuelta árabe abra una grieta en la descomunal concentración de poder que exhibe esa región desde el final de la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Sólo el tiempo dirá si se está cocinando un tsunami tan potente que ni el Pentágono será capaz de surfear sobre sus olas. No debemos olvidar, empero, que los tsunamis no hacen distinciones: arrastran derechas e izquierdas, justos y pecadores, rebeldes y conservadores. Es, no obstante, lo más parecido a una revolución: no deja nada en su lugar y provoca enormes sufrimientos antes de que las cosas vuelvan a algún tipo de normalidad que puede ser mejor o menos mala.
EVERYTHING SOLID MELTS INTO THE STREET

Raúl Zibechi
(Translated by Cristina Cielo.)

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The hunger riots that have shaken the Arab world are only the first waves in the great social tsunami engendered among the poorest peoples of the planet. The phenomenal increase in the price of foods (corn 58%, wheat 62%, over the course of a year) is the fuse that sparks the eruptions. These are fueled, however, by the brutal financial speculation that is again focusing on raw materials. Some prices top the highest spikes in 2008, and the World Bank and the IMF are incapable of putting the brakes on speculation on food commodities, that is, on life.

Two points about the Arab revolts call our attention: the speed with which the hunger riots turned into political revolts; and the fear of the dominant elite which over the last decades only responded to social and political problems with internal security and repressive measures. The former speaks to a new politicization of the poor in the Middle East; the latter, to the difficulties that those in power have in dealing with that politicization. The system is showing only too well that it can co-exist with any state authority, even the most “radical” or “anti-systemic.” But it cannot tolerate people on the street, revolts, permanent rebellions. The people in the street are a spanner in the works in the accumulation of capital, which is why one of the first “measures” taken by the military after Mubarak left was to demand that citizens abandon the street and return to work.

But if those in power cannot co-exist with the streets and occupied squares, those of us below – who have learned to topple Pharaohs – have not yet learned how to jam the flows and movements of capital. Something much more complex is needed than blocking tanks or dispersing anti-riot police. In contrast to state apparatuses, capital flows without territory, so it is impossible to pin down and confront. Still further: it traverses us, it models our bodies and behaviors, it is part of our everyday lives and, as Foucault pointed out, it shares our beds and our dreams. Although there is an outside to the State and its institutions, it is difficult to imagine an outside to capital. Neither barricades nor revolts will suffice to fight it.

Despite these limitations, the hunger revolts that became anti-authoritarian revolts are a depth charge to the most important equilibriums of the world system. These will not remain unscathed by the destabilization in the Middle East. The progressive Israeli press was right in noting that what is least needed in the region is some kind of stability. In Gideon Levy’s words, “stability encompasses millions of Arabs living under criminal regimes and evil tyrannies .... Maintaining Middle East stability means perpetuating the intolerable situation by which some 2.5 million Palestinians exist without any rights under the heel of Israeli rule” (*Haaretz*, 10 February 2011).

When millions of people take the streets, everything is possible. As tends to happen with earthquakes, first the heaviest and most poorly built structures fall, that is, the oldest and least legitimate regimes. But once the first tremor has passed, fractures begin to appear, cracked walls and overburdened beams can no longer hold up the structures. Violent upheavals are followed by gradual but more profound changes. We saw something of that in South America between the Venezuelan Caracazo in 1989 and Bolivia’s second Gas War in 2005. Over the years, the powers that shored up the neoliberal model were forced to abandon governments; a new relation of forces was established in the region.

We are entering into a period of uncertainty and increasing disorder. In South America, the emergent power of Brazil has assembled a regional architecture as an alternative to the collapsing order. The Translator’s note: The Caracazo was a wave of violent protests in Venezuela against pro-market reforms imposed by the government, and the Gas Wars were mass mobilizations protesting Bolivian government support of multinational exploitation of natural gas resources. Both sets of protests eventually led to the deposing of neoliberal governments.

We are entering into a period of uncertainty and increasing disorder. In South America, the emergent power of Brazil has assembled a regional architecture as an alternative to the collapsing order. The
Union of South American Nations is a good indicator of this. Everything suggests, however, that things will be far more complicated in the Middle East, given the enormous political and social polarization in the region, the ferocious interstate competition and because both the United States and Israel believe that their future depends on sustaining realities that can in fact no longer be propped up.

The Middle East brings together some of the most brutal contradictions of the contemporary world. Firstly, there are the determined efforts to sustain an outdated unilateralism. Secondly, it is the region where the principal tendency of the contemporary world is most visible: the brutal concentration of power and wealth. Never before in the history of humanity has just one nation, the United States, expended as much in military spending as the rest of the world combined. And it is in the Middle East where that armed power exercises its supreme force to buttress the world-system. What’s more: a small state of some seven million inhabitants has twice as many nuclear weapons as China, the second world power.

The Arab revolts may open a fissure in the colossal concentration of power that has been manifest in the region since the Second World War. Only time will tell if what is brewing is a tsunami so powerful that not even the Pentagon will be able to surf its waves. But we mustn’t forget that tsunamis make no distinctions: they sweep up rights and lefts, the just and the sinners, the rebels and the conservatives. Nevertheless, they are in many ways similar to revolutions: they leave nothing in their place and they provoke enormous suffering before things return to some kind of normalcy, better perhaps than before, or maybe just less bad.
THIS IS NO TIME TO BE GIVEN TO DISTRACTION

Raúl Zibechi
(Translated by Cristina Cielo.)

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With the Arab revolts, the global systemic crisis enters a new phase, more unpredictable and increasingly beyond control. Until now, the main actors have been the financial oligarchs, the powerful multinationals and the leading governments, particularly the United States and China, followed at some distance by institutions such as the G-20. Now, as popular sectors around the world – particularly the mobilized populace of the Middle East – enter the scene, a momentous shift has taken place. It implies a deepening and speeding up of the global transformations taking place.

The first peals heralding these changes resounded with the Greek youth revolts in December 2008. Financial capital’s attempted escape from inevitable depreciation through food commodities speculation has worsened the precarious situation of millions of people around the world. It is thus no surprise that the Arab world has erupted, but we know perfectly well that something similar can take place in any other part of the world, as testified by the occupation of the Wisconsin state capitol, in the United States. The question is not what will happen, but rather, where the “many-headed hydra” – title of one of the best analyses of history from below – will once more emerge.

The growing dismantling of the system will raze many governments and even some states, whether they be conservative, progressive or of any hue they paint themselves. We are entering into a stage of generalised chaos, with a blurring of the old borders between left and right, between center and periphery and even of hegemonic ideologies.

The activation of popular sectors modifies our analytic axes, and above all, imposes ethical choices. The scenarios of inter-state relations will increasingly collide with the scenarios of emancipatory struggles. Concretely: popular struggles for freedom may bring down governments and regimes that seemed poised against imperialism and the unipolar world headed by the United States and Western multinationals. When popular revolts threaten governments that are friendly to the West, as in the case of Egypt, wide fronts against tyranny are formed by the most diverse lefts. But when those same revolts take aim at tyrannies that are more or less anti-US, that front is fractured and calculations of convenience emerge. Such is the case with Libya.

We Latin Americans can yet learn from the Arab revolts. The people’s struggles for their freedom are sacred for anyone of the left, if that still means anything. In this respect, there is no space for speculations or calculations. Leave that to Berlusconi, worried as he is about Italian investments in Libya and the assumed arrival of thousands of refugees to Mediterranean Europe. It is true that some have fallen as low as the Roman child abuser, but in fact we shouldn’t have expected much more from Daniel Ortega.

Precipitated by the Arab revolts, those of us who strive for fundamental changes in the world system and in our immediate realities must urgently debate three themes. The first is the most painful for those of us shaped by the 1960s struggles. That is, we must look at ourselves in the mirror and refuse to be given to distraction. The heroic struggles of the last half century find their counterpart in the terrible events that we too often sweep under the rug. Roque Dalton is no exception. The murderer Muammar Gaddafi was once an ally of the anti-imperialist camp, and for some, he still is. No one is free from sins, but we must all look terror in the face. The author of these lines was once a fervent supporter of the Chinese cultural revolution, with little regard for the enormous damage it was causing ordinary people.

We should think about what it was at the time that led us to not care to see, to not want to hear or understand the pain of the people sacrificed on the altar of revolution. It is no use shielding ourselves behind “we didn’t know”; that is the same response that Germans gave when asked about their passivity under Nazism.

The second issue involves understanding that we are now faced with something different; this is not a simple repetition of the known. The rupture of the system is the beginning of a chaotic period in which our certainties and learnings will be put to test. The fall of the system will affect us all, and the rubble will also fall on our own heads. In “Marx and Underdevelopment,” Immanuel Wallerstein reminds us that “a controlled and organized transition tends to imply certain continuity of exploitation.” And he tells us that “we must lose our fear of a transition that looks like collapse, like disintegration,
which is indeed uncontrolled and in some ways even anarchic, but not necessarily disastrous.”

We are entering into a period of systemic chaos that at some moment will shed light on a new order, perhaps better, perhaps worse than the capitalist order. This system was born with the demographic catastrophe of the Black Plague, which killed a third of the European population over the span of a few years. It will not surrender on tiptoes and with fine manners, but rather in the midst of chaos and barbarity, as with Gaddafi’s regime.

The third point is that we are forced to make profound ethical choices that will shape our lives. There is no way other than to proceed unconditionally by the side of the oppressed, because they are the ones who most need a new world. Now that they are constituting themselves as actors in this systemic crisis, we must accompany them without directing them,
The first North African rebellions in Tunisia and Egypt, and the later ones that have swelled up in other countries of the region, point to a systemic change in international relations. This change can be summed up as the dismantling of the role of the United States, and its allies, in the Middle East.

In June 2008, the European Laboratory of Political Anticipation (LEAP) warned in its monthly bulletin that “pro-Western Arab regimes [had gone] adrift” and that there was a “60 percent risk of socio-political explosion on the Morocco-Egypt axis”. The analysis emphasized the consequences of the “systemic global crisis” for these regimes, which included imminent hunger riots. The report also highlighted “the inability of Washington and its European allies to answer [to the Middle Eastern situation] by anything other than securitarian stances.”

Focusing on Egypt, the LEAP registered an increase in instability due to “the political deadlock created by the end of Mubarak’s reign combined with the regime’s incapacity to address the economic and social expectations of a growing part of the population.” The conclusion by the European center for strategic analysis is noteworthy in light of recent events: “According to our analysts, Egypt will be politically hit by the outcome of the plunge into the heart of the global systemic crisis. Social instability will be stronger than the securitarian nature of the regime.”

Strategy vs. guesswork

Such anticipatory conclusions are not reached haphazardly. Strictly speaking, the process is neither a matter of guesswork nor of prediction, because the future is not foreseeable. The issue is more complex. It is a matter of understanding the lines of force, the relations of power, the strong and weak points in international relations understood as a system. It is like understanding which bricks in a wall are those that sustain the structure, if those bricks are removed or affected, the whole building - despite its appearance of stability – could tumble ...

To say we are traversing a systemic crisis, however, is not to say that the capitalist system is in a terminal crisis. The point, rather, is that the international system will not continue to function as it has since its last great re-structuring, which took place about 1945, at the end of the Second World War. While systemic analyses do not pretend to specify exact dates for such profound changes, they do indicate stages characterized by important tendencies. For example: the crisis of U.S. hegemony. This is characterized by the fact that the United States can no longer draw the map of the world at its whim, as it has done over the last five or six decades. But the power of the United States will not disappear. It will surely continue to be a global power, yet now in a multipolar world. In a similar way, when 2008 is pinpointed as the year in which the shift began, during George W. Bush’s term of office, this is a matter of approximate dates, symbolic dates that simply indicate turning points.
Egypt as a turning point

In the last two years, the Uruguayan weekly *Brecha* has registered some of these systemic shifts, exploring not only the decline of U.S. power, but also the growth of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China, to which South Africa has now been added). Turkey’s geopolitical shifts have also been noted, as it has slowly abandoned Washington’s sphere of influence. But the Arab revolts constitute a pronounced turn of the screw.

In the case of Egypt, as the journalist Hossam el-Hamalawy noted, what is most astonishing is that the country did not erupt sooner. “Revolt has been in the air for the last few years,” he said in an interview broadcast by Al Jazeera on January 27. No uprising falls from the sky. El-Hamalawy explained that in 2008 there were two “mini-intifadas” in Tunisia. In Egypt, the epicenter of the strong union movements that organized strikes was the textile industry in the city of Mahalla, on the Nile Delta. As a consequence of that wave of strikes, two independent unions were formed: tax collectors, with 40,000 members, and health workers, with 30,000.

The first long-term change to note is the “degree of courage of the people” who have lost their fear, who have become protagonists. It will not be easy to shut them back into their houses. That the uprisings did not happen before this year was because the region’s regimes used the war against terrorism to inhibit dissent.

The second shift is that the United States is quickly losing its most important allies in the region. It lost Turkey, then Tunisia, and now Egypt, the country that receives the most U.S. aid after Israel. If we agree with Immanuel Wallerstein that we are living the second Arab revolution (the first was in 1916, for independence from the Ottoman Empire), Washington is the big loser. The big winner is Iran. As curious as it may seem, the U.S. Defeat of Sadam Hussein gave Tehran a central Middle East role, since the Iraqi leader was “Iran’s fiercest and most effective enemy.”

The White House has been unable to advocate political alternatives to the region’s dictatorial regimes, beyond Barack Obama’s famous speech in Cairo on June 4, 2009. In a moment of historical irony, that speech was entitled “A new beginning.” Hillary Clinton has limited herself to making a few generic calls for peace and democracy and asking for an orderly transition with no vacuum of power. Without its crutch of Egypt’s truly clientelistic regime, created and sustained by political and military aid, the weight of the United States in the Middle East will diminish.

But not only does Washington lose in the region. The influence of the West as a whole, and particularly the European Union, which receives its oil through the Suez Canal, will disappear into the crowded Arab streets and plazas.

Finally, all eyes look to Turkey. Distanced from both Washington and Tel Aviv, yet not quite aligned with Iran, it is setting itself up as both a pivot point and an example to follow. Ankara will provide an almost inescapable source of inspiration for the future governors of Cairo, as the axes of the region’s new and precarious equilibrium find themselves increasingly distanced from those countries that were until now loyal allies of the ex-superpower.
THE REVOLUTIONS BY ORDINARY PEOPLE

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In the most diverse corners of the planet, ordinary people are coming out onto the streets, occupying plazas, meeting up with other ordinary people who they did not know but who they immediately recognize. None of them waited to be convened, they were driven by the need to discover themselves. They do not calculate the consequences of their acts, they act based on what they feel, desire and dream. We find ourselves faced with real revolutions, profound changes and paradigmatic shifts, even if those in power believe that all will return to “normal” once the plazas and streets are cleared.

I find no better way of explaining current events than with a memorable text by Giovanni Arrighi, Terence Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein, “1968: The great rehearsal,” a chapter in their 1999 book Antisystemic Movements. This dense text, inspired in Braudel’s long-term and profound perspective, begins with an unusual statement: “There have only been two world revolutions. One took place in 1848. The second took place in 1968. Both were historical failures. Both transformed the world.”

According to these world-system analysts, these two revolutions’ failures and their ability to transform the world were due to the fact that they were both unplanned and spontaneous “in the profound sense of the word.” They go further: 1848 and 1968 were more important dates than 1789 and 1917, the dates of the French and the Russian Revolutions. The latter were superseded by the former.

The inherited and still hegemonic conception of revolution must be revised, and in fact is being revised by current events. Revolution as exclusively focused on the capture of state power is being replaced by another concept of revolution, more complex and integral, which does not exclude a state-centered strategy but supersedes and goes beyond it. In any case, the conquest of state power is a bend in a far longer trajectory, one which seeks something that cannot be achieved from within state institutions: to create a new world.

Traditional politics – anchored in representation that replaces collective subjects with managerial professionals, professionals of deception – is of little use in the creation of a new world. On the contrary, a new world that is different from the current one implies rehearsing and experimenting with horizontal social relations, in sovereign, self-controlled and autonomous spaces, in which no one imposes on or directs the collective.

The key phrase of the quote above is “spontaneous in a profound sense.” How do we interpret that phrase? At this point, we must acknowledge that there is not a single instrumental and state-centered rationality. Rather, each subject has his or her own rationality, and we can all be subjects when we say “Enough already!” It is a matter, then, of understanding alternative rationalities, a process that can only take place from within and in movements, starting from the immanent logic revealed by the collective acts of subjects from below. It is thus not a matter of interpreting, but of participating.

Beyond their diverse circumstances, the Tahrir Square and the Puerta del Sol movements in Cairo and in Madrid, form part of the genealogy of “All of them must go!” declared in the 2001 Argentinean revolt, the 2000 Cochabamba Water War, the 2003 and 2005 Bolivian Gas Wars and the 2006 Oaxaca commune, to mention only the urban cases. These movements all share two characteristics: the curbing of those in power and the opening of spaces for direct democracy and collective participation without representatives.

This strategy of two phases, rejection and creation, goes beyond the traditional and hegemonic political culture of leftist and trade union movements, which only partially contemplate the first phase through self-controlled protests with precise and delimited objectives. That political culture has revealed its limits. It is not even able to fulfill the first objective of rejecting existing power structures; as it limits itself to institutional channels, it can only
prepare the ground for a change of the guard without a change of politics. That political culture has successfully and skillfully displaced the conservative right but has failed at the moment of transforming the world.

The revolutions underway are estuaries in which rivers and streams of rebellions, having covered much ground, now converge. Some of these drink from the waters of 1968, but they are far more profound and dense. Rebellions that come from afar, from the mountains above, that flow into other sometimes minuscule rivulets. These will all one day mix their waters in a torrent in which no one will ask each other where they’re from, what colors and identity signs they carry.

These revolutions are the visible moment, important but not foundational, of a long and subterranean path. The image of the mole is apt: one day it leaps up and shows itself, but it has covered a long way underground to arrive. Without that trajectory, it does not see that light of day. That long route is made up of the hundreds of small initiatives that were born in spaces of resistance, small laboratories (such as those that existed since the ends of the 1990s in Lavapies, Madrid), where life is lived as it is willed, and not as others want us to live.

Great events are preceded and prepared for, they are rehearsed, as James Scott says, by collective practices that take place far from the attention of the media and political professionals. They take place in spaces made safe and protected by peers. Now that those thousands of micro experiences have converged in these currents of life, it is time to celebrate and smile, despite the inevitable repressions to come. Above all, when dark days of the iron fist return, let us not forget that it is those arduous and solitary experiences, isolated and frequently unsuccessful, that lay the groundwork for luminous times. The ones with the others transform the world.
Challenges Of Urban Growth In Africa

In November 2010 UN Habitat, the Nairobi-based agency that monitors the world’s built environment, published a report on *The State of African Cities 2010: Governance, Inequality and Urban Land Markets*. In this detailed and substantial report, it is noted that there will be three times as many people living in Africa’s cities by 2050. The transformation of a rural population into a predominantly urban one is neither good nor bad on its own, says UN Habitat. Still it implores African countries to plan their cities better, to avoid the development of mega-slums and vast areas of deprivation across the continent, for living conditions in African cities are now the most unequal in the world. The pattern remains that of “oceans of poverty containing islands of wealth”, states the UN Habitat report.

Whatever the value of the figures presented by UN Habitat, it is clear that the speed of growth of some cities on the African continent indeed “defies belief”, as the report states. Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the city upon which I will focus here, is one of the fastest growing urban conglomerations on the African continent today. This megalopolis “that does not respond to reason” and in which “everything that cannot exist flourishes”, as the Angolan author José Eduardo Agualusa remarks in his latest novel *Barroco Tropical*, this urban giant, which others have described as the quintessential postcolonial African city and one of the most drastic urban environments of the world, is the fastest-growing African city in absolute terms, with 4 million extra people expected in the next ten years, a 46% increase of its 2010 population of 8.7 million.

This means that the city of Kinshasa is not only facing the huge responsibility of ameliorating the already very poor living conditions of its urban residents, but also implies that it has to develop a new policy to stop or prevent the further spread and growth of the already substantial slum areas in and around the city, which today extends 100 kms west, south and east of its original center.

That task will necessitate a big effort from all layers of government – from the municipalities, the governor of Kinshasa, the various provincial ministries, the national government to the presidency itself – to arrive at a strategic urban planning which takes the needs of the poor – the vast majority of this city – into account, without discarding them.

How can and should a city such as Kinshasa – with a yearly municipal budget under US$ 23 million, barely enough to cover its administrative salaries, with more people living on a daily income not exceeding 1 US$ than anywhere else in the world, and with 75% of its population under the age of 25 – cope with such growth? How should a country such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, which, in spite of recent and ongoing attempts at administrative reform, is often viewed as a case example of a ‘failed’ state, respond to such an enormous challenge?

During the campaign leading up to the 2006 presidential elections, Presidet Kabila announced his ‘Cinq Chantiers’ program, his Five Public Works. The concept summarizes Kabila’s efforts to modernize education, health care, road infrastructure, access to electricity, and housing accommodation in
DR Congo. In 2010, the year in which Congo celebrated the 50th anniversary of its independence from Belgian colonial rule, and a year before the next presidential elections, the ‘chantiers’ were geared into a different speed, especially in the country’s urban agglomerations, and in Kinshasa in particular. For the first time, perhaps, since the ‘Plan décennal pour le développement économique et social du Congo’, the 10 year program which the Belgian colonial administration put into practice between 1949 and 1959, there is an encompassing project on a national scale which, even if it is not a fully fledged Marshall Plan to secure the country’s future, seems to present something of an attempt towards an overarching governmental plan or programme to respond to the nation’s most pressing and urgent needs, or at least that of its elites, specifically with regard to its urbanisation.

In what follows, I will analyse the impact of the ‘5 chantiers’ program and the ocular and spectral politics underlying the Congolese government’s plans for the future expansion of Kinshasa by introducing two concrete cases: a first case focuses on the expansion of fields in the Malebo Pool, exemplifying the current modes of ‘informal’ urban expansion and random occupation of space in the city. The second case deals with the development of a new urban project, the Cité du Fleuve.

The juxtaposition between the two cases reveals the tensions which, I argue, constantly exist between the reality as lived by millions of urban dwellers in Kinshasa today, and the official vision of Kinshasa’s urban future which political leaders and urban planners seem to share. As Edgar Pieterse has recently noted, the existential core of urbanism is the desire for radical change, but this radical impulse often stands in sharp contrast to the necessary prudence which characterises a more incremental change that often seems to be lacking in today’s African urban centers. It is the profound hiatus between the official urge towards radical urban planning and reform, and the on-the-ground practices of everyday urban life and survival that produces some of the worst violence and insecurity which urban dwellers have to face and cope with in their daily struggle for survival in the urban context.

The history of the Democratic Republic of Congo has, of course, been marked by blatant political violence, produced by a sometimes harsh colonial regime, as well as by a violent decolonization process (1960-1965), thirty years of ruinous reign under Mobutu (1965-1997), a long and painful political transition against the backdrop of violent warfare which involved many of Congo’s neighbours (1998-2003), and a slow and fragile process of democratization and state reform after the 2006 presidential elections. In recent years Kinshasa received its share of that violence: it lived through two massive and violent waves of looting in 1991 and 1993; it was briefly drawn into the war in Brazzaville, on the other side of the Congo river, in 1996 and 1997; it was invaded by the former Rwandan allies of Kabila sr. in August 1998; and it saw some of its worst violence in the period immediately prior to the 2006 elections, when two presidential candidates, Jean-Pierre Bemba and current president Kabila, openly engaged in armed clashes in the streets of Kinshasa, leaving hundreds of people dead. Yet, one might argue that, in spite of this recent violent history, Kinshasa was spared the worst.

Given its importance and size, its poor administration, its lack of insertion into a formal economy, its insufficient policing, its extremely young population, and the growing insecurity in many parts of the city due in part to the failing material infrastructure which leaves large areas without running water or electricity for weeks or even months, Kinshasa nevertheless consists of a chaotic but relatively peaceful social environment in which overt physical violence has remained the exception rather than the rule. Its production of violence lies elsewhere: violence is much more covert, and it is often produced in the folds of the city, the shadow zones or grey areas
existing between the practical level of its everyday existence and the official discourses and practices of its administrative and legal frameworks which are supposed to regulate, sanitize, control and discipline life in this unruly city. Often, it is in this gap that the city’s insecurity, but also its possibilities, are located.

Colonial urban planning and the subsequent random occupation of urban space

Born out of a trading post at what is now known as the Malebo Pool (formerly Stanley Pool) along the Congo River in the late 19th century, Léopoldville rapidly grew into what essentially was a segregationist, Janus-faced city with a white heart, La Ville, the home of the city’s European population, and a surrounding, quickly growing peripheral African city, commonly referred to as La Cité, home to an increasing number of Congolese. The African cités of Léopoldville were in part the result of a large-scale housing scheme launched by the Belgian colonial administration, a plan marked by the modernist ideals that were also en vogue in Belgium at the time. Between 1949 and 1959, thousands of houses were thus built by Belgian urban planners and architects, in an impressive effort to respond to the demographic explosion of the city and the increasing social unrest this engendered after World War Two.

To some extent the division between La Ville on the one hand, and a growing number of townships on the other, continues to mark Kinshasa’s landscape today. In the past the two areas were not only separate from each other along racial lines, they were also physically set apart by railway tracks, strategically placed army barracks (such as the notorious Camp Militaire Lt. Col. Kokolo) and other zones tampons, empty no man’s lands which spatially drew a divisive line between these various living areas. These zones of separation were also responsible for the fact that the city became spatially scattered. Even today, in the historical heart of Kinshasa many of these empty pockets of land have not yet fully densified in terms of housing and construction.

After 1960 the number of cités increased drastically. Existing cités further densified and expanded, and others were added. Some of these post-1960s expansions had been planned by the Belgian colonial administration, but many others were added onto the existing urban core in a rather unplanned and chaotic fashion. Today, the city continues to spread incessantly in a western and southern direction towards the Lower Congo, and eastwards, way beyond Ndjili, Kinshasa’s national airport, towards the foot of Mangengenge Mountain, the eastern gateway to the city.

It is in these increasingly numerous urban areas that the city’s inhabitants, giving little or no credence to the claims of official urban planning and related matters of the map, have started to re-territorialize and reclaim the urban space, develop their own primal and provisional forms of urbanism, and infuse the city with their own praxis, values, moralities and temporal dynamics. In the fifty years of the post-independence period this process, which started in pockets of autonomous life at Kinshasa’s margins, has engulfed the city as a whole, marking a move away from the physical and mental ‘place’ of colonialism (its spatial layout, its work ethos, its time-management and its language, French). Unhindered by any kind of formal industrialisation or economic development, the city has bypassed, redefined or smashed the colonial logics that were stamped onto its surface. It has done so spatially, in terms of its architectural and urban development, as well as in terms of its socio-cultural and economic imprint.

A striking example of this dynamic is provided by the transformation that the Malebo Pool is currently undergoing. Over the past twenty years the inhabitants of the neighbourhoods along the Congo River have converted large parts of the Pool into arable land. They were inspired by the example of the Koreans, who started to develop rice paddies in the Malebo Pool in the 1980s. When the Koreans abandoned these rice fields in the 1990s, the local population took over, and further expanded the farmland into the river, often with very basic tools or even with their own bare hands. By now, in certain areas
such as the mouth of the river Tshangu near the Ndjili airport, the empoldered area is already reaching 10 kms into the Malebo Pool. In this way more than 800 out of the 6000 hectares that make up the Malebo Pool have already been transformed from water into arable land.

Over the years, the official authorities, from the National Ministry of Agriculture down to the municipal level, have made half-hearted attempts to impose a legal framework to direct, control and, above all, tax these new farming activities on previously non-existent land. In theory, the state administration has the right to allocate the land to farmers. The latter are supposed to make a payment to the land registry office of the province of Kinshasa, before being able to obtain various authorisations from different government agencies, ministries and municipalities. After this long and tedious process, a farmer then acquires the right to use the land for as long as he wants, on the condition that he can prove it is continuously cultivated. The municipality is supposed to send an inspector to check on this once a year.

In practice, however, none of these regulations and procedures is applied in any straightforward way. The inspector has never come, and since none of this land is on any official map, the authorities often don’t even know which land should be paid for. In reality this huge new garden belt is organised outside any clearly defined form of government control on the ground. The factual ‘ownership’ of these gardens is, therefore, in the hands of some 80 farmers’ associations. These have divided the riverine farmlands into a number of sectors which in turn are subdivided into a varying number of ‘blocks’, each consisting of hundreds of tiny garden plots that rarely surpass 2 to 6 acres. A sectorial president (officially representing the level of the municipality but in reality acting quite independently), aided by a number of ‘chefs de bloc’, oversee the farming activities of over 1000 farmers. They also organise the trade with the thousands of women who each day buy up the gardens’ produce and ensure the vegetables’ distribution over a large part of the city’s numerous markets.

In this way Kinshasa’s inhabitants not only continue to connect with the city’s and river’s long-standing (precolonial) market and trading history, they also remind us of the fact that the city has not only looked into the mirror of colonialist modernity to design itself, but that it has always contained a second mirror as well. This second mirror is provided by the rural hinterland, Kinshasa’s natural backdrop, which does not only form the city’s periphery, and feed the peripheral city, but which has also deeply penetrated the city, spatially, economically, socially (in terms of the ethnic make-up of large parts of Kinshasa), and above all, culturally and psychologically. Rather than pushing the rural out, Kinshasa’s urban identity has constantly been invaded and formed by, blending with and depending on rural lifestyles, mentalities, moralities and modes of survival.

The small-scale modes of action that punctuate rural living – often reformulated yet continuing within the urban context – provide Kinshasa’s inhabitants with urban strategies of survival. These – often unsteady, provisional and constantly shifting – possibilities and action schemes are perhaps not the only ones available to Kinshasa’s residents to give form to the making and remaking of associational life in the city (think also of the mobilizing force of Neo-Pentecostalism, for example), but as a lever for the conceptualisation of collective action in the urban configuration it is impossible to underestimate their importance. It is in local zones and domains such as the one described above, with its myriad activities and its complex web of ‘informal’
economies that have spun themselves around the river and Kinshasa as a whole, that the city illustrates its own production, and generates the possibility of economic survival and of social life in the urban context. 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 whomever generates, grabs and uses it. Of course, this occupation is always accompanied by (the threat of) expulsion. The whole of the city is caught in a waxing and waning movement between capturing and letting go, invading and retreating, seizure and expulsion. Since the urban residents of Kinshasa 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 becomes a form of property in and of itself. Life in the city often takes on the aspect of a semi-nomadic journey generated in the temporality of the moment.

Here the city reveals itself ... as the outcome of a randomly produced and occupied living space that belongs to whomever generates, grabs and uses it.

Plans are one thing, journeys another. That is also why such random occupation of urban space almost always engenders new conflicts. Again, the riverine fields provide a good example. The creation of new arable land in the Malebo Pool has led to innumerable and sometimes violent clashes concerning ownership and land rights over this previously non-existent land. On one level, these conflicts are mainly played out between the farmers’ associations and the Teke and Humbu chefs de terre, Kinshasa’s original landowners. The latter have sustained their livelihood since the late 19th century by selling plots of ancestral land to the city and its inhabitants. At the beginning of the 21st century, however, they are running out of land to sell. That is the reason why they turned to these newly available plots of land, claiming ownership over them. Backed by some government officials, but without the farmers’ consent, they started to sell large stretches of this new farmland to individuals and families, who, in turn, started to destroy the gardens to convert them into shanty areas. Hundreds of new ‘landowners’ constructed their shacks in what essentially is a very unhealthy swamp area that does not exist on any official map of the city, lacks even the most basic infrastructure in terms of water, electricity and sanitation, and is totally unfit for habitation.

What complicates matters is that the farmers, the land chiefs and the owners of the newly constructed houses are each backed by various administrative and judicial instances on the municipal and the provincial level. This has created a highly explosive situation leading to ongoing violent clashes between the various parties involved. In one instance, in early 2010, the bodyguards of a local traditional Teke chief, backed by some army officials, attacked a provincial minister while the latter visited a disputed site with some policemen and ordered the destruction of infrastructure on what he considered illegally occupied farmland.

Yet, in spite of such conflicting interests, and the uncertainties and constant renegotiations these clashes entail, it is this organic approach to the production of the city and its spaces that enables Kinois (residents of Kinshasa) to survive at all. In many respects, Kinshasa’s cités are conceived around architectures that remain almost invisible, and 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 rather because that
infrastructure is not there, or only exists through its paucity. 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 accommodation. Although these infrastructures might have originated as the product of a careful engineering of urban space, they no longer function along these lines today. Constantly banalized and reduced to its most basic function, that of a shelter, the built form is generated by a more real, living city which exists as a heterogeneous urban conglomeration through the bodies, movements, practices and discourses of urban dwellers. This embodied praxis of urban life is embedded in, as well as produces, the entanglement of a wide variety of rhizomatic trajectories, relations and mirroring realities. All of these enjoin, merge, include, fracture, fragment and re-order the urban space. They create, define, and transform new sites of transportation, new configurations of interlaced spatialities, new regimes of knowledge and power, new public spaces of work and relaxation, and new itineraries which often pursue inversions upon other urbanites’ journeys but which, almost invariably, also engender new clusters of relations and social interactions. And the more there are opportunities to short-circuit any dependence on (unstable) infrastructures and technology, and to bypass the intricate questions of maintenance, ownership and so on, the better all of these actions and transactions seem to work.

Of course, this level of urban functioning outside of the official frameworks of formal urban planning is characterised by precariousness and hardship, and defined by necessity. Therefore, it is often far from an ideal way to live. But yet, at least to a certain extent, it also seems to be efficient and to work for many. It generates a specific agency in a specific urban experience. It also generates the capacity or the possibility to become a willful actor in these urban networks. And it is efficient because it allows urbanites to be local producers and controllers of infrastructure and technology, rather than local consumers of technology imported from elsewhere. It transforms city dwellers from passive victims into active participants with their own social, economic, political and religious agendas, which are often situated far beyond the level of mere survival. Concretely, it offers them a considerable freedom to capture the sudden possibilities opened up by unexpected occasions that are generated by the synergies and frictions of urban life. These energies constantly force the urban dweller to master the tricky skills of improvisation. Kinshasa’s inhabitants seem to be very good at doing exactly that: at being flexible, at opening up to the ‘unexpected’ that often reveals itself outside the known pathways that constitute urban life as most in the Global North know it. Urban residents of cityscapes such as Kinshasa are highly skilled at discovering itineraries beyond the obvious, and at exploiting more invisible paths and possibilities that lay hidden in the folds of urban domains and experiences. Often, these urban residents (and apart from a wealthy but small elite that includes almost everyone in Kinshasa, a city without a well-developed middle-class) have trained themselves to tap into this imbroglio, and to exploit to the full the possibilities these juxtapositions offer. They are constantly busy designing new ways to escape from the economic impositions and excesses that urban life imposes on them. They often know where to look and what to look for in order to generate feasibility within what is seemingly unfeasible.

“Oceans Of Poverty, Islands Of Wealth”? The New Governmental Politics Of Erasure And Of Spectral Urbanisation

All of this stands in sharp contrast to the official planning of the city that the urban authorities and the Congolese government have recently committed themselves to after decades of disinterest and laissez faire. For some years now, a successive series of city governors has been engaged in ‘cleaning up’ the city. This cleansing basically boils down to a hard-handed politics of erasure, destroying ‘irregular’, ‘anarchic’ and unruly housing constructions, bulldozing bars and terraces considered to be too close to the roadside, and banning containers, which Kinois commonly convert into little shops, from the street. The same is happening to the small street ‘restaurants’ known as malewa (which provide many women, and therefore whole families, with an income), as well as many other informal structures and infrastructures allowing urban dwellers to survive in the volatile economy of the street. The urban authorities not only started to wage a war against these ‘illegal’ structures and activities but also against the very bodies of those who perform or embody them. Amongst those who first fell victim to the state’s effort to ‘sanitize’ and recolonise the city, rewrite the city’s public spaces, redefine who has a right to the street and to the city, were Kinshasa’s street children.
and youth gangs, commonly referred to as bashege, pomba and kuluna.

The word kuluna derives from the Lingala verb kolona, which means: to plant, to sow, to cultivate. The verb is, of course, itself a derivative of the French coloniser, while also referring to the military term colonne. Kuluna originated with urban youngsters from all over Southwest Congo who would walk all the way to the diamond fields of the Angolan province of Lunda Norte in order to try their luck there and return with diamonds or dollars: a very common practice in the early 1990s, and to a lesser extent, still today. Walking the small trails through the forests of northern Angola they would follow each other and form a line, like a military cohort, while penetrating and ‘colonising’ new and unknown territory. In the same way these youth gangs re-territorialize the city.

In an attempt to stamp a new material and moral scale onto the city’s surface, the urban authorities started to organise operations such as Kanga Vagabonds (‘Grab the Vagabonds,’ an operation reported by Belgian anthropologist Kristien Geenen), in order to expulse street children and kuluna from the city’s public eye. But this urban policy went much further than purifying the streets of unruly kids, or prostitutes. What it envisaged was a much more outspoken attempt at redefining what a ‘proper’ city means today. Inspired by Kabila’s “Cinq Chantiers” program, downtown Kinshasa (la Ville) is currently undergoing a quite radical face-lift under the guidance of Chinese engineers, Indian or Pakistani architects, and real estate firms from Dubai, Zambia or the Emirates. Along the main boulevards and major traffic arteries all trees have been cut down and adjacent gardens and fields destroyed, while the roads and boulevards themselves were widened to become eight lane highways leading right into the heart of the city. Some landmark buildings have been embellished or restored, while others have made way for new construction sites on an unprecedented scale. Plans also exist, so the city’s rumour mill has it, to build a new viaduct connecting an upgraded Ndjili International airport with La Ville (and more precisely with its Grand Hotel, one of the two international hotels of downtown Kinshasa). The viaduct will follow the Congo River, and run over and above the heads of the hundreds of thousands of impoverished inhabitants of the densely populated municipality of Masina, thereby relegating them to new urban folds and shadow zones out of sight of those who have a right to the new city.

Today, also, almost every main street and boulevard of Kinshasa is covered with huge billboards in a sustained politics of ‘visibilité’ for the 5 chantiers policy. The boards announce the emergence of this new city and offering the spectral, and often spectacular though highly speculative and still very volatile, vision of Congo’s reinsertion into the global oecumene. The advertisements promise to bring ‘modernisation’ and ‘un nouveau niveau de vie à Kin’ (a new standard of life to Kinshasa). Apart from the classic infrastructural works (bridges, roads and street lights for example), the billboards also show representations of soon-to-be-constructed conference centres, five star hotels, and skyscrapers with
names such as ‘Modern Paradise’, ‘Crown Tower’ or ‘Riverview Towers’. Many advertisements sport a portrait of President Kabila alongside the statement that Congo will soon be ‘the mirror of Africa’. Kinshasa, in other words, is again looking into the mirror of modernity to fashion itself, but this time the mirror no longer reflects the earlier versions of Belgian colonialist modernity, but instead it longs to capture the aura of Dubai and other hot spots of the new urban Global South.

At the same time, the billboards powerfully reveal the tensions and disjunctures between these mirages and images of the new city and the histories and temporalities of the lives currently lived in Kinshasa by most.

The most striking billboard of all is to be found near the Beach, Kinshasa’s main port. Today, however, the Beach has become an industrial wasteland. The riverbank itself is hidden from view by boats that have all sunk and no longer offer possible lines of flight; instead cadavers of boats, in every possible shade of rust eaten brown, just lie there stranded, immobilized, stuck in the mud and entangled by floating carpets of water hyacinths. It is this very same setting that was chosen by a real estate firm that calls itself ‘Modern Construction’ to erect a new conference centre. On a huge billboard, a poster again shows a photo of a smiling Kabila. On his left and right, one beholds a computer animated picture revealing the new international conference centre, which will be built in the form of...a giant cruiser, complete with a rooftop terrace and restaurant. This building, Kabila seems to tell the Kinois, is the ultimate metaphor for the new Kinshasa and the new Congo. It offers the nation a new start and promises a prosperous voyage en route to global modernity. Even if, rather cynically, the name given to the building by the project developers is ‘Modern Titanic’, the image of the ship setting sail towards a new future for Kinshasa is powerfully seductive. Although there is no doubt in anyone’s mind that the odds against the Titanic not sinking are overwhelming, and although many urban residents in Kinshasa know that they will never have a right to this new city, the hope which this naval image engenders, the hope for a better future, for new and more advantageous ways to cruise through life and navigate the city, simply proves to be irresistible. Even those who count themselves amongst the President’s political adversaries cannot help but exclaim: ‘If only this were true’, or ‘And what if it would be for real this time?’ Although utopias usually remain locked within the realm of pure speculation and material impossibility, Kabila’s ‘chantiers’ seem to have awakened new hopes, seem to have rekindled a dormant capacity to ‘believe’ and to dream against all odds: ‘C’est beau quand-même, ça fait rêver!’ people exclaim, ‘It is so beautiful that it makes one dream.’

But nowhere does the speculum of neoliberal global modernity conjure up the onerice more
spectacularly (and nowhere does it reveal its exclusionist logics more strongly) than in another construction project, which, as the developer’s website states, ‘began as a dream in 2008’ and is currently underway: the Cité du Fleuve. This is the name given to an exclusive development to be situated on two artificially created islands. These will be reclaimed from sandbanks and swamp in the Congo River, and will partly overlap with the riverine agricultural area described above, forcing its current occupants to leave. The Main Island, the larger of the two, will offer mixed commercial, retail and residential properties, while North Island, the smaller of the two, will be reserved strictly for private homes and villas. The two islands will be connected to Kinshasa by means of two bridges. The Cité du Fleuve is supposed to relocate the entire Kinshasa downtown area of Gombe. According to the current plans it will span almost 400 hectares, include 200 residential houses, 10.000 apartments, 10.000 offices, 2000 shops, 15 diplomatic missions, 3 hotels, 2 churches, 3 day care centers, a shopping mall and a university. The Main Island, the larger of the two, will offer mixed commercial, retail and residential properties, while North Island, the smaller of the two, will be reserved strictly for private homes and villas. The two islands will be connected to Kinshasa by means of two bridges.

According to the developers’ website, La Cité du Fleuve will provide ‘a standard of living unparalleled in Kinshasa and will be a model for the rest of Africa’ and, so the website’s comments continue, ‘La Cité du Fleuve will showcase the new era of African economic development.’ In reality, once more, most people currently living in the city will never be able to set foot on the two islands. If all goes according to plan, the Cité du Fleuve will probably be accorded the administrative status of a new municipality, and will be subject to its own special bylaws. Thus operated as a huge gated community, the Cité du Fleuve will inevitably redefine what is centre and what is edge in Kinshasa. The Cité du Fleuve echoes many of the ideas behind concepts such as the ‘charter city’, that is, a special urban reform zone which would allow governments of developing countries to adopt new systems of rules and establish cities that can drive economic progress in the rest of the country. But at the same time, it also replicates the segregationist model of Ville and Cité that proved so highly effective during the Belgian colonial period. It is clear that the islands will become the new Ville while the rest of Kinshasa, with its nine million inhabitants, will be redefined in terms of their periphery. In this way the new city map will redraw the geographies of inclusion and exclusion in radical ways, and relegate its current residents to the city’s edges. In total disregard, also, of any of the farmers’ and land chiefs’ current claims over the land they themselves created. In this respect, the developer’s website states: “One of the many factors that make La Cité du Fleuve unique in Kinshasa is that no land titles have existed on this property before (as it will be build on artificial land, where until now was only water on the Congo River. When you buy land at La Cité du Fleuve, you can rest assured that there are no possible claims on your property.” As noted before, the emergence of the new city drastically changes the content and scale of what is deemed to be proper urban existence, and is going hand in hand with a destruction of the small-scale networked agencies and coping mechanisms that currently allow the majority of Kinois to survive in the city.

Undoubtedly, this re-urbanization process regularizes Kinshasa and ends its ‘exceptionalism’ in
the sense that Kin’s dynamics of urban growth has started, at last, to resemble that of other world cities in the Global South such as Dubai, Mumbai, Rio or the urban conglomerations of Southern China. Simultaneously, however, Kinshasa will also join the shadow-side of that global process of urbanisation, a side revealing itself in an increasing *favela*-isation and an ever more difficult access and right to the city for many of its current inhabitants. Here, the spectral dimension of the marvellous inevitably combines with the dimensions of terror and the dismal. The nightmarish side of these new spectral topographies forms the tain, the back of the mirror which constantly reflects the occulted ‘underneath of things’, to use Marianne Ferme’s phrase, accompanying this process of ocular urbanisation, and bringing it back to the surface and into the daily life experience of the Kinois.

**In Need Of A Near Future?**

It remains unclear whether the government seems to believe that these images of the new polis will emerge in any lasting way, otherwise why would a developer have chosen cynically to refer to his initiative as a ‘Titanic’? And the Kinois themselves are not easily fooled either: they know very well from past experiences not to trust or believe in the official discourses or the outcome of government policies. And yet, it is the very same impossible mirror that somehow also unites Kinshasa’s residents and its leaders. They do not only share the same longing for a better city, but, remarkably, they often also share the same dream of what that city should look like. Upon my asking the farmers who are in danger of being relocated due to the *Cité du Fleuve* development whether they were well aware of what awaited them, they stated: “Yes, we’ll be the victims, but still it will be beautiful.” In other words: even though the governmental management of the urban site generates new topographies of inclusion and exclusion, of propinquity and distance, and of haves and have nots, and even if this dream of a new future for the city simultaneously generates very tangible forms of ever more pronounced segregation, even then, those who will not be granted access to the new ‘Mirror of Africa’ revel as much in this dream of the modern city as the ruling elites. Both echo a far more widespread longing for the right of inclusion in global society.

What this tells us is that Congo is very capable of imagining new spaces of hope and better urban worlds in a (distant) future, but that its vision is often shaped by a desire for a radical tabula rasa, a desire that is shared by all but simultaneously engenders a total denial of the urban reality as lived by most today. The current lack of a clear trajectory or pathway, a bridge to straddle the divide between the here/now of actual city life and the there/then of urban utopia, will no doubt necessitate the construction of a new kind of temporality, of the kind that Jane Guyer recently referred to as a ‘near future’. The implementation of such a closer temporal horizon might serve to hyphenate between reality and dream, and thereby enable the drawing of a road-map that would lead the city forward through slow incremental transformation rather than through the sweeping gestures of radical change.
Why Zanzibar Reeks

Elizabeth Godfrey
(South Luangwa, Zambia)

You can look away, but you can’t ignore the smell. Or can you? Elizabeth Godfrey explores the complexities of waste in Zanzibar, and the (non)relationships such waste reveals.

Most unavoidably: the trash. There are no proper facilities for waste disposal on Unguja, the main island of Zanzibar, nor are there waste regulations or the resources for a waste management programme. One just must contend with the residue of fishing nets, Styrofoam floats, plastic buoy bottles. One just must ignore bony, deformed looking livestock as they sift through and defecate on empty rice sacks and broken glass. It stinks. This might seem a bizarre description of an island that is famed for its paradise beauty, but most foreigners to Unguja do not even notice. Most foreigners to Unguja do not notice. Foreigners, both holiday visitors and residents, do not care to look closely at the island, or look at all. Instead, they concentrate solely on a specific aesthetic: the ocean filled frame they desire. What lies in their peripheral vision is nothing more than the other stuff – the crap, the waste – behind the preferred domain.

It stinks .... but most foreigners to Unguja do not even notice.

This is precisely what is toxic about Unguja: there is little foreign desire to see the human landscape, the social and material space, the fixed life. Foreigners to the island patronize ex-pat operated hotels and lodges, none of which involve structured inclusion of Zanzibar citizens other than through employment. On the island of Unguja, there are no hotels with community benefit (no outreach programmes or capacity building initiatives, for instance), no eco-lodges, and very few advertised outings to the interior. Foreigners who visit and reside on the island isolate themselves on the outskirts, barricade their consumption, and have their trash dumped on the unseen terrestrial backdrop.

There is thus a miasma between nationalities on Unguja, a miasma opaque with the dregs of consumerism. The Revolutionary Government of Zanzibar makes it exceedingly difficult for foreigners to establish legal tourist operations on the islands, and so foreign businesses rarely operate legally. Foreigners working in Zanzibar pay at least thirty percent of their gross salary to the government in tax; businesses are subject to unannounced immigration visits and fines; tax must be paid on each individual visitor to a hotel, even complimentary guests. And so some owners establish their businesses as “voluntary initiatives”, work using a volunteer permit, and earn money off the books; there are often protocols for who speaks and who conceals if or when an immigration official arrives; and cash-paying visitors stay off the record. The miasma thickens as the transient subjects continue to turn a blind eye to (those who inhabit) the fixed space, and government officials emphasize that it is a highly taxable privilege – not a necessity – for Euro-Americans to be on Zanzibar.

On Unguja, this peripheral blindness, peripheral avoidance, is striking. The vast majority, if not all, of the tourism endeavors neglect the potential for
cultural exchange on the island. The way Zanzibaris – those people – live is not understood as financially beneficial to business, so relationships are not explored. Unlike some of the game park destinations in East Africa, Zanzibar tourism often does not involve local knowledge and skill. Many dive instructors and snorkel guides are foreigners with international degrees in marine biology, which perhaps renders these oceanic interactions more enchanting. Yet, that there may exist material of equivalent interest on the island’s terrestrial systems – in the natural and human history – is rarely considered, and thus the opportunity for local interpretation is ignored. Local natural resource handling and use on Unguja is fascinating: invertebrate collection in the intertidal zones, the manipulation of coconut husks for coir rope, building with fossilized coral, dhow construction techniques and launching ceremonies, spice farming and spice trade. The further inward one wanders, the more spectacular and complicated the eco/systems. The beaches of Unguja are but the crust around several endemic species of plants and animals; unique medicinal and spiritual understandings; an intricate language distinct from the Kiswahili on mainland East Africa; a contradicted, proud sense of political autonomy.

Yet much of this is missed by foreigners who set foot on Unguja, especially those who call Zanzibar a home. Those people gripe endlessly about the corruption of their Zanzibari staff, the inconvenience of local employment conditions, the hassle created by government officials. Those people live in East Africa exclusively for their business ventures. Those people care for the Indian Ocean because tourists love white sands. Those people disregard potential for intercultural and interpersonal exchange because, as long as tourists come for beaches, they have no need to feign interest. People of waste: those people.

The pollution on Zanzibar is glaring, if one dares to glance around.

British colonialists did notice the rubbish in the nineteenth century, and they attempted to organize waste management on Unguja by introducing the Indian House Crow. This effort to clean up the island was, and continues to be, an environmental and ecological disaster: Indian Crows eat everything, from trash to endemic bird and mammal species. They have irreparably altered biodiversity around Unguja and throughout Zanzibar. Since the mid-twentieth century, there have been several unsuccessful eradication attempts, and today the environmental damage continues, and the trash remains.

Of course trash was not the only sight and scent registered by the colonizing north: the perfume of spices, most pungently cloves, intoxicated the Western World from the nineteenth century onwards. One of Zanzibar’s main exports, indeed the export for which it was most famed, was used to flavour the bland and infuse European households with stimulating scents from the south. Zanzibar is what it is today because of a Western market for the ingredients with which one could cover up undesirable smells. From the metropole, Europeans could cook and decorate with the fruits of Zanzibar without having to witness the conditions of production. Today, from the periphery of the periphery, they actively refuse to see. Euro-Americans travel to Zanzibar for sights, not smells, and the human conditions are un-noticed; on Unguja, foreigners limit their sense-abilities to avoid the displays and odors – the facts – of local humanity.

This main island of Zanzibar festers with estrangement, which renders meaningful cohabitation between nationalities impossible. If there is no palpable foreign appreciation for the many landscapes on Zanzibar, if the heart of the island is regarded as merely a waste-land, then this miasma will only intensify. Instead of cultivating authentic, consequential relationships around Unguja, hotel entrepreneurs and tourists place themselves at safe distances, and focus on the consumerism inside their establishments and their own capitalist expenditures. They isolate themselves indiscreetly: on the periphery, faced away from the interior core. Thus the waste abounds, the stench lingers, and the potential for larger, panoramic outlooks is unseen and ignored in favor of Westward evening views.
An encounter with charismatic Christianity in Ghana produces in Brian Goldstone a shock of the unrecognizable and unassimilable. Faced with a passionate and embodied understanding of the miraculous not as an exceptional interruption, but as the intensification of ordinary quotidian existence, Goldstone is called to think beyond the exegetical tools of his intellectual tradition.

The break is not between fiction and reality, but in the new mode of story which affects both of them.

Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*

We drive in silence through the din of Tamale’s narrow streets, our little bubble of quiet punctured only by the refrain of the afternoon *adhan* ringing out from the city’s loudspeakers and, inside the car, by the jagged bursts of indecipherable tongues that intermittently break the surface of Kwesi’s soundless prayers. Exhausted, my body aching with what feels like the first signs of an impending bout of malaria, I doze off and on in the passenger seat, drinking in the precious air-conditioned coolness streaming across my face and relishing this brief respite between a frenetic day of prayer meetings and street evangelism and the undoubtedly protracted evening service at which we will be arriving at any minute. It is during moments such as these that I marvel at the apparent boundlessness of Kwesi’s energy and intensity. Not once today, it seems to me, has the flow of his almost mantric praying abated for even a single instant: whether speaking about some mundane triviality or, as in the street this morning, about the unbreakable hope that will enable him to face death without the slightest trace of fear, I got the impression that the torrent of — what? Words? Intonations? — composing his glossolalic intercourse had merely submerged for the time being, persisting along a kind of inner parallel track of mental activity. A few weeks earlier, when I asked him about this peculiar tendency, he half-jokingly compared it to, as he put it, “those machines that show the motions of the earth” — as apt a characterization as any, I thought, of the manner in which, much like the seismograph’s planes and peaks, his transactions in the Spirit seemed to churn relentlessly onward, punctuated by their occasional irruption into the world of voice and sound.

As we make our way slowly through the city, I close my eyes and return to those seismic currents. Their oscillatory waves of surges and repetitions yield a fitting image of Kwesi’s singular receptivity, of his rigorously habituated — if, as he sees it, necessarily inadequate — spiritual praxis, of his total participation in a mode of life whose lineaments and whose force I was then still struggling to comprehend.

Such were my tired ruminations as we pulled up to the storefront that doubled as a church. Kwesi turned off the engine but continued to sit there, sensing, I assumed, my own reluctance to go into the already begun service. It turns out he has an entirely different reason for staying put. Some minutes later he finally speaks.

“Let me tell you what happened the other night.”

The throbbing rhythms of praise and worship music reverberate from within the church; a stifling heat has long replaced whatever vestiges of cooler air remained inside our vehicle. I listen wearily, distractedly, but he refuses to proceed until he is assured of my rapt attention. Were it not for my recorder, which, as so often amidst these periods of fatigue, proved to possess a deeper reservoir of stamina than that of its owner, I am sure that the contours of Kwesi’s narrative would have blurred into the dozens of similar such stories recounted to me during the course of my research in northern Ghana.

In the middle of the night, Kwesi says, speaking quietly at first but growing increasingly animated, he awoke to the terrified screams of his wife coming from the other bedroom. She rushed in holding our baby, our daughter. She said I must take her to the hospital. She was choking on something, my wife said, and would die unless we took her to the hospital immediately. Susannah, her eyes were …
She said no, she kept crying, and I asked, ‘What are you crying for?’ She said the baby was going to die. I said, ‘Who told you – who told you that! That is a lie from the Devil! Please, you must leave me alone with her.’ She didn’t move, so I shouted, ‘Please, leave this room!’ Finally she walked out, and I held the baby in my hands. I said, ‘Satan, you are a liar.’ I just spoke straight to him, I said, ‘Satan, you are a liar! Come out from her and stop this thing!’ You know and I said it, I said it with some word in my spirit – I had been given a secret word to speak. Would you believe, I never trembled, no anxiety took any hold of me, nothing. My wife was waiting outside, she was still crying, so I walked the baby into the corridor. I set the baby down and I decided ... I said, ‘Devil, I’m not going to pray. I’m going to do something else, and you will give way.’ So I started to sing. I didn’t know the song but I began to sing from my spirit: ‘Glory be to my God – Hallelujah.’ I was just singing it little by little. ‘Glory be to my God – Hallelujah.’ I began to love that song. I loved it with all my heart. All of a sudden, I heard my baby sigh, and she began to breathe. My wife took her and she couldn’t believe her eyes. You know, if I had listened to my wife’s evil report, if I had taken her to the hospital, that would have been the end of the girl. That is why you need to know... if nothing else, the assumption goes, surely we would recognize a miracle if we saw one.

A story such as this is not unfamiliar to anthropologists, and we have amassed a formidable conceptual library to which to turn for unpacking its constituent parts: its sociology and political economy, its desires and sensibilities, its pasts, its presents, its potential futures. And for all the drama of the narrative – the choking daughter, the screaming wife, the uncomfortable ethnographer – it contains within it not a single term, not a single motif, that has gone unstudied or untheorized in the books that comprise that library. So it is that when Kwesi says at the end of his story that all of this has to do with the miraculous, with the miraculous life, we may find ourselves fascinated or intrigued, but we won’t be at a loss as to what these words entail or the energies that propel them: if nothing else, the assumption goes, surely we would recognize a miracle if we saw one.

Yet it is precisely this presumption that Kwesi’s story seemed to challenge, and over time I have come increasingly to suspect that the conceptual devices that have been handed down to me, to us, for the apprehension of such putatively religious forms are inadequate, not so much wrong as irrelevant, to the task of finding an expressive mode in which the realities so singularly and, at times, disturbingly heralded by people like Kwesi might somehow remain intact – in which, to put it in slightly different terms, they might be permitted to stake their claim. For it is, to be sure, a claim that Kwesi’s reality wishes to stake. According to him, the world he sees and inhabits and the world his wife sees and inhabits are not the same worlds; nor, for that matter, and against any hope for a kind of agreement to disagree,
are they to be equally valuated. Although his wife, like Kwesi, was and remains a born-again believer and an energetic member of their tiny church, her spiritual sensorium, as exhibited by something so seemingly innocuous, so seemingly commonsensical as wanting to send their choking daughter to the hospital, was evidently a great deal less developed than his own. Where his wife saw a child in pain, unable to breathe owing to the unknown object lodged in her throat, Kwesi discerned a word to be spoken, a song to be sung, an Enemy to be defeated. Suffice it to say, this was hardly a case of differing opinions: hers was not simply a mistaken prognosis; it was an unambiguously evil one. If such a chasm separated, however momentarily, his wife’s manner of seeing (and sleeping and eating and thinking) in the Spirit from his own, how much greater was the disjunction between our respective habits of perception? In retrospect it became clear that Kwesi’s testimony in the car that afternoon was deployed as an object lesson whose illocutionary force, whose intentio, as Walter Benjamin might put it, consisted in its desire to falsify, to give the lie to, the coordinates of truth and falsity that organized my reality – a reality held hostage to, among other things, a defective image of thought as regards the Holy Spirit’s action in the world and human participation in it; which is to say, the very idea of “miracle” as such.

Kwesi’s testimony in the car that afternoon was deployed ... to give the lie to the coordinates of truth and falsity that organized my reality

This notion of a defective or dogmatic image of thought comes from Gilles Deleuze, who, first in Nietzsche and Philosophy (1983) and then in Difference and Repetition (1994), utilizes the term to designate those impediments, those hidden orthodoxies or conjectures – what he calls implicit or subjective presuppositions – that for centuries have kept philosophy from achieving its various rebeginnings. What is needed, says Deleuze, is an encounter, “be it with Socrates, a temple, a demon” or some other “strangeness or enmity,” that would “awaken thought from its natural stupor,” that would, in other words, through a shock of the unrecognizable and unassimilable, liberate thought from “those images which imprison it.” Odd as it may seem, I am struck by the pertinence of Deleuze’s philosophical diagnostics to our encounter with Kwesi’s testimony, for while the specific images that Deleuze seeks to excavate and abandon – in this case those of identity and recognition – would appear to have little or nothing to do with our apprehension of the miraculous, our images of the latter, I came to realize, have been no less stubborn or intractable. As Ruth Marshall has forcefully demonstrated in her work on Nigerian Pentecostalism, what we have recurrently been given is a conception of the miraculous refracted through an image of the Event, the exception, the transgression of, if not “natural law” per se, then at least what has come be authorized as the shape of ordinary existence. “What is a miracle?” asks Caesarius of Heisterbach in the early thirteenth century. “We call a miracle whatever is done contrary to the usual course of nature [contra solitum cursum naturae], hence we wonder.” Emerging from the technical theological and philosophical vocabularies of medieval scholasticism, and put to use in the nascent canonization procedures that accompanied them, versions of this picture of the miraculous can be evinced in everything from early modern debates surrounding “general” versus “particular” will – for example, Nicolas Malebranche’s assertion that “the laws of nature are always quite simple and quite general... God does not act at all by particular wills, unless order requires a miracle” – and the development of Humean epistemology to, more recently and recognizably, Alain Badiou’s theorization of the unanticipated, irruptive “truth event” and Carl Schmitt’s theological-political nexus of miracle and exception. Rupture and suspension, negation and nature, and law and intervention – these are the keywords that constitute our prevailing image, that undergird the entire edifice upon which, at least in the knowledge formations we inhabit, miracle has been and continues to be constructed.

Our apprehension[s] of the miraculous ... have been no less stubborn or intractable

Just as Deleuze perceived the fact of every thought-image disclosing its own ontology, its own story
and style of life, so too does this particular image of thought, this particular image of the miraculous, open onto and presuppose a peculiar story of its own. I can think of no better name for this story than that of sovereignty. For when Schmitt famously claimed in the penultimate chapter of his *Political Theology* that “the exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology,” where, as he put it, “sovereign is he who decides on the exception,” he was writing as merely one in a long tradition of constructing miracle not only as a theological or philosophical but as a theologico-political thematic, a tradition in which, even when a specific arrangement of sovereignty (e.g., dictatorship or republicanism) was being opposed, it was nevertheless presumed that *any discourse on the miraculous was simultaneously and necessarily a discourse on sovereign power*. (This holds true even for that constellation of German-Jewish thinkers in the interwar period who, in reconceptualizing the miraculous on the terrain of prophecy and fulfillment instead of nature and suspension, attempted, as political theorist Bonnie Honig puts it, to “take exception to the exception.”)

A fuller elucidation of the extent to which this story has managed in recent years to capture our scholarly imaginations (encompassing domains as analytically diverse as economics, humanitarianism, theology, and political theory), and the potential resources for freeing ourselves from it, will need to be undertaken elsewhere. Here I will limit myself to the assertion that in continuing to reproduce the story of sovereignty – a story whose animating doctrines and motifs cut to the very heart of the Western intellectual tradition, and so also a story that, from Foucault’s regicidal effort at pitching the king’s decapitated head into the field of biopolitics to, more recently and ambiguously, Hardt and Negri’s call to go beyond our “apocalyptic” obsession with sovereign authority in favor of “the really dominant forms of power” that confront us today (the “predominant contemporary form of sovereignty,” they write, “if we still want to call it that”), many have tried to put an end to; a story that despite or perhaps because of repeated warnings that they should resist the temptation to tell it (recall Radcliffe-Brown’s forward to *African Political Systems* in which the findings of its contributors are contrasted with what he calls the “fictions” of political philosophy, with the latter’s insistence on the state, and the notion of sovereignty, as the locus of political power), Africanists have begun to narrate with surprising vigor, finding some new permutation, some shifting logic of sovereign power in everything from churches and NGOs to informal economies and HIV clinics – in continuing to tell this story, I want to suggest, we are not brought any closer to the reality Kwesi admonished me to seek.

And so we confront a question that, though seldom asked, seems as crucial as it is inevitable: the question, that is, as to whether abandoning the time-worn link between miracles and sovereign power, the great Schmittian dialectic of suspension and interruption, is to abandon the possibility of a political theology more generally. I want to argue that it doesn’t, and that, whether conceived vertically or horizontally, top-down or democratically, the rubric of sovereign power by no means exhausts the forms of ethico-political life – the forms of mutuality, desire, aspiration, and indeed destruction – that might be organized by an alternative grammar of the miraculous. Yet how to think this other grammar, this other story, this other world that is emplacing itself across the continent today, how to think it beyond the rubrics that have been handed down to us is not an easy task. It pushes us into regions rarely visited by our queries: ones oriented, I discovered, less around “nature” than around creation, ones defined less in terms of “exception” than in terms of inception, and ones whose truth status derives not from disinterested proof or impartial evidence but from an intensive, wholly passionate (though no less “objective”) mode of storytelling. And it is the reality that follows from such stories, the world spoken by a word, as Kwesi would say, that comes to compose
the fabric of ordinary life, a life – a miraculous life – in which miracles are received not as interruptions but as intensifications of the everyday. Where in another theological universe the miraculous would inevitably point the way to a metaphysics of transcendence, such that any creative act would merely mimic or analogize God’s originary act of speaking something out of nothing, here “miracle” appears to name a quite different relationality, less of vertical emanation than of immanent participation.

Circumventing the story of a world of sovereignty, we are confronted with another story, one that aspires to nothing less than the rewriting of all other stories, the stories we call “historical” and “political,” “medical” and “economic.” It rewrites the story of Africa and Ghana and northern Ghana. It rewrites the story of development and success, death and misfortune, the story of soccer victories and defeats, the story of Islam and the War on Terror. It rewrites the story of why I was feeling sick that day, of why my energy was depleted. And, above all, it rewrites the story we call miracle, no longer a capital “E” event, a once-for-all-time episode, but rather a profusion of events, jets of singularity, as Deleuze might put it, an entire lifestyle of recombinant, paratactic (“and... and...”) potentialities, of seemingly commonplace encounters full to bursting with meaning.

In spite of the huge archive on this religiosity that has emerged in recent years, we still know very little about the kinds of politics, the kinds of futures it insinuates. Yet there is little doubt that beginning such a task will entail our accompanying, or rather following, a word like “miracle” back into the weave of affinities and associations in which it lives and breathes; or, at the very least, allowing our bodies to linger within spaces – Kwesi’s car for example – where we might be haunted, affected, by the realization of our unwillingness or incapacity to do so.
Left
Casting out a demon
Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone

Facing page
Post-deliverance
Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone
Left
Reading the word
Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone

Facing page
Praise and worship
Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone
Left
Sunday morning
Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone

Facing page
Preaching
Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone
Left
Posters in town
Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone

Facing page
Prayer for healing, Sunday morning
Photo: Courtesy Brian Goldstone
In February 2005, Togo’s dictator of four decades, Gnassingbé Eyadéma, died of a heart attack on a plane to Israel – or at least that was the official story. “Radio trottoir,” intrigued by the fact that there was no open casket at the funeral, spun the dictator’s demise differently – that he had scalded himself to death in his bathtub, and that, by the time the conversations among his sons about proper burial had finished, the body had putrified and become so disfigured that it had to be withheld from public viewing at the last rites.

The dictator’s death, or at least the story told on the street about his death, is spectacularly over-determined. Not only a tale about Eyadéma’s literal death and the decomposition of his body, it also reads as symptomatic of the death of the dictatorship and the era it defined. But it condenses other histories as well, most notably that of the death of culture or “tradition,” now rotting away in the villages, an end-of-tradition embodied in the un-interred corpses that litter the landscape today – those not given proper treatment because of the Pentecostal interdiction on local ceremony. Eyadéma’s death also concretized the demise of those authority relations that sanctioned and nurtured the ceremonial complex, relations that radiated out from the village all the way to the metropole. With Eyadéma’s passing, as it were, an entire cultural system, and the political culture that patronized it, entered history’s dustbin.

The larger context is that of the end of the Cold War and the eclipse of those sovereignty relations that defined the decades leading up to 1990 – of a strong/authoritarian state tethered to the metropole, on the one hand, and to the villages through ongoing indirect rule, on the other. In the 1990s the Togolese state was largely eviscerated and the money spigot turned off, interrupting long-standing flows from metropole to state, and state to village and village chief. At the same time, two new sovereigns – Pentecostal churches and neoliberal NGOs – stepped into the gap, assuming control of the social and biopolitical, and effectively deciding who would live and who die. Both proxies demonized local culture – seeing village religion as instrument of the Devil, on the one hand, and “traditional culture” as impediment to neoliberal development, on the other. These shifts, both political and cultural, are perceived as greater than any in living memory.

Today in the northern villages, young school teachers, many of them charismatic Christian, are replacing animist chiefs as local authorities, and never miss an opportunity to criticize tradition and proselytize the “rights of man.” They walk arm in arm with the NGOs and the churches, pushing the new humanitarian agendas and deciding who to support and who not to support. Bizarrely, all this stirring of the pot, this new biopolitics, is carried out on a resource-starved terrain that last saw inputs to infrastructure over 20 years ago. Equally puzzling, the new agendas are largely immaterial, targeting youth and gesturing towards an unknown future, content on developing human potential, whatever that might mean.

I am especially interested in the way temporality and spatiality get re-configured by the new dispensation. Today, the linear time of the dictatorship (with its modernist teleologies and steady sources of income) and the continuous time of the ancestors is being replaced by a non-continuous temporality, one that is “punctuated” and event-driven, and one that anticipates a future while closing its eyes to the past. This is not only the temporality of the Pentecostal, of “event” and radical rupture (and End Times futurity), but also that of the NGO, the new sovereign who appears and disappears, hopping in and out, slithering snake-like before disappearing into its black hole (its eyes fixed on a distant future).

“We used to be able to count on things, knowing that if you did this you would get that,” a local resident
said at a development conference I attended in December 2007. “But today everything is in disor-
der. You never know when it will be your time, when you might get lucky and when not.”

Today, the linear time of the dictatorship ... and the continuous time of the ancestors is being replaced by a non-continuous temporality, one that is “punctuated” and event-driven

The re-temporalizations of the new dispensation are matched by a rescaling of the spatial. The distant is now proximate in ways that it never was before, and the proximate seems distant. Thus, at the same time that kin in southern Togo have disappeared from the horizon, a family in Europe (through one of develop-

The entire spatio-temporal system and cosmology – of time moving teleologically from past to present to future (the time of the dictatorship and the time of the ancestors) and of spaces connected as dots on a map (a village to the city to the metropole) – is thus rescaled by the post-Cold War moment, with implications not only for the lives of those undergoing these changes but also for theory. Much of the theory to which we are accustomed, and I would not exclude postcolonial theory here, relies on notions of temporality and spatiality that are continuous: of pasts that produce (and “haunt”) a present, of proximate spaces that influence/colonize/appropri-

Eyadéma’s naked body – unmasked, disrobed, vulner-

Oddy, they blame themselves as much as others for their abandonment and disposability. When souther-

With witches everywhere, raw nerves and necropolitics are the stuff of everyday life.

There may be something culturally-given here – a reflex to look inward first, to not accuse others when one knows that he or she is also to blame. This has long been the impulse at the heart of witchcraft discourse: Evil in the world derives from the local
not the beyond; the witch who is trying to kill you is always close to home, often in your own family. But I think there is something more going on as well. To claim responsibility for one’s “abandonment” is not only to fall in line with local norms of conduct (and, implicit within such ownership of responsibility, to retain agency and the power to change things for the better) but also to seek acknowledgment or recognition by international humanitarian groups.

“This self-criticism makes us stronger for the future and will help impress the next NGO,” a local school teacher responded when I asked him about this instance of self-blame. He followed this up with a disquisition on how destitution is what the NGOs are seeking. “The village they like is one that is like an orphaned child, one that has nothing but also one that will be grateful to be saved,” he concluded.

“This self-criticism makes us stronger for the future and will help impress the next NGO”

In the same way that Eyadéma/the dictator invented states of emergency, and Pentecostals produce an ongoing state of crisis, the northern villages are “producing” their own abandonment, producing themselves as disposable naked life – in order to be recognized. Moreover, is not this self-willed encampment related to the Pentecostal desire to jettison the past and start anew? Both gestures are aimed at recognition and seem motivated by the desire to be acknowledged as full members of the 21st century.

To put this in terms conceptualized by Ferguson, Togolese, like others across the continent, are acutely aware of their position in the world today, of their “abjection” or expulsion from (or persistent non-inclusion in) European modernity – a modernity they see every night on the TV screen but cannot touch, a modernity they hear spoken but may never inhabit. In the same way that Ferguson reads mimesis of the modern and emulation of European style among Zambians as a type of global plea, as an attempt to stake a claim to the “rights of full membership in a wider society”, I see something similar at work in Togolese appropriations of charismatic Christianity and in villagers’ invocation of the rhetoric of “abandonment.” Both are passionate pleas to establish their rights to inclusion in global society.

This same desire is what motivated 300 lottery winners who were denied visas to sit in at the US Embassy in Lomé throughout the spring and summer of 2008. Despite the serendipity of the selection process, those who were chosen had an abiding sense of entitlement. “We were picked for visas, then denied them on arbitrary grounds, and we are here to claim what is rightfully ours,” the organizer of the sit-in said when I met him in June 2008. Behind him, the group of 300 strong, all dressed in red (“to show our wounds”), united in prayer to the Holy Spirit, one of their thrice-daily pleas for divine intercession. With a persistence that strained credibility – they showed up every day for five months, from eight o’clock in the morning to five in the evening, through blistering sun and driving rain, until forcibly removed in early October by Togolese security forces – they were pleading for global access.

Jean and John Comaroff have recently suggested that a signature feature of the neoliberal moment in Africa and beyond is the delinking of the domains of production and reproduction, engendering a crisis within the domain of social reproduction. The Togolese material from the post-Cold War moment would appear to provide a particularly cogent example of social reproduction’s travails at this moment – but also of the novelties and desires that such a crisis can produce. Witness the array of new kin-related practices that increasingly permeate the Togolese landscape today – from the way in which Pentecostalism substitutes a new spiritual community for family and neighborhood, to the arranged marriages and adoptions that define the pursuit of visas, to the “adoption” practices of child sponsorship organizations, to the “child trafficking” panic in the northern villages, to the manner in which authority structures within families are being undone by children who invoke the “droits de l’homme.”

Moreover, what does it mean for social reproduction that NGOs and distant European families are becoming surrogate parents for children in remote villages or that siblings are shuffled between homesteads to qualify for NGO aid? What does it mean
that kinship and marriage are being reinvented and refigured by visa practices that conjoin unknown partners and generate debts across an ocean? And what does it mean for social reproduction that the traffic in children to Nigeria generates resources for the local marriage market while at the same time removing labor from families and workgroups? Finally, what does it mean when such instrumental practices become binding or even desired? Some of the more touching visa lottery stories are those in which partners of convenience became lovers and even spouses. And some of the European child sponsorship-inspired shuffling of children between houses lead to permanent realignments, with children staying on beyond the departure of the NGO.

I remain compelled by the privations of the current moment and sympathetic to the ways in which the death of tradition, the end of chiefship, and the dissolution of the dictatorship complex have disrupted those frames that are responsible for reproducing the conditions by which life is lived. And I read the rumors that circulate in Togo today of missing human organs, often reproductive organs, as symptomatic of the very real crisis of social reproduction that the collapse of these structures has engendered. But I also want to remain open to those new possibilities that are emerging out of the current moment, especially because the old structures were so closely tied up with power hierarchies that benefited the few and rendered submissive the many.

* *

But what of the “political” in a moment of wholesale rejection of the past and embrace of Euro-otherness, at a time when an entire nation (region? continent?) has a single desire – to go into exile and evacuate the space they call home – and in an era when the only form of protest is that being staged at the US Embassy, as if being denied a visa to leave was the only grievance worth fighting for? And what of the political in an era of diffuse power when it is difficult to locate the source of one’s discontent and to know what might be an appropriate and effective response? And what of the political when it is hard to know on what side of power any actor lies? Does the Pentecostal’s identification with Christianity and middle-class desire, and their disavowal of African tradition, place them on the side of power, or does their opposition to the culture and authority relations associated with the dictatorship complex and Cold War geopolitical interests position them against power? Does the peasant’s embrace of tradition place him in bed with the chief- and dictatorship system, or does his marginal economic status position him – always and forever – on the other side of power? Needless to say, politics here can no longer be located in any of the standard gestures or in any of the usual places.

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I am compelled by recent calls to resist the romance of resistance and to fight the impulse to make theory adequate to political desire. Political aspirations certainly need to be tempered by experience, by the times in which we, and those about whom we write, live. But the question of the political is begged by the material itself, by the way in which old systems of authority (within nation, village and family) are being refused, by the numbers of those who sign up for the visa lottery and the persistence of the protestors at the gates of the embassy, by the mass conversions of West Africans to charismatic Christianity, by the way in which witchcraft imaginaries shadow global capital. For all the shifts of the post-Cold War moment, political agency seems far from evacuated.

Moreover, the Derridean gesture represented in the desire to deconstruct old forms of authority and the cultures that attend them, to wipe the slate clean, to return to naked life, strikes me as in and of itself a form of political aspiration. In taking apart old authority structures, not only local but also geopolitical, this cultural revolution bespeaks an opposition to power and the status quo, and an open-ness to new forms of sociality and the political – to be sure, forms unknown and desires still inchoate, but an open-ness nonetheless. Furthermore, there seems a recognition that remaining incarcerated by tradition and the local, by Togolese-ness or African-ness,
leads away from rather than toward global inclusion and a better life. Is there not here a nascent post-national, even global, conception of citizenship?

But wither anthropology in the face of culture’s sacrifice? A discipline that feasted on those cultures that nested within the colonial and the Cold War state apparatuses, it has long made its living celebrating the local (its complexity, its nuance, its alternative rationalities and subjectivities), and, in anthropology’s reincarnation as postcolonial studies, valorizing the local’s encounter with its others (its ways of appropriating, domesticating, and hybridizing the state and the global). However, both theoretical moments – moments I was keyed into and remain compelled by – are past, and the cultural formations that accompanied them are dead or dying. In their place are those futurities and immanences, those rescaled temporalities and spatialities, those commodified imaginaries and desires, those global aspirations that Togolese and many West Africans are today embracing with such zeal – in short, much that the old paradigms figured as politically suspect and lacking in cultural thickness and authenticity. And, yet, if our interlocutors are tired of being incarcerated by local categories and cultures, and long for the new horizons of global citizenship, it behooves us to do what we have always done best and follow their lead, even if it means giving up all for an unknown future.
There are many myths about what is known to white South Africans as the ‘Border War’. Fought primarily in Namibia and Angola from the mid-1960s to the late 1980s, it engaged a series of conflicts that merged into one of the most complex and protracted wars ever fought in Africa. Alongside its local raison d’être, the war in Angola also unfolded as a proxy Cold War, mobilised by external interferences, secret partnerships and undeclared political and economic agendas. All of these manifested in a range of deceptions, from the violation of formal international agreements to illegal operations, secret funding and the provision of arms. It was a war of subterfuge; a fiction woven of half-truths and cover-ups. Even now, over twenty years later, many of its stories have yet to be told.

For most Namibians it was a war of liberation, a war fought to gain independence from South African rule, which had been ongoing since 1920 when the League of Nations granted administration of Namibia (then South West Africa) to South Africa under a Class C Mandate. While apartheid policies, strictly speaking, were not applied till the late 1960s in Namibia, the territory was subjected to harsh forms of segregation and a colonial labour system that later fed into a growing nationalist movement. After decades of pressure and various legal disputes, the United Nations (UN) revoked South Africa’s mandate in 1966 – a decision South Africa ignored. In 1970, the UN Security Council declared South Africa’s presence in Namibia illegal and later, in 1978, passed Resolution 435, which proposed a ceasefire and democratic elections supervised by the UN. On both occasions, when instructed to withdraw from Namibia, South Africa refused to do so.

It was against this backdrop that SWAPO (South West African People’s Organisation) and its military wing, PLAN (People’s Liberation Army of Namibia), launched an armed struggle against South African forces in Namibia. In what is generally considered to be the beginning of this 23-year conflict, the first major clash between SWAPO and a South African police unit, supported by the SAAF (South African Air Force), occurred on 26 August 1966.

However, the ‘Border War’ involved more than South Africa’s attempts to prevent SWAPO coming to power in an independent Namibia. It also involved conflicts between South Africa and many of its frontline states as South Africa attempted to curb the liberation struggle that was happening within its borders. Portugal’s withdrawal from Angola added another layer to the perceived threats against the apartheid state. The possibility of a Marxist government, sympathetic to the ANC (African National Congress) and SWAPO, propelled South Africa to involve itself in Angola’s civil war. South African forces had ventured into Angola as early as 1967, sending air force helicopters to support Portuguese troops against UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola). Less than ten years later, with the launch of Operation Savannah, the SADF (South African Defence Force) and UNITA – with covert support from America – began a strategic and somewhat expedient alliance. Their intention was initially to prevent the MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola) from taking control of Angola at independence, but later the alliance focused on trying to maintain control of southeast Angola against the MPLA and SWAPO. South Africa’s 1975 invasion into Angola was a crucial factor in Cuba’s decision to support the MPLA in Luanda. Contrary to the belief that Cuba was acting on Soviet recommendation, Fidel Castro launched Operation Carlotta in response to a direct request from a besieged MPLA in Luanda. The arrival of 7,000 Cuban troops effectively halted the SADF advance, and on 11 November 1975, Agostinho Neto declared independence. In January 1976, the SADF was compelled to withdraw from Angola.

South Africa’s 1975 invasion into Angola was a crucial factor in Cuba’s decision to support the MPLA in Luanda.

For the remainder of the 1970s, the SADF directed its efforts primarily towards keeping the war north of the ‘cut-line’, clearing a ‘free-fire’ buffer zone along the Angolan border and displacing thousands of people in the process. It also conducted counter-insurgency raids and pre-emptive strikes on SWAPO bases, including the controversial raid on Cassinga on 4 May 1978, in which over 600 people were killed. But the 1980s marked a shift in South Africa’s presence in Angola. In an undeclared war with the government forces, FAPLA (People’s Armed Forces for the Liberation of Angola), the SADF began to mount continuous large-scale military operations inside Angola. The strategic aim was to maintain UNITA’s dominance in the region and thus also undermine SWAPO’s ability to launch attacks from Angola into Namibia. On 16 February 1984, South Africa and Angola signed the Lusaka Accord, a ceasefire agreement aimed in part at resolving the issue of
Namibian independence in terms of Resolution 435. But in 1985 when FAPLA launched a successful attack on UNITA and threatened to capture its stronghold town of Mavinga, the SADF with support from the SAAF came to UNITA’s rescue. The war escalated and for the first time, the South African government admitted it was supporting UNITA.

In 1987 the war reached its final and decisive turning point with the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale. It was a critical moment, and one that many believe presaged an opportunity for the SADF to overrun UNITA’s hold over southeast Angola and regain control of the region. Launching a major assault from Cuito Cuanavale, FAPLA targeted the UNITA stronghold of Mavinga and began to drive UNITA south, inflicting heavy casualties in the process. But in a series of debilitating skirmishes at the Lomba River, FAPLA was repelled by the SADF, which had come to UNITA’s rescue. Forced to retreat back to Cuito Cuanavale, FAPLA was then besieged by the combined forces of the SADF and UNITA. It was a critical moment, and one that many believed presented an opportunity for the SADF to overrun FAPLA and take the town. The consequences of this were unthinkable for the Angolans and once again they appealed to Cuba for assistance. But the SADF failed to seize the initiative: and with Cuban reinforcements, despite heavy bombardment from the SADF and UNITA, Cuito Cuanavale did not fall. The battle continued for months with neither force gaining the upper hand, and on 23 March 1988 the SADF launched a final unsuccessful assault. Cuito Cuanavale remained secure despite long distance shelling from the SADF over the following few months.

In 1987 the war reached its final and decisive turning point with the Battle of Cuito Cuanavale.

During this time, Angolan and Cuban troops opened a second front to the west. Mobilising a force of 40,000 Cuban, 30,000 Angolan and 3,000 SWAPO troops with some 500 tanks and 1,000 anti-aircraft weapons, supported by MiG-23 fighter jets, they advanced towards the Namibian border. Castro drew on a boxing combination for this strategy: the defensive left fist blocks the opponent at Cuito Cuanavale in the east, while the force of the right fist strikes in the west. Over the next few months a series of clashes with South African forces occurred, including the bombing of the dam at Calueque by the Cubans. As the SADF retreated into Namibia, the Cubans withdrew and the war ended.

In May 1988 the South Africans returned to the peace negotiations, which they had abandoned for two years. In a series of talks mediated by US Assistant Secretary of State, Chester Crocker, Angola, Cuba and South Africa agreed to the withdrawal of Cuban and South African troops from the region and the implementation of Resolution 435. On 22 December that year, all parties signed a final peace accord in New York. Namibia celebrated its independence in March 1990.

But the war in Angola was not over.

After Cuito Cuanavale, in an attempt to reach peace within Angola, the MPLA government and UNITA signed the Bicesse Accord in 1991. The agreement set out the principles for a ceasefire, the demilitarisation of UNITA troops and the formation of a national army. It also laid out the process for the creation of a multi-party democracy with an elected government. But when the incumbent president and MPLA leader, José Eduardo dos Santos, defeated UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi in the 1992 presidential elections, Savimbi contested the process and rejected the results. The peace process unravelled and once again the country was subjected to war. Alongside bitter fighting countrywide, the post-election period also saw an unprecedented rise in violent attacks on the national population, including the indiscriminate killing of civilians in ideological cleansings – known as limbeza – carried out by armed civilians and special police in service to the MPLA and UNITA. In an endeavour to end the post-election conflict, both sides agreed to sign the Lusaka Protocol in November 1994, which effectively reinforced the principles and implementation of the Bicesse Accord. But despite international monitoring and peacekeeping, the fundamental mistrust between the MPLA government and UNITA led to the collapse of the protocol and war resumed.

In the late 1990s the war reached its most brutal and destructive phase and threatened to reduce the country to a state of chaos. During this period, much of the country’s infrastructure, including schools, factories and medical centres, was destroyed. Scorched earth tactics and the continuous laying of mines resulted in the death and displacement of millions of Angolan citizens. A final political settlement and peace was achieved only after Savimbi’s death in 2002.

I first read about Angola in Another Day of Life, Ryszard Kapuściński’s book about events leading
up to Angola’s independence. This was during the mid-eighties – some ten years after it was written. At the time, South Africa was experiencing a period of intense resistance and increasing mobilisation against the forces of the apartheid government, which was also engaged in the war in Angola. I was photographing in the townships around Cape Town – taking images that would form the material of a series of apocalyptic photomontages of urban wastelands, resettlement camps and dogs (this body of work was titled Nadir). At the same time, amongst other books on landscape, dispossession and war, I was reading about Angola. Until then, in my imagination, Angola had been an abstract place. In the seventies and early eighties, it was simply ‘the border’, a secret, unspoken location where brothers and boyfriends were sent as part of their military service. And although tales about Russians and Cubans and the Cold War began to filter back – all of which conjured up a distinctly different image from the one portrayed by the South African state – Angola remained, for me, largely a place of myth.

In 2007, I went to Luanda for the first time. Five years had passed since the war had ended – and it was the year of Kapuściński’s death. I entered the myth.

For further information on the images, see:
http://www.stevenson.info/artists/racliffe.html
The frontier is never somewhere else, and no stockades can keep the midnight out.

—Norman MacCaig, *Hotel Room, 12th Floor*
Crossroads, 1986
Vissershok, 1988
Nadir, no 2, 1987
Nadir, no 3, 1987
Nadir, nos 14, 15, 16, 1988
Vacant plot near Atlantico Sul, Luanda, 2007
The beach at Ilha, Luanda, 2007
Roadside stall on the way to Viana, 2007
On the road to Cuito Cuanavale, 2009
On the road to Cuito Cuanavale, 2010
Unmarked mass grave on the outskirts of Cuito Cuanavale, 2009
On the road to Cuito Cuanavale, 2009
Mined forest outside Menongue on the road to Cuito Cuanavale, 2009
The battlefield at Cuito Cuanavale, 2009
Field with eucalyptus trees at Cassinga, 2009
Mass grave at Cassinga, 2010
Ambush site near Mupa, 2009
Minefield near Mupa, 2009
Mine pit near Mucundi, 2009
On the road to Jamba, 2010
Woodland near Cassinga, 2009
Mural, FAPLA base, Lobito, 2010
Parade ground, FAPLA base, Lobito, 2010
‘Comfort Station’, FAPLA base, Lobito, 2010
Mural in an abandoned schoolhouse, Cauvi, 2010
Burning field, Dombe Grande, 2010
Mural, FAPLA base, Chinguar, 2010
Stone map of Angola, Cuban base, Namibe, 2010
SAM missile bunkers, Cuban base, Namibe, 2010
Turning circle, Cuban base, Namibe, 2010
Remains of the trench system, Cuban base, Namibe, 2010 (triptych)
Mural depicting Fidel Castro, Agostinho Neto and Leonid Brezhnev, painted circa 1975, Viriambundo, 2009
Unidentified memorial in the desert, south of Namibe I, 2009
Unidentified memorial in the desert, south of Namibe II, 2010
Soldiers training in the desert, near Namibe, 2009
My tent at Longa, 2009