Routledge Studies in Political Sociology

CITIZENSHIP UTOPIAS IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

THE EMERGENT FORMS OF ACTIVISM IN AN ERA OF DISILLUSIONMENT

Edited by
Henri Onodera, Martta Kaskinen and Eija Ranta

"*Citizenship Utopias in the Global South* offers a timely and engaging work that combines critique with action. This compelling volume that models transnational scholarship, portrays how citizen activists from Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia imagine, reinvent, and challenge reactionary and unjust forms of power. Through "imaginative forms of creative activism" they strive to overcome the disillusionment of contemporary politics. Chapters on digital communications, new youth movements, anti-corruption campaigns, anti-racism, non-violent strategies, to name a few, convey how people join forces to forge alternative futures grounded in dignity and justice. A valuable addition to the work on new youth movements, political change, and alternative activism in the Global South."

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"In the era of post-pandemic dystopias, this book offers a myriad of citizens' utopias emerging from the Global South. It collects the voices of young feminists, ecologists, anti-racists, pacifists, queer individuals, students, and trade unionists from a dozen countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, who engage to build micro-utopian communities from below. Lessons for a period of old fears and new hopes."

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Citizenship Utopias in the Global South

Citizenship Utopias in the Global South is an edited collection of empirical research that explores emergent forms of activism in Africa, Asia, and Latin America in times of multiple crises. At the intersection of hope and disillusionment, the diverse and thought-provoking chapters investigate emerging forms of activism in the Global South – including youth activisms, anti-racism struggles, feminist initiatives, online dissent, and Indigenous movements.

In the 2020s, many parts of the world are witnessing contradictory processes of popular claims to rights, livelihoods, and social justice, and subsequent forms of populist authoritarianism and the securitization of civil society. Previously hopeful calls for dignity, democracy, and social justice – through protesting, strikes, civil society campaigns, legal reforms, and elections, for example – have been met with disdain and civic disengagement. This book investigates the re-imagination and pursuit of citizen activism in such times of popular disillusionment. It explores citizenship utopias as social imaginaries that are enacted and that articulate an ideal social order or democratic polity with ideal forms of experiencing citizenship. Its chapters interrogate conventional approaches to citizenship by introducing a nuanced and empirically grounded exploration of the complex ways in which people experience, negotiate, and engage in the societal changes that they aspire towards. The examination of citizenship utopias outlines contemporary signals for transformative futures and their possibilities.

The book undertakes a fresh effort at contributing to the shifting terrain of critical development studies, political anthropology, political sociology, and decolonising scholarship by engaging in discussions about citizenship, activism, disillusionment, and future societal alternatives in times of multiple global challenges.

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The Emergent Forms of Activism in an Era of Disillusionment

Edited by
Henri Onodera, Martta Kaskinen and Eija Ranta

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The beginning and making of this book coincided with the precarious years of the global COVID-19 pandemic. Amid health emergencies and increasing death rates, the pandemic also deeply impacted livelihood opportunities and exacerbated poverty, threatening social welfare everywhere in the world. Most particularly, however, it affected lives in the Global South, as global responses to the pandemic highlighted and deepened global inequalities, while demonstrating the need and yearning for solidarity and justice struggles on a global scale. Since then, the political and economic impacts and colonial continuities related to the Russian war on Ukraine and the Israel–Palestine conflict, along with accelerating autocratisation around the world, have further intensified geopolitical tensions and reorganisations. In a post-pandemic global context distinguished by multiple crises, complex citizenship dynamics and a multitude of social struggles for democracy, justice, and equality have arisen. Thinking critically about citizenship utopias and investigating transformative alternatives have thus become more crucial during the making of this book than what we could ever have anticipated.

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of the structural conditions and contemporary phenomena that tie them together.

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and "Youth and Development in the Global South", taught by Onodera, many of the topics of this book have been nourished through the active engagement of students of Global Development Studies and other related disciplines at the University of Helsinki.

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Henri Onodera, Martta Kaskinen, Eija Ranta
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List of abbreviations

ADAM	Association ADAM pour l'Égalité et le Développement
ADD	Association pour la promotion du Droit à la Différence
ADS	Social Development Agency
ANC	African National Congress
ANGEM	National Agency for the Management of Microcredit
ANSEJ	National Youth Employment Support Agency
AUCC	Asamblea de Unidad Cantonal de Cotacachi
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
C19PC	C-19 People's Coalition
CAA	Citizenship Amendment Act
CDR	Comités de Defensa de la Revolución
CNAC	National Unemployment Insurance Fund
CNES	Conseil National des Professeurs du Supérieur
CNDDC	Comité National pour la Défense des Droits des Chômeurs
COSAS	Congress of South African Students
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
COWG	Community Organising Working Group
CSO	civil society organisation
CTC	Central de Trabajadores de Cuba
EU	European Union
FEBAC	Federación de Barrios de Cotacachi
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
FIS	Front Islamique du Salut
FMC	Federación de Mujeres Cubanas
FMF	Fees Must Fall
FTDES	Forum Tunisien des Droits Economiques et Sociales
GEAR	growth, employment and redistribution
GNC	gender non-conforming community
HCMC	Ho Chi Minh City
HDP	Halkların Demokratik Partisi
HE	higher education
HRD	human rights defender

ICC	International Criminal Court
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOM	International Organization for Migration
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
IVD	Instance Verité et Dignité
LGBTQIA+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual
LTDH	Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MSJC	Mathare Social Justice Centre
MP	member of parliament
MRG	Minority Rights Group
NCA	National Constituent Assembly
NDA	National Democratic Alliance
NDP	National Development Plan
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NRC	National Register of Citizens
PAD	Points Anti-Discrimination Network
PAM	Plan Nacional para el Avance de las Mujeres
PCC	Partido Comunista Cubano
PIC	Partido Independiente de Color
PNCRD	Programa Nacional contra el Racismo y la Discriminación Racial
PPE	personal protective equipment
RDC	Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique
RDP	reconstruction and development programme
RMF	Rhodes Must Fall
SAP	structural adjustment programme
SAPS	South African Police Services
SARS	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
SASO	South African Student Organisation
SFI	Students Federation of India
SIT	Syndicat Islamique du Travail
SJCWG	Social Justice Centres Working Group
SMILE	Support for Marginalised Individuals for Livelihood and Enterprise
SNAPAP	Syndicat National Autonome des Personelles de l'Administration Publique
TISS	Tata Institute of Social Sciences
TUT	Tshwane University of Technology
UCM	University Christian Movement
UGTA	Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens
UGTT	Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens

UN	United Nations
UNEAC	Unión Nacional de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba
UNORCAC	Unión de Organizaciones Campesinas e Indígenas de Cotacachi
USA	United States of America
VGCL	Vietnam General Confederation of Labour
VCP	Vietnamese Communist Party
WB	World Bank
Wits	University of the Witwatersrand
WTO	World Trade Organization

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1 Citizenship utopias in the Global South

Emerging activisms, re-imagining citizenships

Henri Onodera, Martta Kaskinen and Eija Ranta

Introduction

Many parts of the world have been witnessing bursts of popular uprisings and emergent activism in recent years (Alvarez 2019; Muggenthaler, Bringel, and Martínez 2021), while at the same time authoritarian populism, ethnic nationalisms, and religious conservatism are also on the rise (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019; Scoones et al. 2018). No matter which democracy index is discussed, the worldwide decline of democracy is a clear trend, one that was further reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic at the outset of the 2020s and the restrictions on movement, assembly, and livelihood that accompanied it (Cooper and Aitchison 2020). The pandemic also rendered visible and exacerbated existing inequalities between and within societies in the Global North and Global South. Transformative processes in the 2010s, such as the "Arab Spring" uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa and the construction of plurinational states in Latin America, had raised people's aspirations for equality, justice, and democracy, but, a decade later, these hopes had been replaced by widespread disillusionment, disdain, and civic disengagement (Onodera et al. 2020; Radcliffe 2015; Ranta 2023a; Spierings 2020). In other words, the previous optimistic calls for dignity, democracy, and social justice – through, for example, protests, strikes, civil society campaigns, legal reforms, and elections – have increasingly been encountering state repression. In these volatile circumstances, imaginative forms of creative activism, collaboration, and articulation are needed within and beyond formal avenues of political participation. This complex phenomenon calls for research on the potentials, conditions, and difficulties of emergent activisms and their transformative alternatives.

This book investigates the re-imagination and pursuit of citizen activism in times of disillusionment. It examines the ways in which intertwining processes of populist authoritarianism, securitisation of civil society, and pandemic conditions shape political actors' social fields and transformative action. The contributions explore emergent forms of activism that challenge the deep structures of state governance and the economy in the context of shared disillusionment with state promises of equal citizenship, social justice,

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and representative democracy. The empirical contexts involve, but are not exclusive to, youth activism, anti-racism struggles, feminist initiatives, online dissent, and Indigenous movements. Together, the chapters interrogate conventional approaches to citizenship by introducing nuanced and empirically grounded explorations of the complex ways in which people experience, negotiate, and engage with the societal changes to which they aspire. As we elaborate further below, our approach to "citizenship utopia" in this context builds on the notion of utopia as the imaginary reconstitution of society and, as such, it involves critical examination of implicit imaginaries of the ideal society, and their practical realisation and envisioned memberships (Levitas 2013).

In this introductory chapter, we start by discussing diverse conceptualisations of utopia, after which we address the book's focus on citizenship utopias in the Global South. The remaining three sections introduce the book's chapters in the course of examining the interrelated themes of emerging activisms in times of disillusionment, decolonising the state, and re-imagining citizenships.

Whither utopias?

There are many definitions of "utopia", and its meanings are contested in both scholarly and everyday discussions. It was first used as the title of the novel by Renaissance humanist Thomas More, published in 1516, which portrayed the imaginary island of *Utopia* as an ideal society, thus providing a satirical critique and counter-image of political life in England and Europe at the time. Partly inspired by Plato's *Republic*, the communal life on Utopia was characterised by equality, collective property, and material abundance (Beauchesne and Santos 2011, 2), and it "was to become a model for future political constellations, investing the concepts of 'utopia' and 'utopianism' with the temporal dimension of the belief in a dreamworld to come" (van Ruler and Sissa 2017, 7). Since then, the notion of utopia has inspired fiction writers and critical social theorists alike. Despite diverse interpretations, the commonality in the ways in which utopia is discussed relies on its critique of the present and "the desire for a better way of being and of living" (Levitas 2013, xii). In addition to implying the imagination of better futures, utopia can also refer to concrete social initiatives that create and prefigure alternative lifestyles and practices such as communal living, time banking, and ecovillages. As spaces where new practices of politics and citizenship are constructed and exercised, they can be perceived as radical alternatives to mainstream society (Firth 2012). These alternative projects notwithstanding, utopia can also refer to more comprehensive and holistic societal changes and the construction of alternative social systems through, for example, popular revolutions (Levitas 2013, xiii–xiv).

Revolutionary holistic or systemic utopias were largely considered to be over by the 1990s; with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern

European socialist bloc, it was proclaimed that humanity had reached its final stage or "the end of history", according to Fukuyama's (1992) conceptualisation. The horizon of revolutions seemed to be withering away as liberal democracy and capitalism (in the form of neoliberal globalisation) emerged as the hegemonic pillars of the "new world order" in the making. In the post-Cold War era, as Scott (2014, 4) argues, "there arose, as a seemingly single and natural horizon, the new utopia of liberal democracy, its dogma of human rights, and the disciplining and governmentalizing technologies to urge and enforce its realization". While several countries were democratised from the 1970s to the 1990s – at times called the "third wave of democratization" (Huntington 1991) – global "messianic" beliefs in democracy's potential and real-life fulfilment were also criticised (Abrahamsen 2000). For many, democracy in itself continues to be a distant utopia, in a process that never fulfils its justification, particularly its radical promise to provide economic and social equality and justice to citizens (Eskelinen 2019; Holston 2008). As Eskelinen puts it, "no other political concept in contemporary society is, simultaneously, as radical *and* compromised" (Eskelinen 2020, 151, italics in original), and democratic practices have increasingly surrendered to the logics of global capitalism since the turn of the millennium. Furthermore, the deepening inequalities and the concentration of wealth due to neoliberal reforms have eroded democracy's popular appeal by creating, for example, an uneasy association between liberal democracy and economic austerity measures (Ranta 2021, 45). It is an important reminder that while utopian thinking is often attached to socialist or green politics, neoliberalism also implies a certain utopianism when it comes to rethinking and reconciling the exigencies of the state and the global markets (Levitas 2013, xiii).

While dreams of overarching revolutions and systemic utopias may have waned, many scholars have argued for a more empirically grounded focus on "concrete utopias" as hopeful and imaginable future horizons. This reorientation suggests a focus on utopian visions that promote attainable transformative alternatives in the framework of what exists and what is possible, thereby positioning "abstract utopias" as unrealisable visions that have little transformative potential in practice (Bloch 1986; Elder-Vass 2022; Vogt 2005). In her defence of the contested concept, Levitas (2013) argues that utopia should be understood less as a descriptive imaginary of entire social systems, and more as a method at the core of sociological thinking. Such a perspective allows utopias to be explored wherever futures are imagined, regardless of how fragmentary, elusive, and provisional those imaginaries might be (Levitas 2013, 4).

Cooper (2014) also conceptualises "everyday utopias" as viable practices and social projects which open spaces in the present for imagining larger-scale utopian futures. In her view, everyday utopias consist of networks of people and spaces that perform social life as it could be through communal practices that radically differ from those of mainstream society and its values. Everyday utopias do not comprise activism or public advocacy per se, nor

are they necessarily political in their primary aims; rather, they provide the spatial possibility to create the desired societal changes in small-scale sites, temporarily forgetting the mainstream societal practices that are in conflict with those desired changes. Thus, they indirectly critique existing societal practices by creating utopian alternatives to those practices (Cooper 2014). In the field of Marxist social theory, Wright (2010) takes part in delineating alternative practices and institutions to the capitalist system through the concept of "real utopia", which, as with concrete utopias, is attentive to pragmatist considerations of whether utopian visions are realisable or not. For Wright, utopian practices like participatory budgeting or worker-owned cooperatives represent "waystations" towards utopias that may seem unreachable, thus expanding the realms of possibility for social imaginaries in the present. On the other hand, real utopias – such as redesigning new institutions – are by definition partial rather than systemic utopias and it is questionable who exactly can impose realism on utopias and discern what is realistically possible or not (Levitas 2013, 141–149). In this book, we recognise that utopias are found not only in imaginaries of ideal society but also in everyday practices and "the here and now of any actual social constellation" (Vogt 2005, 5); indeed, multiple chapters in this book examine activist hopes and imaginaries of ideal societal futures and actions taken to attain them through practical lenses of the everyday.

Citizenship utopias in the Global South

In this light, the citizenship utopias explored in this book are connected to the notion of "lived citizenship" (Kallio, Wood, and Häkli 2020), that is, the lived experiences of being and acting as a citizen rather than the classical understanding of citizenship as a legal status with certain rights and duties (Marshall 1950). We approach citizenship utopias as social imaginaries that are enacted and that articulate an ideal social order or democratic polity with ideal forms of experiencing citizenship. Both ideals situate equality, dignity, and justice as the core organising principles of public life; in an important way, they work against hegemonic power relations, hierarchies, and inequalities that are based on gender, race, ethnicity, and class, among other differences, and generate transformative alternatives to disrupt the reproduction of these inequalities.

In this vein, the chapters explore the collective agencies of citizens and activists, and analyse how the latter re-imagine and enact more inclusive and democratic citizenships as a way of constructing better futures. The chapters also re-examine conventional understandings of civil society and explore emerging forms of civic mobilisation vis-à-vis public authorities, global institutions, and economic power structures. The collective effort in this edited volume is geared to addressing the following questions:

- What are the emergent forms of activism and dissent, and why? Where and in what conditions do they emerge?

- How can state-society relations and people's possibilities to influence them be re-imagined in conditions of shared disillusionment?
- What kinds of locally grounded conceptualisations and understandings of citizenship emerge in these conditions?

While the structure of the book loosely follows these lines of inquiry, it is important to note that they represent interrelated and overlapping themes that feature in all the chapters in one way or another. Before presenting the individual chapters in more detail, however, it is necessary to discuss why we think it is important to focus on citizenship utopias in the Global South.

Such a discussion must begin by accepting that the notion of "Global South" is far from unproblematic, referring as it does to highly heterogeneous social, cultural, and political dynamics, lived realities, and local and national histories (Haug, Braveboy-Wagner, and Maihold 2021). It is used here to acknowledge that contemporary patterns of inequality, impoverishment, marginalisation, and militarism are intimately connected with the global legacies of colonial and imperial domination (Dados and Connell 2012). It also helps to acknowledge that scholarly discussions of utopias have predominantly focused on post-industrial societies in the Global North and, at times, on its contemporary difficulties – or even "apathy" – in re-thinking and proposing transformative visions of ideal society (e.g. Foa and Mounk 2016). Indeed, the focus on the Global North has been further strengthened in the recent past, as multiple crises such as the climate emergency, escalating conflicts, and security concerns have incited new discussions about alternative and more sustainable restructurings of society. The desired changes may pursue environmentally and socially sustainable futures but in many cases they increasingly reveal nationalistic, racist, and conservative utopian visions that echo romanticised imaginaries of the past (Berntzen 2019). In much of the Global South, imagining and searching for alternatives and criticising the status quo have been integral to public debates since the colonial era, albeit receiving less scholarly interest.

Following World War II and the emancipatory struggles for national independence, most academic and political debates about desirable societal change in the Global South have taken place through the prism of "development" (Ferguson 1994). As Sachs (2019, xiii) reminds us, "the discourse of development held a monumental historical promise: that in the end, all societies would close the gap with the rich and partake in the fruits of industrial civilization". The problem with this utopianism of development was that a "progressive, development reading of history" has implicitly, and often explicitly, portrayed "Western" modernity as the culmination of history, thus reinforcing the continuation of colonial and imperialist relations (Allen 2015, 525; see Mignolo 2011). While their means were different, both capitalist and socialist development ventures were justified by the idea of progressive change and a future state of abundance and better equality. Many aspirations were attached to the idea of revolution – either nationalist

or socialist – particularly in the aftermath of the Cuban Revolution (1959), which inspired extensive decolonisation processes and nationalist movements within the Third World and the Non-Alignment Movement. African socialism was a widely discussed and practised ideology in the 1960s in the wake of the continent's decolonising processes and nationalist uprisings, but such ambitious revolutionary movements gradually atrophied after one-party systems co-opted ideological debates. At the time, it was not difficult to dream of a revolution or even to execute one, but the principal difficulty was "that of institutionalizing the new, of establishing a sustainable, durable space for free political action" (Scott 2014, 63). Indeed, many emancipatory and immensely hopeful uprisings gave birth to "strategic generations" of new national political elites (Edmunds and Turner 2002, 16–18) who consolidated the political power of the postcolonial states, leading to authoritarian leadership and *de facto* one-party rule.

While the hopes for revolutionary, transformative change may have weakened during the 1990s in some parts of the world, the Global South has continued to witness attempts to construct transformative alternatives and societal change. We have already mentioned the Arab Spring uprisings and the efforts to construct plurinational states in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile. These processes can be complemented by Venezuela's twenty-first-century socialism, Brazil's social assistance programs, or Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index as a new development paradigm, to name some examples. Additionally, a significant number of pluriversal transformative initiatives seem to be emerging at local levels (Kothari et al. 2019). We argue that these transformative alternatives are particularly prevalent in the Global South for two reasons: first, because its uneven processes of state formation bear colonial legacies, such as overlapping structures of social authority, extractive production, and ethnic conflicts. This has resulted in citizen-subjectivities that are more fluid and precarious, as they are constructed in relation to postcolonial state structures that represent but one locus of social authority in society among others (Migdal 2001; see also Kontinen and Onodera 2015). In these contexts, structural and institutional conditions allow significant questioning and space to imagine the restructuring of social life, as state governance has, to varying extents, produced weak institutions, clientelistic practices, and despotism (e.g. Mamdani 1996). In many ways, the global and former colonial powers have maintained and benefited from these conditions, at times supporting violent coups and autocracies, at other times tying their assistance and strategic partnership to their visions of "good development".

Second, due to the unequal global distribution of wealth and privilege, the paramount aspirations to access better life chances and equal opportunities – whether in the form of income, welfare, or political participation – continue to prevail and be withheld at multiple levels of social life. In these contexts, people may not enjoy "substantive citizenship" and do not have access to the rights and entitlements which their formal citizen status should in principle

provide (Holston 2008). At the same time, as recent research suggests, weak state institutions do not necessarily mean that civil society activists are pessimistic about their political influence (Luhtakallio, Ylä-Anttila, and Lounela 2022). In exploring these dynamics, our approach is inspired by Eskelinen's (2020) proposal that democracy be viewed as a utopian ideal that is, as noted above, both radical and highly compromised, increasingly so today. Conceived in this way, democracy "has not been completely institutionalised, and indeed cannot be" (Eskelinen 2020, 153), and existing democracies are by definition hybrid as they incorporate both democratic and undemocratic elements. As we have argued, however, the lived realities are more complex in the postcolonial Global South than in established or "achieved" democracies elsewhere. As Tripp (2010, 1) comments about Museveni's Uganda, postcolonial hybrid regimes can be "fraught with contradictions", continuing: "Their leaders adopt the trappings of democracy, yet they pervert democracy – sometimes through patronage and largess, other times through violence and repression – for the sole purpose of remaining in power."

As already mentioned, popular claims to rights, livelihoods, and social justice since the turn of the millennium have increasingly been translated into authoritarian politics and the securitisation of civil society in many parts of the Global South. Populist politics may have expanded the access to public arenas for some actors and new elites, thus widening their exercise of active citizenship (Arditi 2010; see also Rancière 2016), yet parallel processes of demobilisation and reduced spaces for autonomous action are becoming ever-more widespread. The state-led projects and programs that have co-opted utopian notions of equality – be it the development paradigm, socialist revolution, or the capitalist project – have partly lost their prominence as alternatives for activist struggle. Nonetheless, as this book attests, instances of citizenship utopias and alternative forms of activism do emerge. For decades, people have been forced to condition political imaginaries to existing, often constraining, postcolonial realities, which may result in a myriad of surprising, sometimes seemingly apolitical means of expressing political dissent and social grievances. Two decades ago Mbembe (2001) discussed how citizens in authoritarian one-party regimes in post-colonial Africa have always found ways to conduct political discussions, although the forms of such discussions may have eluded conventional civil society prisms or the binary understandings of authoritarian–democratic rule.

In sum, we suggest that complex and overlapping hierarchical realities, coupled with the lack of responsive public institutions and the unmet aspirations for societal change through formal political processes, have provided fertile ground for a multitude of emerging activisms and social movements in the Global South. This book aims to build on empirically grounded understandings of such emerging forms of activism in contemporary contexts, especially in situations where shared disillusionment is an ever-growing dimension of experiencing citizenship.

Activism in times of disillusionment

Building on these insights, this book explores emerging activisms in what could be characterised as post-emancipatory contexts of disillusionment. By this we mean that the activists have already experienced the heightened hope of emancipation – and the aspirations of equality, dignity, and justice it carried – but, in retrospect, not only have these aspirations not been met but, often, developments have been quite the reverse; prime examples include popular revolutions against an authoritarian regime. In post-revolutionary contexts, such as Tunisia and Egypt in the 2010s, the former subjects of authoritarian regimes emerged briefly as empowered citizens, but after a period of mass protest and initial political liberalism, both of which yielded hope of emancipation, transitional processes resulted in ever-more populist regimes and re-emerging authoritarianism (e.g. Spierings 2020). What do shared experiences of such "failed" mobilisation do for reconfiguring new, alternative forms of activism in such circumstances?

Post-emancipatory contexts do not, however, need to be as evident or abrupt. Activism in times of disillusionment can be smaller in scale and outreach, longer in the making, more subtle and partial. By activism we generally refer here to individual and collective actions – social movements are but one of their organisational forms – in which "social actors constitute collective identities as a means to create democratic spaces for … autonomous action" (Escobar and Alvarez 1992, 5). Beyond revolutions and their aftermaths, post-emancipatory activism can also manifest in continued efforts in the wake of presidential and legislative elections, legal reforms, and similar processes invested with hope for societal change. Beyond political events, disillusionment may likewise relate to the wider framework and limited spaces of action in which activists live and operate. In these contexts, wherein expectations of societal change have not been realised, people are compelled to cope with the inadequacy of limited or even contrary results with feelings of disillusionment or acceptance (Oinas, Onodera, and Suurpää 2018; Ssentongo and Alava 2023).

In general, disillusionment is characterised by feelings of being stuck in conditions that either do not reflect or have moved further away from the utopias or hopes people once had for the future. Most cases discussed in the chapters of this book feature such processes of disillusionment, along with the dynamism between what is considered possible, what is not, and how this balance can be negotiated. In Chapter 2, Kaskinen and Mwaura discuss how community activists in Kenya have accepted the far from ideal framework and conditions of civil society by adopting the human rights discourse of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for practical purposes, despite its conflicts with their leftist social justice aims. Similarly, in Algeria, as Benyamina suggests in Chapter 3, young activists are highly disillusioned with the existing avenues of political participation and choose to "disavow" politics altogether. Bearing in mind the personal risks and disconnect of overt resistance,

they actively disengage with formal politics, preferring to engage in voluntary groups that are less radical, but nevertheless provide avenues for meaningful collective action, friendship, and peer support.

In contexts where available avenues have led to dwindling faith in the possibilities of political transformation, social media have provided alternative spaces for collective actions whereby ideal futures are negotiated and new citizen agencies constituted. Indeed, the expansion of access to the Internet has enabled practices of "wired citizenship" (Herrera 2014) and strengthened digital activism as an important experiential and pedagogic space in the Global South. As activist initiatives simultaneously evolve in online and offline spaces, their scope, aims, and accessibility are necessarily affected, leading to new experiences of what citizen utopias could mean in practice. In Chapter 4, Chukunzira provides an activist account of how the COVID-19 pandemic pushed community activists in South Africa to organise themselves online and, in the absence of state action, to provide support for the residents of impoverished townships and informal settlements. In doing so, they navigated and forged alliances in contexts where people's access to digital platforms is not evident, which created and restructured the possibilities of activist mobilisation.

Overall, this book discusses disillusionments on different scales and issues: from large revolutions to civil society campaigning, student politics, antiracism, and community activism. It particularly examines what happens during moments of disillusionment, when hopes and expectations of democratisation or social justice have been undermined or dashed by, for example, populist politics or autocratic rule. In this context, our interest in citizenship utopias relates to activists' ability to cultivate and maintain hope in the attainment of rights and justice, and to act on their claims for better futures from the polities to which they belong. While most chapters focus on rather small-scale and emergent forms of activism in particular national contexts, in Chapter 5 Pleyers explores the popular uprising in Chile in 2019 and how it connects with global social movement dynamics today, including the relevance of "socio-digital networks" during the past 10 years or so. He identifies commonalities between global mass mobilisations and protest movements, and observes that social changes leading to a more just and democratic world are far from linear processes, but involve the dynamic of advances and setbacks, and moments of both euphoria and disillusionment.

Decolonising the state

As enacted ideal visions, citizenship utopias imply acts of political imagination with regard to how public political life and society could be organised, its resources distributed, common decisions made, and diverse memberships equally respected and recognised. The activists who appear in this book rarely denounce the role of the state as a locus of social authority in society; in other words, they do not necessarily contest the democratic justifications

of the state while often fundamentally contesting its withering legitimacy. Thus, in this sense, citizenship utopias evolve on a normative terrain in which state apparatuses play a role in securing the citizens' equal access to justice and welfare. This is conspicuous, as the advent of neoliberal globalisation has tied state governance intimately to the undemocratic operations of transnational corporations, banks, and other agencies (Sharma and Gupta 2006). Furthermore, many activists operate beyond statist realms, if only globally by digital means, while international institutions and standards, such as the United Nations and international human rights mechanisms, provide them with valuable, albeit sometimes contested, tools and frameworks for action and protection.

The global trend of increasing authoritarianism and declining democracy indicates, however, that states are increasingly becoming sources of disillusionment. Thus, we suggest that states are of growing importance as sites of contestation and objects of utopian imagination in the Global South. While state governance invites a myriad of aspirations for better futures, the practical realisation of these aspirations is becoming ever-more distant. In some sense, the once "concrete utopias" of building and designing state institutions that ensure welfare, justice, and equality have become increasingly unrealisable. In this context, seemingly conventional claims related to the defence of people's power and democracy, the rule of law, and rights and freedoms in civic spaces have become ever-more pertinent for utopian activism. Although activists may not promote systemic utopian visions as such, their operational contexts have been so altered that these claims are being reinvigorated with more radical, existential meanings. In other words, citizenship utopias are utopian insofar as the existing social, political, and economic conditions have pushed their ideals further away from the realm of perceived possibilities.

What is more, processes of state formation and policy making in the Global South are being contested by aspirations to decolonise state structures and struggle against intersecting inequalities and marginalisation. In such countries as Bolivia, Chile, and Ecuador, Indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants have lobbied for the construction of plurinational states that recognise and include their cultural and racial diversity. In the name of decolonising states, new visions, stemming from Indigenous peoples' worldviews and cosmologies, of the forms and practices of state institutions have materialised. For example, the Quechua concept of *sumak kawsay,* which has been translated – depending on the context – into Spanish as *vivir bien/buen vivir* (good life, living well), means "life in fullness" (Cubillo-Guevara and Hidalgo-Capitán 2015; Cuestas Caza 2020), thus drawing close to what is generally considered to be characteristic of utopian futures: life lived to the full in an idyllic community without private property or material deprivation (Beauchesne and Santos 2011, 2). In Chapter 6, Radcliffe examines the practical implementation of "decolonising utopias" in Ecuador, where the notions of *sumak kawsay* and *buen vivir*, enshrined in the national

constitution since 2008, "propel social activism into institutionalising and social embedding a break from historically entrenched exclusionary citizenship". In addition to the institutionalisation of "good life" policies in some Latin American countries, *vivir bien/buen vivir* thinking continues to inspire social movements and activists throughout the region (Habersang 2022), although their state co-optation has also been contested and opposed (Ranta 2023b).

Thus, we need to be attentive to criticism of large scale or systemic utopian projects for their totalitarian tendencies (Sorensen 2011) or lack of freedom in the Arendtian sense (Arendt 1990 [1963]). Utopian ideals have often implied that a world without power relations could exist; however, envisioning a "power-free utopia" can potentially lead to fundamentalism, totalitarianism, and attempts to homogenise the citizenry, which obscures intersecting inequalities and, ultimately, silences and invisibilises marginal groups, including women, sexual minorities, ethnic groups, and Indigenous peoples (Allen 2015, 525; also Brown 2005). Certain kinds of idealism and romanticisation have accompanied many revolutionary projects that aimed at classless societies, as, for example, in the case of the Cuban revolution (Morales Domínguez 2002, 76). As the state-led discourses of equality have been so overpowering, the specific economic and social hardships, discrimination, and racism that Black and Mixed-Race populations have faced, particularly since the pro-market reforms of the 1990s, have gone unnoticed. Consequently, the hopes and expectations of Afro-Cubans in regard to the "socialist utopian horizon" in Cuba have decreased, or even disappeared (Zurbano 2021, 156). In Chapter 7, Rodríguez Malagón and Ranta discuss this situation from the perspective of Black feminists, who find themselves caught in complicated dynamics between socialist mass organisations and emergent autonomous organising. Meanwhile, although the case of Cuba is unique, feminist organising is booming throughout Latin America. Reacting to the rise of patriarchal authoritarianism and the shrinking space for civil society, new feminist formations are appearing "outside/beyond the state, beyond institutionalised interactions, in the streets, in the realms of media, culture, meanings and representations" (Alvarez 2019, 307–308), bringing together activists, artists, and scholars to address intersecting inequalities based on gender, sexuality, age, race, and ethnicity, to name a few.

Much of the booming feminist activism is part of much wider social and political mobilisation promoting decolonisation, anti-imperialism, and the restructuring of unequal power relations between the Global South and Global North. One of the most emblematic recent struggles has been the South African student movement, which has advanced the processes of decolonising systems of higher education. In Chapter 8, Nyundu and Hosseini discuss how the parallel processes of neoliberal reforms and authoritarianism have resulted in the failure of the post-apartheid state to keep its promise of providing quality education to university students. The introduction of increasing tuition fees in 2015 instigated strong opposition among students,

many of whom were already providing for their families – in the form of the so-called "Black Tax" – who have been structurally impoverished for decades under apartheid. Since then, demands and movements for decolonising the university have spread to many parts of the world (Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nisancioglu 2018).

Discussions of anti-racism and racism, as well as struggles for racial equality and justice, are at the centre of decolonial movements and activism. While the Black Lives Matter movement has inspired racial justice movements the world over since 2013, concrete forms of collective action remain rooted and articulated in the local contexts and histories in which they unfold. In Tunisia, as Onodera and Garfi discuss in Chapter 9, everyday racism is connected to the legacy of slavery in the region, and Black Tunisians, augmented by migrants from elsewhere in Africa, have historically faced discrimination and marginalisation based on socially reproduced racial hierarchies. While the Tunisian Revolution of 2010–2011 opened new spaces and opportunities for anti-racist activism, with actors and civil society networks managing to push racism into public debate and even legal reforms, in retrospect this has yielded few tangible changes. Nonetheless, despite experiencing setbacks, activists have persisted in public life and diversified the scope and content of what being a Tunisian could mean.

Re-imagining citizenships

Citizenship implies the notion of political belonging in important ways, and thus its examination produces knowledge of "how we live with others in a political community" (Lazar 2013, 1). From a sociological perspective, Isin and Nyers (2014, 1) note that citizenship can be seen as "an 'institution' mediating rights between the subjects of politics and the polity to which these subjects belong", with institution referring to a broad set of processes whereby "something is enacted, created, and rendered relatively durable and stable but still contestable, surprising, and inventive". By talking about political subjects they distance the notion from the implication of national belonging inherent to the concept of citizen, while polity transcends the state frame to include transnational actors and rights conventions (Isin and Nyers 2014, 1).

Some caution in this context is needed, however. In a sense, the concept of citizenship can be seen as intimately tied to the idea of the modern nation-state and European/North American traditions of liberalism, making it something of an accomplice to processes of imperialism and colonialism in the Global South (Shindo 2022; Smith 2012; Smith and Rogers 2015). Instances where states promote rigid identities at the core of citizenship may also produce highly exclusive, ethnic nationalisms, which have at times led Indigenous peoples to produce their own framings of citizenship as alternatives to the state-sanctioned memberships. Simpson (2014, 109) refers to these as "feeling citizenships" that emerge in the "present space of

intracommunity recognition, affection, and care, outside the logics of colonial and imperial rule". Globally, as Boatcă and Roth (2016, 192) suggest, the notion of citizenship can also be seen at the core of global inequalities, as "its institutionalization in the West has gone hand in hand with the legal (and physical) exclusion of non-European, non-White and non-Western populations from civic, political, social and cultural rights".

Talking about citizenship utopias that articulate utopianism with the notion of citizenship, as we do in this book, may in this light seem an oxymoron. As noted above, however, our interest lies in the exploration of ideal experiences of being and acting as a citizen. We also hope to take part in attempts to decolonise citizenship discussions and make them more relevant globally (Smith and Rogers 2015). In this sense, our approach to citizenship utopias allows, first, a critical scrutiny of the deterministic accounts of a "good citizen" that are conveyed, often in contradictory ways, through state policy and rhetoric, on the one hand, and state practices, on the other. Secondly, the focus on citizenship utopias opens up potential ways of imagining transformative and decolonising futures beyond the parameters of contemporary populist authoritarianism, exclusive nationalism, or post-pandemic economies. At the same time, most of the movements and activists discussed in this book are not promoting radically new definitions of citizenship. As we shall see, theirs is a defence of the principles of welfare, justice, equality, recognition, and the right to have rights (Arendt 1985 [1951]) and to engage in public processes that intimately reverberate in people's everyday lives. From this perspective, citizenship utopias can both be reconciled with *and* transcend the ontology of democratic state, while leaving their precarious positions unresolved at the margins of what is imaginable and what is actually possible.

In the Global South, the public debate about encounters between the state/polity and political subjects is notoriously complex. Terms such as citizenship, nation, and state are profoundly contested, and political subjects may enjoy – or suffer from – multilayered political belongings and "multiple and segmented sovereignties" (Hansen and Stepputat 2006, 305). If, for the protagonists, the state has always appeared distant, corrupt, clientelist, and/or ethnically biased, it may seem utopian to hope it could ever bestow upon citizens ideal forms of societal change, belonging, and action. In Chapter 10, Zakhour explores the narratives of state corruption among youth living in the marginalised regions of Tunisia, demonstrating that by naming the faults and shortcomings of a state claiming to be democratising, they hold the state to account. While he examines what could be termed the "generational narratives of systemic failure" (Murphy 2012) that persisted after the Tunisian revolution, the pessimism and disdain of the coercive state also suggests hope for a better state of affairs and ways of being citizens. In Algeria, where the Arab Spring uprisings did not yield a popular revolution, the Hirak movement emerged in 2019 and ousted President Bouteflika from office, widening its demands to include the rule of law and an end to corruption. In Chapter

11, Maïche explores the roles of autonomous trade union activists in building the culture of protest in the run-up period to Hirak mobilisation. He pays attention to the performative dimension of citizenship, as activists constituted themselves as citizens through various "acts of citizenship" (Isin and Nielsen 2008) while operating on the fringes of formal trade union activism and state-centric webs of patronage and control. In this book, Algeria, Tunisia, and South Africa each provide the empirical background for two separate chapters. This serves to illustrate, we hope, how the different and multiplex processes take place within any given national context.

In authoritarian contexts and one-party states, the institutionalised practices of citizenship tend to correspond to the ideological needs and perspectives of state actors in terms of the ideal of a "good citizen". Yet, as contemporary communist countries, such as China, have started to embrace state-led capitalism, the relationships between ordinary citizens and state officials and institutions have changed considerably (Chen 2014, 191). In highly centralised communist decision-making, citizens were expected to participate in mass organisations and submit complaints and petitions at various levels in the nonbinding consultations of socialist democracy. Now, however, as ordinary people have lost many of the benefits and much of the security offered by the previous system (Chen 2014, 190–191), they are forced to address government officials directly through collective action and petitioning, which Chen (2014) describes as "contentious authoritarianism". In Vietnam, as Le and Nicolaisen describe in Chapter 12, the communist state has assumed the role of an educator that teaches its citizens morally correct behaviour through the mechanisms of reward and punishment. Meanwhile, responding to increasing state repression during the COVID-19 pandemic, small-scale everyday resistance and citizen activism has emerged beyond state control in support of the most marginalised groups, while large-scale protests or public mobilisations have not taken place.

Beyond one-party states, the question of citizenship and belonging has become a tool for nationalist leaders in an increasing number of countries where ethnic nationalism and autocratisation are on the rise. Such is India, where diverse activists struggle between contradictory and controversial solidarities and forms of belonging, including class, caste, and gender. As Ghosh explains in Chapter 13, Indian queer activists have gradually promoted new visions of rights and privileges with the support of local, national, and global organisations. Some members of gender non-conforming communities, who have been historically marginalised and dispossessed, have simultaneously found refuge in Hindu nationalist circles, while others detest the latter's xenophobic and polarising politics.

Finally, the contributions in this book bear witness to the complex entanglements of emergent activisms that articulate ideal societal orders with re-imaginations of what citizenship means and how it is performed, enacted, and transformed in diverse contexts in the Global South. While the chapters are rich in historical and contextual description, they collectively contribute

to greater understanding of the contemporary global dynamics around utopias, activism, and disillusionments. By highlighting different aspects of what we call "citizenship utopias", they engage in outlining contemporary signals for transformative futures and their possibilities.

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Part I

Activism in times of disillusionment

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2 Activist contestations in contemporary socio-political change making in Kenya

Martta Kaskinen and Job Mwaura

Introduction

"Why are you arresting me? I protest because you're killing us. You police – you're killing us in our communities!", a young woman cried out as she was hanging on to a parked car mirror in Nairobi city centre trying to stop police officers from carrying her away. The video of her shouting back to the police on 7 July in 2020 was posted on Twitter and it quickly became an iconic video among human rights activists in Kenya (Kimathi 2020). That day, human rights and social justice activists organised the Saba Saba March for Our Lives protest for the 30th time to protest against state-led human rights injustices. Saba Saba movement is a commemoration of protest events of 7 July 1990 (*saba* for seven in Kiswahili), when civil rights groups and politicians protested for the end of one-party rule and a constitutional reform in Kenya. Today, the annual march unites working-class activists from the informal settlement communities, and civil society organisations, to fight for pressing social justice issues. In this chapter, we look at the 2020 Saba Saba march – which was particularly violent but also solidarity-driven because of COVID-19 restrictions of the time – as an example of community-based activist collaboration amid feelings of distrust and disillusionment among activist groups in Kenya.

While Kenyan civil society has been actively working towards societal change even in the midst of repression by various government regimes throughout Kenya's colonial and post-independence history, the activist movement has diversified during the past decade. Numerous community-based justice centres have been established in urban informal settlements to fight for the rights of marginalised, poor communities. This in part is due to perceptions that the decades of presence of human rights non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in their communities has yielded limited results (Jones, Kimari, and Ramakrishnan 2017). Nevertheless, the community-based activist movement has not diverged from the NGO sector, but works in close collaboration with it, and has in part adopted a human rights institutional discourse frame for activism. Activists at the community level refer to themselves as human rights defenders (HRDs), mirroring UN human rights

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policy rhetoric that was adopted after the 1998 UN declaration on human rights defenders (OHCHR 1999). We looked at the contestations and dynamics of the human rights activist movement within civil society and focused especially on the justice centre activist networks and their collaborators at the more formal NGO level of organising. In doing so we unearthed how tensions along both vertical and horizontal lines are perceived by activists at the community level. Further, we discuss how the dynamics that may be perceived as problematic can also potentially contribute towards a healthy civil society ecosystem.

Our research is based on data from one-on-one interviews and focus-group discussions (FGD) conducted between 2017 and 2022 with activists from several justice centres in informal settlements in Nairobi. We also spoke with young middle-class activists who operate independently or in small groups outside the justice centres, and professionals who work on human rights issues at the NGO level. Kaskinen, the first author of this chapter, conducted 31 semi-structured interviews and five focus-group discussions with activists from several organisational levels during three-and-half months of fieldwork in Nairobi between 2019 and 2022. Mwaura conducted over a dozen interviews with activists during his doctoral studies in 2017, 2018, and more recently in 2021 and 2022 in other related studies. In addition, the two authors co-organised a focus-group discussion with six activist participants from the Mathare Social Justice Centre in February 2022 that focused specifically on the topics of this chapter.

Our analysis reveals that while there are events in which activists feel connected and focused on the same goals – such as the Saba Saba protest of 2020 – there are underlying disputes within the movement that create friction within the activist networks. On the one hand, there are vertical contestations that are seen in the relationships between community-level organising and the mainstream NGO level, and occasionally, between community-level activists and individual celebrity activists. Here, class relations within the movement create tensions that have the potential to create conflict within and beyond, derail advocacy and also shift the focus of social political movements, which we define as loosely organised but sustained campaigns in support of social and/or political goals. On the other hand, many activists highlighted what they called "horizontal violence": as the community-based social justice movement has grown, collaboration opportunities with mainstream institutions have become less accessible due to increased competition and dwindling resources such as donor funding. In this chapter, we will first provide a historical contextual overview of the civil society ecosystem in Kenya, and how community-level activism is situated within it. We will then discuss and analyse the dynamics within the human rights activist movement along vertical and horizontal lines based on empirical data. Lastly, we will exemplify the dynamics with the case of the Saba Saba protest.

Overview of the civil society ecosystem in Kenya

Some scholars argue that civil society is often characterised narrowly in academic and policymaking discourses, with a tendency to exclude heterogeneous grassroots activism and focus excessively on well-established forms of association especially in the Sub-Saharan African context (Luttrell-Rowland, Engebretson, and Segalo 2021; Obadare 2011). To ensure a more inclusive conceptual frame, we used the concept of "civil society ecosystem" to refer to civil society as a complex and only partially visible political entity that involves lively processes at multiple levels. Borrowing terms from the natural sciences, civil society as an ecosystem was conceptualised by Michael Edwards (2011), as he aimed to highlight the organic complexity, diversity, and interconnectedness as traits of a healthy civil society, which is composed of context specific actors and their dynamic relations between the state, the market, and the private sphere. Looking at civil society as an ecosystem emphasises that even its smaller and less visible parts have crucial roles for the system to operate effectively as a whole (Edwards 2011; Paturyan and Gevorgyan 2021). Such an approach is suitable for our purposes in analysing the Kenyan context, as we scrutinise the dynamics on different levels of activist organising within the particularities of the Kenyan civil society context.

In the colonial period, civil society organisations (CSOs)[1] – in addition to unofficial popular groups – were instrumental in liberation movements and ending British colonial rule. Apart from having a political component, the Kavirondo Taxpayers Welfare Association and the Ukambani Members Association fought against the poor treatment of the people in their own ethnic communities. With the attainment of independence in 1963, the first government led by the independence leader Jomo Kenyatta silenced any voices that opposed the government operations. Some individuals from CSOs, academia, and even the political class that were critical of the government went into exile when their lives were threatened by government forces. During President Daniel arap Moi's dictatorship between 1978 and 2002 opposition voices were largely silenced, and the government treated activists like Peace Laureate Wangari Maathai and her Greenbelt Movement as enemies of the state. In 1990, politicians such as Raila Odinga rose to be at the forefront of opposing the Moi single-party regime, initiating the already mentioned Saba Saba march that was referred to as the "second liberation" movement after Kenyan independence (Nyinguro and Otenyo 2007). When President Mwai Kibaki took power in 2002, he tried to nurture greater freedom of expression in the country. There was little interference with the media and a wider variety of opinions could be expressed. CSOs could also speak with a louder voice, and activists from the CSO realm were brought into government for the first time. However, the popular high hopes for a democratic shift in Kenya after Kibaki's accession were soon abated, as some accused him of continuing with "politics as usual" (Murunga and Nasong'o 2006).

Today, Kenya has a vibrant civil society ecosystem compared to many other African nations especially in East and Central Africa. However, during the past decade, the space for civil society has been shrinking due to antagonism from the Kenyan government. The previous government, led by Uhuru Kenyatta – the son of the country's first president – and his Jubilee coalition,[2] openly cultivated hostility towards CSOs between 2013 and 2022. Many argue the government hostilities towards civil society in Kenya were rooted in Kenyatta's rancour towards Kenyan human rights activists, who openly supported a thorough International Criminal Court (ICC) investigation that started in 2012 of his and five other Kenyan politicians' complicity in the post-election violence of 2007–2008 (Kendall 2014). Since then, Kenyatta has infamously strengthened the narrative of civil society as "evil society". In the Jubilee political rhetoric, it is argued that this functions as a puppet of donor countries in the Global North (Nderu 2018; Wood 2016). Consequently, the Kenyan government has muzzled CSOs and deregistered them in masses since the ICC investigation (CIVICUS 2022). At the same time, the Kenyatta regime faced pressure to implement the 2010 Constitution and its progressive Bill of Rights that would safeguard citizen participation in civil society organising – which is yet to be actualised in practice (Murunga, Okello, and Sjögren 2014; Wood 2016).

While there have been many indications of the state's hostility towards critical and politically vocal activist groups throughout Kenyan post-independence history, the dichotomous understanding of the state's overtly oppositional stance towards the civil society simplifies the dynamic realities of the civil society ecosystem and its position vis-à-vis the state in Kenya. Mati (2020) argues that the Kenyan state has always curtailed the civil society movements it has perceived as being antithetical to state interests, while simultaneously supporting CSOs that are beneficial to state interests. For example, responding to donor demands for democratisation during the dictatorship, the Moi regime generated narratives of pro-democracy CSOs as puppets of foreign funding – narratives that the Kenyatta regime subsequently bolstered – while creating a "soft spot" for seemingly apolitical development NGOs operating within a neoliberal market frame (Mati 2020).

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist bloc and the transition to multiparty democracy in Eastern Europe, Africa, and Latin America in the 1990s, the civil society "boom" began. Before that, state ministries and organisations had received most of the donor financing under the modernisation paradigm especially in Africa. The combination of the debt crisis, excessive expenditure and corruption by authoritarian regimes, one-party rule, and dissatisfaction with the meagre successes of African socialism contributed to persuading funders that NGOs and civil society were the new development panacea (Young 2004). African socialism was a strongly state-centred endeavour, and it received generous funding from international contributors. African socialism was never realised into a mass movement with political power in Kenya (Bellucci 2021), but the country

experienced debt crises, excessive use of public resources by authoritarian governments, and one-party dictatorship that ended in the early 1990s during the second liberation movement. African socialist thinking nevertheless influenced the social justice movements in Kenya, as well as in other African countries, as they fought inequalities related to class, and neoliberal and neo-colonial power dynamics (Mutunga 2015).

While donors from the Global North expressed increasing support for Kenyan NGOs in the 1990s and the number of aided NGOs skyrocketed, it is notable that the remaining pro-democratic ones served mostly elitist, middle-class, urban issues and were not overtly critical of the governing one-party regime (Mutua 2013). Today, development assistance from the Global North to Kenyan CSOs has dramatically decreased since the 1990s, partly due to Kenya's economic development and decreased donor dependency, as well as increased donor focus on supporting the private sector and strengthening counter-terror alliances, not to mention the strengthening presence of Chinese investment in the country (Wood 2016; on recent CSO challenges in the Global North, see Kaskinen and Ranta 2023). Nevertheless, community-based civil society organising has become ever more vibrant and visible in the Kenyan civil society ecosystem, as will be discussed more in detail below.

Situating community-based activism in the Kenyan civil society ecosystem

As there has been an upsurge of human rights violations such as extrajudicial executions after the regime change from Kibaki to Kenyatta in 2013 (Jones, Kimari, and Ramakrishnan 2017) and the new Constitution adopted in 2010 guarantees greater freedom of organisation than during previous governments, community-based activist movements have had fertile grounds to grow in Kenya during the past decade despite decreasing donor funding. The first official justice centre, Mathare Social Justice Centre (MSJC) was established in 2015 by young people living in the Mathare informal settlement in Nairobi. While numerous NGOs had been working on hundreds of projects in the second largest informal settlement in Nairobi, many felt they were not helping in addressing socio-political issues affecting everyday life in Mathare (Jones, Kimari, and Ramakrishnan 2017). For example, police brutality continued to be a threat despite the progressive Constitution and subsequent police reforms, while many other constitutional human rights had not been met nor addressed by the government. Additionally, although 70% of Kenyans are below 30 years of age, young people have been excluded, marginalised, and criminalised by the Kenyan state in the public discourse, which has caused disillusionment among the youth (Kimari, Melchiorre, and Rasmussen 2020). From these grounds, MSJC aimed to create a space for more participatory forms of justice, so that people with first-hand experience of human rights violations could be empowered to take action against them by protesting and documenting human rights violations.

Following Mathare's footsteps, numerous other informal settlement communities formed justice centres in Nairobi and other cities and counties, and today there are at least 50 centres across Kenya (OHCHR 2019). The community-based centres form a national Social Justice Centres Working Group (SJCWG), which has two representatives from each centre and functions as the collective voice and coordinator of justice centres in the Kenyan civil society. SJCWG is further divided in geographical chapters, such as the Nairobi chapter and the Western chapter that covers the Western counties in Kenya. Within the chapters, there are thematic committees that work on specific topics, such as gender-based violence or police brutality. While the social justice movement is based on volunteer work and does not require qualifications that are valued in formal civil society organisations, such as NGOs, it is a highly sophisticated collaborative network that aims at more straightforward and radical activism than what the NGO framework would enable. For example, the justice centres play a crucial role in organising the annual Saba Saba march, and the SJCWG has composed the official Saba Saba petition since 2018.

Most activists in justice centres are young and most are women, which makes the centres a peculiarity in established ways of civil society or political organising in Kenya, which are usually senior male dominated. According to an interviewee from MSJC, the centre's leadership was composed of six women and one man in 2022. This, according to interviews, has contributed to issues such as gender-based violence being central in many centres' agendas, and to a feminist framework being incorporated in centre policies. In addition to women, the centres also enable young and poor people to have access to spaces where they can get a sense of agency not possible in other forms of socio-political changemaking. For example, becoming involved with Kenyan party politics requires capital and patron–client affiliations that may compromise radical political ambitions, which often leaves young people with first-hand experience of poverty without opportunities (Ranta 2017).

Kenyan post-colonial activist movements have tended to claim affiliation with historical symbols of political opposition – such as the Mau Mau insurrection against the British colonial regime – and strategically combined those symbols to the international human rights discourse (Pommerolle 2006). The combination of a socialist revolutionary discourse and a human rights discourse was strongly embraced in the justice centres: graffiti and quotes by international and national independence leaders and socialist figures decorated the walls of MSJC and other justice centres, next to NGO banners and information about human rights and the Kenyan Constitution. In interviews, the justice centre activists cultivated a discursive mixture of left-wing revolutionary rhetoric and human rights jargon when describing their activism and referred to themselves as HRDs. According to Mutunga (2015), the community-level activists fighting for better living and working conditions in Kenya have largely adopted a human rights discourse framework for their activism, while the limitation of that framework has not been critically assessed much. However, the justice centre

activists we interviewed were critical of NGO frameworks, while emphasising the need to operate within those frameworks for strategic reasons, as will be discussed in more detail next.

Vertical dynamics within the activist ecosystem

Activism in social movements and advocacy in Kenya are shaped by a range of issues. Mwaura (2019) argues that class, ethnicity, and political affiliations shape the social and political life of many Kenyans. The main issue that distinguishes community-based and NGO activists is the issue of social stratification – class. While the NGO activists possess financial resources and assets (mainly from donor funding), they also have cultural capital: higher levels of education and local and international networks, which provide them with a lot of power and influence in the civil society. Activists and social movement groups at the community level in informal settlements, on the other hand, are less privileged. Financial resources such as donor funding, are difficult to access because the activists' educational achievements are comparatively lower. While their greatest asset is social capital, through which they are able to resonate, advocate, and build stronger networks in the communities, they often still consider themselves to be of a lower class than the NGO activists. These dynamics that project differences of superiority and inferiority, where activists are devalued or valued depending on wealth, class, resources, education, and cultural dynamics, is what we refer to here as vertical dynamics within the activist ecosystem.

In an in-depth interview conducted in early 2019 with an activist from MSJC, the respondent lamented about the disconnect between NGO activists and grassroots activists and mentioned the following:

> There is a class disconnect between us as grassroots activists and activists operating within the NGO sector. When they hold important forums that affect the people we advocate for, they hold the meetings in flashy hotels located in the leafy suburbs of Nairobi. Not everyone can access these hotels, particularly because one needs financial resources to access them. Also, their style of advocacy is a bit distant from ours. While we are on the ground with the communities we fight for, the NGO activists operate mainly on digital media, and people in these underprivileged communities cannot afford a smartphone or data to participate in the discussions online.
>
> (Interview, 9 January 2019)

Despite the perceptions of a disconnect, community-based activist networks have had to find ways of working in collaboration with the "formal" side of Kenyan civil society, namely, NGOs and UN organisations, for various reasons. As social justice centres operate fully with a volunteer force and are composed of people living in informal settlements, resources for working on larger scale campaigns are limited. According to the interviewees, many

campaigns and protests that require material resources and legal support are conducted in collaboration with funded NGOs, who may provide training, cater for travel expenses, and organise t-shirts, banners, or other supporting material for street protests. Additionally, NGO presence is crucial for grassroots protection in protests in which conflict with the police is probable – such as Saba Saba – as they can provide legal support and financial assistance in paying for bail for those arrested. While the community-based activist movement benefits from such collaboration materially and legally, the movement is also crucial for NGOs, as funders require their work to be anchored in grassroots realities. This is sometimes perceived as ingenious from the community-level perspective, as NGOs are seen working from ivory towers and their work at the grassroots level might not reflect the realities or might set boundaries to how that work should be executed (Jones, Kimari, and Ramakrishnan 2017).

During the earlier-discussed civil society "boom" of the 1990s, NGOs laid strategies that would give them an edge while seeking funding and other resources in Kenya. One of the things they did was to establish offices in upmarket urban centres in Nairobi and elsewhere, hire national and international professional staff in various portfolios like fundraisers, accounts managers, projects managers, community workers, communication officers, among others. The focus of their advocacy also broadened first, by focusing on bigger geographical areas, and second, by including a mix of focus areas such as health, gender, and governance. While some of the issues of NGO advocacy focused on solving practical problems of low-income Kenyans, they also included agendas that were driven by donor ideologies. In line with many other critics, Wright (2012) argues that while donors gained the power to set the development agenda, NGOs became Trojan horses for global neoliberalism. These NGO transformations towards elitism and professionalism, while not necessarily bad in their own right, necessitated two things. First, it made NGOs run like corporate businesses, in which elite jobs would be found. Second, and as Lehr-Lehnardt (2005, 22) notes, NGOs began to have a very different outlook from their intended beneficiaries and became detached from poor, uneducated, and marginalised communities. This resulted in disillusionment with the NGO sphere among poor communities and especially the youth, as many of them felt neglected in civil society discussions. In effect, this contributed to the establishment of community-based movement centres like MSJC, to push for the grassroots agenda especially in informal settlements (Jones, Kimari, and Ramakrishnan 2017).

Our research unearthed perceptions of a class disconnect and contestations between community-based social justice activists and NGO activists. Overriding sentiments captured in interviews revolved around funding and cultural capital. The interlocutors mentioned that:

> NGOs have financing, and they have the power to dictate which issues are advocated for. Sometimes grassroots activists feel this may direct

> them away from the main goals they see most relevant from their perspective, as funders' perspectives may differ … Money is a big factor. They [NGO activists] have divided the human rights activists and all these organisations because the NGOs are fighting social justice because of money. The human right defenders even within themselves are fighting each other …
>
> (FGD, MSJC, 25 February 2022)

In addition, many of the justice centre activists had post-secondary school qualification, which was not sufficient to allow them to work in highly professionalised NGOs. In the NGO sector, employees are required to have higher education qualifications and academic level proficiency in English – which most young people and activists in informal settlements would be unable to fulfil. However, such qualifications are not needed for becoming involved with community-level human rights activism, in which the understanding of human rights and the local context and having passion for them is considered enough to join the movement. One activist noted that while their education levels were not enough to work in an NGO, it was more important to understand the grassroots realities in activism:

> For someone to work as a human rights defender in the NGOs, one has to have a certain education qualification which can also attract funding. But from our experience, we do not need the expected education qualification – but only need an understanding of human rights and an understanding of the context you are working on. The understanding can be gained in various ways other than by holding formal education qualification.
>
> (FGD, MSJC, 25 February 2022)

These trends of domination, class, and power play in human rights and social justice activism between NGO activists and community-level activists is what we refer to as vertical dynamics here. These different levels of organising civil society have profoundly different starting points for human rights activism, as the professional NGOs work within the frameworks of global institutional structures that have foundations in postcolonial and neoliberal inequalities, while the justice centres have roots in social justice struggles. Despite the frustration many community-based social justice activists articulated about this disconnect, they acknowledged that collaboration with NGOs is necessary and at best is fruitful for their agendas, too. Next, we will scrutinise how these vertical dynamics reflect on contesting dynamics on a horizontal level among justice centre activists.

"Horizontal violence" in justice centre activism

In addition to the mutually beneficial but at times, delimiting relations between NGOs and the community level in social justice activism,

contestations also occurred within the justice centre activist spaces horizontally. In a FGD with activists from MSJC and in some interviews, tensions were described as common between different activist communities, such as justice centres or other community-level activist initiatives, and often referred to as "horizontal violence". An important aspect of the context for such tensions was competition for limited resources that are needed for running costs and campaigning. Usually, resources have come from cooperation with NGOs in specific initiatives, which has caused both opportunities and feelings of being bypassed, as was discussed above. However, activists mentioned that justice centre initiatives are now getting direct funds for their operations too, for example from UN institutions and Global North based NGOs. But because justice centres have expanded across the country during the past decade and donor funding has dwindled, funds for community-level activist operations have become increasingly difficult to access. Thus, several justice centre initiatives are campaigning for the same cause, for example creating competing hashtags for social media, and not collaborating even if that were beneficial for the outreach. This way, one activist noted, one group aims to gain recognition over the other: "It's not like we – as human rights activists – we fought this, but we want recognition. We want that recognition that *we* are the people promoting these things" (FGD, MSJC, 25 February 2022).

According to some activists, the competition for funds has led to activist communities filing public complaints against each other to damage their reputation, in order to eliminate them from the funding competition. One male justice centre activist described what commonly happens when an activist community raises allegations against another:

> So, you have tarnished the other movement, so that they don't access funds. Then you will not say that we are doing the same thing. "So please, help us with funds." So, it's a horizontal violence, where activists are fighting against each other for survival, because this space is where our passion is. And most of us, if not all, are not in formal employment. So, we survive in our activism. If money comes, that's where fighting comes.
>
> (FGD, MSJC, 25 February 2022)

An efficient way to "tarnish" another initiative's reputation was mentioned as being reports on sexual harassment among activists. As the above quoted activist said, sexual harassment is "a new trend that people are taking to fight the movement", in which activists are reporting on each other from different communities of sexual harassment, which hampers other centres' funding opportunities. Although investigating the motives behind the complaints on sexual harassment and reports was beyond the focus of our research, it was evident in our data that activists, both male and female, perceived the phenomenon negatively. However, the context for competition among activist groups also forced them to take any allegations seriously,

regardless of what they personally thought. For example, a female activist in a leadership position in MSJC explained the contradictory feelings that sexual harassment allegations within the network cause:

> You're like portraying a bad picture with the donors. Personally, I will say most of it is propaganda, but because we're still in the growth process, we usually take these matters very seriously. If I talk about Mathare Social Justice, we don't condone [sexual harassment] … we make sure every member signs the Code of Conduct. And we have people commit to the sexual harassment policy. When you break it, we usually suspend you.
>
> (Interview, 3 March 2022)

Her views indicate that even if she and others in the centre may not believe in the honesty of all reported allegations, they still feel obliged to go through with investigations and give sanctions when needed. However, sexual harassment policies and codes of conduct do not always lead to consequences in the justice centres, as for example, the above interviewee also mentioned that many women drop allegations due to lacking evidence. Nevertheless, there was a shared understanding among activists fighting for resources at the community level that donor institutions do not favour collaborating with grassroots initiatives when harassment occurs. As Jones, Kimari, and Ramakrishnan (2017) note, volunteer-based activist organising tends to mirror bureaucratic institutional structures often seen in human rights institutions' policy frames, even when activists are partly driven by disillusionment with those exact structures. The justice centres' sexual harassment policies can be interpreted as such mirroring, especially as most of our interlocutors considered them more as a necessary evil than as policies that might support the integrity of the movement.

Some scholars have identified infighting and other within-movement tensions as major causes of burnout in activists (Gorski 2019; Plyler 2009). For many activists, oppressive societal contexts, or fear of being arrested or even killed may not cause as much stress as internal conflicts between peers (Plyler 2009). In the Kenyan social justice movement, many activists articulated frustration with horizontal contestations, as the struggles and activist work are similar across the movement. As one respondent put it: "We are at the same level, we should be fighting for a common goal, but I'm seeing you as the enemy". The competitive framework for funding creates distrust and division among activists, which may lead to activists dropping out as their life situations are often burdensome even without additional stressors caused by internal conflicts. Nevertheless, focusing on tackling the issues that cause tensions, such as sexual harassment allegations may at best force the movement to become more sensitive about such issues. This can be essential for movement growth in the long term, as creating safer and more regulated spaces may encourage inclusion as more young women from different backgrounds have lower thresholds to

become involved in justice centre activism. Next, we will look at how activist dynamics at vertical and horizontal levels appear in the case of an annual protest that is planned and executed by multiple actors in the Kenyan human rights and social justice activist movement.

Saba Saba March for Our Lives as a stage for community ownership of activism

The annual Saba Saba march creates an arena for Kenyan human rights activists to work together for a common goal, despite contestations at both vertical and horizontal levels. Each year, the protest focuses on specific themes or human rights violations that have been topical especially for the informal settlement communities that year. In 2020, the COVID-19 restrictions had changed the already challenging situation in informal settlements to almost unbearable. The curfew that hindered people's livelihoods and compulsory use of masks were not possible to follow for many, which resulted in increasing police brutality. Additionally, people staying home increased gender-based violence. (Mutahi and Wanjiru 2020; Rockowitz et al. 2021.) Against these circumstances, the 2020 Saba Saba march focused especially on police brutality and the violation of the constitutional right to basic needs (Mathare Social Justice Centre 2020). Because of COVID-19 restrictions, public gatherings had been banned, which gave the police an excuse to arrest 56 protesters, while using teargas and violence to disperse the protest. According to interviewed activists, this was one of the more memorable and violent Saba Saba marches in near history, while at the same time, it was also recalled with pride and feelings of solidarity. Police brutality during the protest only strengthened protesters' sense of unity against a common enemy, bringing activists from different community level networks together. As an activist from the Kayole Community Justice Centre put it:

> During 2020 Saba Saba, what inspired me was the fact that yes, we can have people power in this country, and it can reduce a lot of violence in our areas. It's because there was a lot of solidarity, people coming together. At that moment people are not even looking who you are working with. We were sharing this moment together.
>
> (Interview, 11 March 2022)

While the 2020 Saba Saba was perceived as a culmination of solidarity from a community-level perspective due to shared frustration during the extraordinary pandemic context, such unity does not occur every year. Many respondents described lack of clear focus being a common problem in Saba Saba marches, as activists may release various parallel petitions that conflict with the agenda agreed in the planning. Additionally, female activists mentioned gender-related tensions as being central in organising the Saba Saba march. While women form the majority of activists in justice centres and

their role is remarkable in putting together the protests, they argued that women's role is not recognised as visibly as that of male activists.

However, there were more concerns related to the vertical contestations in Saba Saba that reflected wider dynamics within the human rights activist sphere. Many justice centre activists problematised branding during the protest, as NGOs, political parties and other institutions' visibility in the march may compromise community ownership of the protest. As a male activist from MSJC put it:

> Because the reason why we are not branding, we're not carrying flags, we're not singing social justice, is because we want the common *mwananchi* [citizen] to feel that this is part of their problem. And it's up to them to come to the streets.
>
> (FGD, MSJC, 25 February 2022)

Along the same lines, the presence of elite activists, such as the internationally recognised activist Boniface Mwangi, caused contradictory responses from respondents. On the one hand, they attract media attention and can be helpful with their long experience in protesting. On the other hand, elite activists may provoke police violence in the protest while themselves enjoying security by their fame, as one female activist pointed out:

> So, he [Boniface Mwangi] can talk to them [the police] any way he wants, then they're like "we cannot touch you". So, he can do whatever he wants. You cannot touch him, but the police get angry. Because they don't have the power. For me it's different, I'm arrested again before I get out of the police station.
>
> (FGD, 8 July 2021)

In general, activists recalled the 2020 Saba Saba march as especially powerful because all community-level activists had a clear, common agenda that was provoked by the effects of COVID-19 measures. Solidarity and anger among protesters were only strengthened by the excessive police violence, while viral video clips of angry protesters – such as the one described at the beginning of this chapter – filled Kenyan social media spaces during and after the protest. While at an everyday level, collaborating with NGOs and other donor institutions creates the need for social justice activists to use the rhetorical frame of institutionalised human rights policy strategically, this was hardly the case for them during the Saba Saba march. Rather, the annual protest was perceived as a stage for poor and working-class activists to unite and fight for more political agendas and in more radical forms than usually seen in the human rights activist framework. It was thus important for the activists that the "common *mwananchi*" has ownership of the protest, instead of NGOs or political entities, allowing it to have more resemblance to revolutionist struggle than institutional human rights activism.

Conclusion

Justice centre activists who operate at the community level are a vital part of the Kenyan civil society ecosystem that has been simultaneously expanding on a more informal grassroots level, and shrinking in regards to funded CSO operations during the past decade. As a way of navigating within the contextual constraints for civil society – such as state hostility, competition over resources, and significant class difference – these activists fluently and strategically combine different discursive frameworks for socio-political change making. On the one hand, they adhere to the "people power" revolutionary rhetoric of social justice movements, akin to the (African) socialist discourse or anti-colonial activist movements such as the Mau Mau insurgency. They insist on community ownership of activism in instances such as the Saba Saba march, which has roots in the political opposition and social justice. On the other hand, justice centre activists have adopted bureaucratic policy structures and a human rights rhetoric that enables access to global institutional human rights frameworks. This is embodied as comprehensive sexual harassment policies and codes of conduct, and the use of human rights policy language. In this dynamic composition reinforced by recent contextual constraints for activism, justice centre activists balance between revolutionary struggles, and the financial and material impossibility of fighting those struggles on their own terms.

While the justice centre activists perceived compromises and collaboration as being necessary for success in the competitive funding scheme, they did not view the bureaucratic structures positively, as their thoughts about sexual harassment allegations indicated. Contestations that the activists perceived deriving from horizontal competition and vertical power dynamics compromised the opportunities for straightforward action and radical community ownership of activist initiatives. Although contestations among activists may result in demotivation and disillusionment (Gorski 2019), studies show that being part of an activist group enhances individual well-being in a number of ways, especially for young activists, due to a sense of collective accomplishment and feelings of empowerment (Montague and Eiroa-Orosa 2018). Our interlocutors, too, expressed feelings of empowerment and joy when thinking about collective achievements when activists stood up for themselves and against the authorities, such as the 2020 Saba Saba protest. At an everyday level, however, the contesting forces were mainly perceived as distractive to effective activism.

However, we argue that the dynamic and creative coexistence of different frameworks for societal change can also have beneficial impacts on the activist movement as a whole. For example, even if sexual harassment policies may not guarantee harassment-free spaces or if the policies were abused in the name of tarnishing other activist initiatives' reputation, as the activists speculated, it is likely that allegations are made also because sexual harassment exists, and the policies encourage reporting. Strict policy frames may

allow the community-level movement to become more diverse if they enable women and minority groups to feel more secure in activist spaces. Additionally, dynamic collaboration between actors at vertical and horizontal levels of the activist movement is important for supporting a vibrant civil society ecosystem to work for the greater good of the people it serves. This said, activists should have the space to express critical concerns about the realities of current collaboration. The subtle criticism of community-based social justice activists of the NGO human rights framework and its elitist distance from community realities is an important aspect of a healthy civil society ecosystem, albeit sometimes inconspicuous.

Notes

1 We differentiate NGOs from CSOs here in regard to their scopes: CSOs can be any established or non-established organisations or popular movements (including NGOs), while NGOs refer to established organisations that often seek or receive external funding.
2 Jubilee coalition is a political party in Kenya and was the ruling political party from 2016 until 13 September 2022. It was formed after a merger of many smaller political parties. When the party was formed, it pledged to ensure devolution of power, protection of minorities and the marginalised, and non-discrimination on the basis of race, sex, religion, ethnicity, or any other bias.

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3 Disavowing politics

An alternative way of doing politics for young Algerians

Yahia Benyamina

Introduction

On 22 February 2019, an unprecedented popular protest broke out in Algeria against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's fifth-term candidacy. For almost a year, the country had witnessed each Friday and Tuesday dozens of popular marches and sectorial gatherings (students, teachers, lawyers, independent trade unions, associations). Although Bouteflika resigned on 2 April, the protest movement took a more radical turn when the demonstrators demanded the elimination of all symbols of the political regime, or what they have called *yetnahaw gaa* ("they must all go"). During the movement, the demonstrators rejected any similar efforts at political framing. Some even demanded a constituent assembly, before the intervention of the military institution, which imposed presidential elections within the framework of the existing constitution on 12 December 2019, a process that brought Abdelmadjid Tebboune to power (Bensaâd and Rahal 2020; Dris-Aït Hamadouche 2020; Oussedik 2020).

Commonly known as the *hirak* movement (referred to below as just "*hirak*"), the involvement of young people in this mobilisation process went against expectations (Chiheb, Guemar, and Northey 2019; Northey and Guemar 2020). Previously, young people were framed as a danger to public order, politically apathetic, eager to leave their country, whether by legal or illegal means, susceptible to manipulation by local and foreign supporters of sedition, unemployed and passive regarding the development of their country (Lakjaa 2014; Omrane 2019; Serres 2013). During the *hirak*, young people behaved peacefully, preserved public and private property during rallies, refused sexual harassment or ethnic cleavages, fought against ideological and partisan manipulation of the movement, and manifested a sense of solidarity with the protestors through the distribution of water and food or the cleaning of public places after the gatherings. More importantly, their active roles in different initiatives discussing the evolution of the *hirak* and the political shape of the "new Algeria" revealed a politicised youth, concerned about the future of their country (Baamara 2022; Thieux 2021).

In this chapter, I explain why young people became involved in different ways in the *hirak*. By examining "political disavowal" as a form of activism, I

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shed light on certain latent political processes that contributed, in the pre-*hirak* period, to the political socialisation of young people. It is a form of political engagement that emerged during my doctoral fieldwork. Between May 2017 and January 2019, I interviewed more than 40 young people involved in political parties and civil society organisations in the city of Oran, Algeria.[1] Besides the 30 young people active in political parties and opposition movements, 12 young people manifested a different form of activism.[2] They participated instead in civil society initiatives – either formally or informally – describing themselves as being apolitical in terms of their reasons for participating in the public sphere and the activities undertaken in the framework of their activism.

By assuming a stance of political disavowal, a contradictory equation emerged: How could young people be political without engaging in politics? In addressing this question, I aligned my focus with a research tradition that assigns importance to the latent forms of political engagement. These forms of engagement are considered pre-political because "citizens actually do many things that cannot be directly or unequivocally classified as "political participation", but at the same time could be of great importance for future political activities of a more conventional type" (Ekman and Amnå 2012, 287). Political disavowal can be seen as a form of involvement that prepared young people to assume political roles during the *hirak*. On the other hand, I question here the reasons for engaging in the practice of political disavowal. I assume that political disavowal is a form of political engagement developed by young people to bring about social and political change in a soft and indirect manner, doing so in response to a political power that could easily suspend all initiatives of the political opposition. It was also a way of attracting the attention of citizens who had become suspicious and disapproving of everything related to politics.

The chapter is organised as follows. I first explain what political disavowal means and its theoretical frameworks. Then, I shed light on the political context of young people, especially during the reign of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika (1999–2019). After defining the method and data used for the analysis, I present and discuss the results.

Framing political disavowal

Political disavowal can be seen as a form of activism that exists in democratic and non-democratic settings. It is often explained by a state of scepticism and a distrust of politicians and politics (Bennett et al., 2013; Eliasoph 2003), or else as a desire by some individuals to take care of others and develop themselves without engaging in ideological and political struggles (Malafaia et al. 2018). In authoritarian contexts, it has been investigated more as a "surviving and resisting strategy" to cope with the narrow margins of political activism. By engaging in non-contentious civil society activities, the activists position themselves as not threatening the established political order,

while at the same time they influence how the government behaves. Such a strategy has been used, for example, by social movements across Latin America in the 1990s, human rights and women's movements in Malawi and Uganda, and conservation and development groups in Southern Africa (Dicklitch and Lwanga 2003; Holmes 2019).

In the context of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), some of the concepts that have been used to study political activism include the meaning of disavowal. When analysing the origins of the Arab Spring, Bayat (2010), for example, introduced the concept of "social non-movement" to explain the collective actions of non-collective actors. Such actions frequently occur without ideology, organisation, or leadership, and they can only be captured by digging into the details of everyday life. Political disavowal is part of this perspective, as activists avoid direct political confrontation and prefer seemingly apolitical forms of resistance, such as the unofficial occupation of public spaces by vendors, women working in a job deemed to be the exclusive domain of men, or illegally tapping into electricity from municipal power lines. In the same vein, Rennick (2019) has investigated the fate of young people who participated in the events of the Arab Spring and noted that many of them have refocused their activism on development and community work in local contexts, such as coordinating humanitarian aid and basic services or social entrepreneurship platforms, promoting sustainable tourism or focusing on the poorest people or those beyond the power of the regime's planning radar. According to her, these "non-political activities" involve apolitical contestation with the aim of producing a significant and tangible change in daily life without resorting to the authorities or changing the political system.

In this light, political disavowal also comes close to the notion of denial in Bourdieu's sociology, where the political system/life as a specific social field determines its own rules of functioning to preserve itself from external influences (Bourdieu 1977). According to this perspective, individuals create their own social norms that define acceptable or unacceptable behaviours and attitudes, through which we can understand why they avoid certain activities or situations. Although apolitical, political disavowal produces "politics". By denying given political practices or structures, people define what good politics should be like. In other words, if activists proclaiming a stance of political disavowal position themselves against pre-existing political practices, they redefine "politics" through this type of rejection and in the process generate an alternative politics, whether consciously or unconsciously. In addition, the voluntary activities, although appearing non-political, influence society and, even if indirectly, political life.

The context of youth political activism in Algeria

The young people whose political activism is examined in this chapter were born in the late 1980s. When they came of age, the political landscape was

undergoing a process of reconfiguration after a decade of civil war (1992–2002) and economic crisis. President Bouteflika, who came to power in 1999, was a key figure in this process. His success in restoring political stability and strengthening the economy made him hugely popular. However, the way in which he conducted public policy helped enshrine a centralised political regime that revolved around his person as the main figure. This strategy was evident first at the level of the state institutions. The government was reduced to his person, particularly after the constitutional revision of 2008, when he replaced the head of government with a prime minister whose nomination and actions depended on his good will (Bennadji 2009). The parliament merely became a space for mobilising political support for the president's policies, after having been dominated from 2002 to 2012 by the presidential alliance and then by the National Liberation Front and the National Democratic Rally as the main traditional pro-regime political parties (Dris-Aït Hamadouche 2021). The pluralist elections of people's assemblies functioned only as mechanisms for reproducing the pro-regime majority, while the presidential elections did not contain any real competitors to Bouteflika or his influence (Tlemçani 2012).

At the level of formal political life, political parties were poorly organised, disconnected from the social base, co-opted by the political power in place or else excluded entirely from the decision-making process (Dris-Aït Hamadouche 2020; Addi 2006). Similarly, civil society organisations, despite progress recorded in terms of numbers, have remained hostage to state funding and the control imposed by the public administration on their functioning (Kadri 2012). Moreover, their inability to resist political manipulation, whether by the political power in place or by opposition movements, has limited their autonomy (Cavatorta and Elananza 2008). This has had a negative impact on the involvement of citizens in such organisations. According to the Arab Barometer survey, 2.4% of citizens declared that they belong to a political party and 9% to civil society organisations (Arab Barometer 2016).

In response to this reduced formal political sphere, informal forms of participation have grown considerably. In the spring of 2001, Bouteflika confronted a major riot in Kabylia, with people demanding that he recognise Amazigh identity (Tilleli 2003). During the same period, a movement of unemployed persons emerged in the Algerian Sahara, demanding equal economic opportunities between the north and the south of the country. By the time of the Arab Spring, this movement had developed into a nationally coordinated effort that formulated its political demands against accusations of corruption and the politically centralised mode of management (Belakhdar 2015). In addition to this effort, the period saw the rise of more localised and sectorial strikes, neighbourhood riots against persistent socio-economic problems, political chants, stadium politics, self-immolation, and hunger strikes (Bennadji 2010; Hadj-Moussa and Derradji 2020). However, the protests failed to create a coalition capable of challenging the ruling regime. Several reasons explaining the failure included the dispersing of the opposition, the inability to

organise and promote representatives, the distrust among political elites and ordinary citizens, the memories of the civil war experienced during the 1990s and the rentier-based policies that allowed the regime to maintain social peace (Addi 2017; Volpi 2013).

The advent of the so-called Arab Spring was a turning point for Bouteflika's regime. Unlike the regime changes in Tunisia and Egypt, or the civil wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen, the Algerian regime could preserve its hold on political life thanks to the financial resources of the state, which allowed it to absorb the anger of protesters in 2011 and the memory of the 1990 civil war. Nevertheless, the new regional environment has forced political authorities to undertake new political reforms in which the lifting of the state of emergency has enabled many opposition movements to participate in politics. As a result, some activists have joined, for example, the National Coordination for Change and Democracy, an opposition movement created by young people repressed during the 2011 protests (Baamara 2012). Others participated in the *baraket* ('enough') movement, which challenged President Bouteflika's candidacy for a fourth term in 2014. In the south, inter-community clashes in the M'zab region (Wilaya of Ghardaïa) between 2013 and 2015 offered challenges to certain traditional forms of solidarity by which the regime in place has drawn its legitimacy for decades (Hadj-Moussa 2019).

Elsewhere, social media platforms have embraced many campaigns against the government's policies. For example, in response to the introduction of more expensive automobiles than those available in the international markets, a campaign called Khaliha Tasda ("let it rust") was launched by activists on Facebook to change this new political policy. The same spaces embraced a boycott campaign against the 2017 legislative elections under the slogan Ma Nsoutich ("I do not jump"), a campaign that contributed to a decline in voter turnout from 42.9% in 2012 to 35.37%.

At the time of this study, President Bouteflika had almost entirely disappeared from the public sphere due to a stroke that he suffered in 2013, which sparked much controversy regarding his ability to lead the country. The National Liberation Front and National Democratic Rally dominated the elected councils and government in a way that excluded the other political forces from political life. This period is also known as a return to economic austerity due to the decline in oil and gas prices, Algeria's main exports in the international markets. The ambiguity surrounding the manner of decision-making in state institutions, in particular with the growing influence of a lobbying group of businessmen in alliance with the brother of the president, has aggravated tensions, which ultimately culminated in the *hirak* movement in February 2022.

Disavowing politics: Negative understandings of politics and the political sphere

I have already pointed out that young people claiming "political disavowal" prefer civic activism instead of political activism. When asking them about

this choice, their answers were directly linked to their negative understandings of the word "politics" and the "political sphere". Moreover, their reactions to the political component of my interview questions reflected negative attitudes.[3] Some preferred to move beyond these types of questions, while others either proved less inclined to questions related to political participation in comparison to questions related to civic engagement or they gave a succinct response, such as "I don't have any relation with or interest in politics". Even their physical gestures proved meaningful with regard to their negative attitude regarding politics, such as remaining silent for a while before answering or offering a slight smile or shake of the head, and sometimes even expressing doubt as to whether the researcher might not be a security agent. As I discuss below in more detail, analysing their answers and reactions revealed that fear, complexity, corruption, and scepticism were the main categories that structured their understandings of political activism.

First, their fear was connected to the regime's repressive tactics, especially when it comes to joining opposition movements or rallies demanding a radical change. In some cases, it was informed by the history of violence that shaped political life in Algeria. The interviewed young people mentioned several times the example of the civil war during the 1990s. The war had played an important role in the political disillusionment of a large number of Algerians after the gradual transformation from a sense of hope linked to the short-lived experience of a democratic transition (1989–1992) into the "national tragedy" characterised by hundreds of deaths, periodic massacres, and thousands of people missing (Zeraoulia 2020). Although young people did not directly experience this war, the memories transmitted to them, whether by their families, the media, various associations, or political actors defending the rights of victims of this period, made them suspicious of any political initiative, especially opposition movements. State authorities could easily manipulate such collective memories and use public fear for its own advantage. During the so-called Arab Spring, for example, the ruling political elite warned the citizens who took to the streets in 2011 of fomenting "chaos" and "instability" similar to the situation in the 1990s or in several other countries in the region at that time (Addi 2017).

Second, with regard to complexity, scholars have demonstrated that an increased level of education enhances an understanding of "politics" (Persson 2013). Although all the activists that I studied were either university students or had already completed their university degree, such complexity appears more closely connected to the opacity characterising how the political regime operates and the difficulties in understanding many decisions. Young people noted a lack of reliable information and transparency in the management of public affairs, but also in "the culture of informality" that shapes political practices in the country. This point was especially salient in discussions about who really governs Algeria (Hachemaoui 2016). Many interviewees reportedly believe that the decision-making process takes place "behind the scenes", while institutional arrangements only formalise decisions already made by unknown forces.

Third, for the respondents, corruption mainly means the practice of pursuing private interests and enrichment that is both illegal and easy. Understood also as opportunism, corruption provoked two types of debate. The first relates to the influence of the so-called "dirty money" in politics. At the time of my fieldwork, the use of money to influence the political process (e.g. to purchase an electoral list, voters, and state officials) had increased considerably and provoked widespread debate in the newspapers and on social media, among differing political forces and even by state officials (Dris-Aït Hamadouche 2020). This practice has negatively impacted the value of political activism. One respondent expressed it as follows: "It is useless to spend time being an activist in a political party. It is enough to have *chkara* (literally means bag, here used in reference to money) to obtain a political position." The second debate connects disengagement from politics with religious values. Corruption has triggered dichotomies, or *halal* (permitted) and *haram* (prohibited), as to what is considered morally good or bad according to Islam.

Finally, scepticism emerged as a distinct category that has shaped young people's understandings of politics. It is mainly based on past individual or collective experiences with politicians and political life. In several instances, the respondents mentioned the unfulfilled promises made by politicians during elections and political events or the inability of certain organisations to bring about real change in society. In this regard, the young people reaffirmed the crisis of distrust in everything related to politics (Dris-Aït Hamadouche 2020). In particular, they severely criticised the existing political parties, perceiving the opposition as merely a pragmatic strategy used by political actors to put pressure on the regime in an effort to obtain personal privileges or as an instrument of the political regime to deceive people and international opinion with respect to democratic rule. Some even criticised volunteering for being manipulated by politicians and the ruling political power, noting that one of their objectives is to purify it from this type of political manipulation.

Two kinds of "politics" to avoid

The studied young people highlighted two meanings of "politics" that they want to avoid. The first one is narrow, as discussed above, meaning the "manifest form of political activism" that takes place particularly in political parties and opposition movements. These types of political organisations imply direct involvement in political life, and both are perceived negatively by the respondents. As an alternative, the respondents prefer engaging only in civil society organisations and engaging in activities that do not "disturb" or attract the attention of politicians. The second meaning is broader. It includes abstract practices and behaviours that the studied young people believe that are also a form of politics that must be avoided. In this light, the cases of Hassan and Halima illustrate this second meaning quite well.

Hassan, a 22-year-old university student, is an activist in an association concerned with youth development. He began doing volunteer work at the age of 18 with an informal volunteer group engaged in social work. After two years, he left this group and joined the youth association in which he was active at the time of the interview. When debating the reasons for abandoning the informal voluntary group, Hassan provided a set of practices that he sought to avoid. He pointed out:

> When I volunteer, I prefer recognition of others for my work without searching to get their attention by posting photos or spreading defamatory statements. This practice has distorted volunteering and alienated many people from it.

On the other hand, Halima, a 24-year-old university student, began volunteering with an informal volunteer group at the age of 16. After six years, she became responsible for the branch of a national association concerned with youth development in the city of Oran. She complained about the bad practices she had experienced while engaging in civic activism, saying:

> Some volunteers don't let you advance, and they frustrate you with unconstructive criticism. They don't take into consideration your age or that you're still learning. What interests them is destroying you. What I do is noble and free work; I don't expect any return, and despite that, I have encountered many problems.

The examples provided by these young people clarify what young people mean by the type of "politics" they are seeking to avoid. As explained above, fear, complexity, corruption, and scepticism are how young people understand the political sphere. Though these understandings reflect the abstract features and practices that define the type of "politics" they want to avoid, they do not provide a specific framework where they are practised (e.g. political parties, associations, trade unions, protests). In this vein, the detestable practices in the field of volunteerism mentioned by Hassan and Halima can also be considered "politics", and therefore, such forms of politics should avoid becoming linked to such practices as corruption, mistrust, greed, fear, exploitation, manipulation, and opportunism. Such politics have no tangible or concrete limits because they entail practices that may exist everywhere.

The "apolitical" and "non-political" aspects of engagement in the public sphere

Volunteering with civil society organisations is the main form of engagement for the studied young people. However, given their state of suspiciousness and scepticism of anyone active in the public sphere, the young people strive to differentiate themselves by emphasising that their engagement is an

integral part of the processes of societal inclusion and the social and economic development of the community, and therefore, which gives their engagement meanings and purpose other than just "doing politics". I term such practices the "non-political aspects of engagement in the public sphere". They mainly encompass, on the one hand, the motivations for young respondents to become involved in voluntary groups in the first place, and on the other, the results of their involvement, meaning services and activities that benefit the community.

Concerning motivations, the studied young people listed a set of advantages that they could achieve due to their engagement. In this vein, social networking is one such advantage. Through engagement, they can make useful contacts, whether with members of the voluntary group or through the group or organisation. Indeed, within the framework of voluntary activities, many of them had already had the opportunity to meet public officials, private and public funders, and media professionals, even to collaborate with international organisations. Employment and gaining professional experience are another motivating factors influencing the engagement of some young people. By assuming certain paid or unpaid positions within associations (e.g. financial and administrative management, secretarial work, chairing the association, or leading a voluntary project), young people become familiar with professional life. For others, volunteering gives them an opportunity to develop professional expertise in establishing and managing formally registered associations.

In terms of the advantages, the respondents also join an association out of a desire to be part of a specialised training program (e.g. refurbishing the stones of old buildings in the case of young people from the local heritage preservation association) or to acquire "soft skills", particularly with regard to how to connect and communicate with others and enhance their personal abilities. Likewise, finding a safe and trusting space to meet, make friends, exchange information, and spend one's spare time appeared frequently in the statements of young people. This aspect also implies a gendered dimension when used by young women to convince their families to remain outside a while longer or when coming home late in the evening. In fact, several young women pointed out that society and families still control the movement of women in public space and that an association is one of the few places where they can safely spend time. Finally, acquiring a social identity is also an explanatory factor for the engagement of young people in associations or informal voluntary groups. On several occasions, expressions of distinction and differentiation from those who do not volunteer emerged in the discourse of the interviewed young people. Volunteering means for them being positive and useful for the community, unlike non-volunteering, which they equated to passivity and selfishness.

With regard to contributing to the social and economic development of the community, the studied young people highlighted different activities, including protecting the local heritage of the city of Oran, the training and

integration of young people into society, taking care of marginalised people like the elderly and orphans, organising campaigns to clean up the city or afforestation efforts, helping poor families with food and clothing, contributing to blood donation campaigns, honouring excellent students and providing support lessons for students who are preparing for exams. The studied young people believe that these types of activities are "non-political" in scope and do not disturb the existing political power structure. In some cases, they complement the work of the state, for example when collaborating with official authorities on the campaigns to clean up the city or afforestation efforts or on other campaigns to raise awareness among citizens about the importance of social solidarity when it comes to donating blood or protecting the environment.

Practices claiming an aspiring "politics"

While the young respondents were striving to appear apolitical in the public space, the ways in which they were organising and conducting their voluntary activities implied another meaning for their civic engagement, one which emerges when they use political practices to support their apolitical activities. The process includes the implementation of certain modes of organisation and relations inside the group that involve political meanings. In other words, it appears that the internal making of the activities is political in nature, even if the outcomes appear "non-political". The concrete translation of this process can be captured through the nature of the vertical and horizontal relationships between activists.

The vertical level determines the nature of relations between the head of the group and activists, during which time application of a "leadership" mode of management and participatory democracy is a common practice. The interviewed young people mentioned the word leader (in Arabic قائد) repeatedly in their responses to refer to an activist who has the principal mission of coordinating and organising activities. This means that the status of the "leader" is not a hierarchical position that requires exerting power over the rest of the members. Instead, the leader's role is more symbolic and emotional. A good leader, said the young respondents, is a person who goes out into the field, lives with the members of the group, and is exposed to the same suffering as the others. The leaders put themselves at the forefront of problems, exposing themselves to risks before the team. Therefore, it is a form of sacrifice that must be provided for the general well-being of the group. Through these meanings, the young respondents framed good "leadership" in opposition to the presidential or top-down mode of management. The young activists depicted the latter forms of leadership as unidirectional, bureaucratic, passive, less interactive, and even authoritarian, reflective of practices that already exist in the public sphere, ones which they try to avoid. In other words, by applying a different leadership style within their voluntary

groups, young activists negate existing political practices and employ other practices that they consider more acceptable and effective.

The respondents particularly expressed appreciation for how the ideals of participatory democracy are applied within the groups. The promotion of this practice was closely related to the leadership mode of management. Since the leader is just a member like the others, the process of defining the activities to be carried out and the decision-making process is a collective one. In addition, the intensity of relationships that the leader initiates with the members produces an intimacy that creates the general feeling that the voice of each member is heard and taken into consideration in the overall dynamic of the group.

From a practical standpoint, the implementation of participatory democracy implies two main processes. The first involves encouraging proposals from members of the group and creating the feeling that all initiatives are welcomed. Newcomers to a group have especially noted the importance of strengthening the feeling of participatory democracy in the first days after joining the group. Indeed, several young respondents mentioned that they were assigned to run a volunteer project already on the first day that they joined the group, despite their lack of experience in running volunteer projects, something which they appreciated and that represented for them a kind of encouragement and confidence in their abilities. The second process is related to consultation. All proposals and initiatives are subjected to consultation and deliberation by the group. Applying this process bridges the gap between a member's self-esteem and the overall functioning of the group, as each member will feel that their initiative has been taken into consideration and discussed, while the group avoids any personal aspect of domination within the group. Moreover, some associations and informal voluntary groups have introduced communication technologies to improve this "participatory practice". This may involve creating a private group on Facebook to circulate information and ideas between members or creating an interactive and consultative space for all questions concerning the group. Such a method allows each member to feel connected, even if they are not physically able to attend the group meetings.

At the horizontal level, the young respondents described the links uniting them within the group as tinged with intimacy and mutual emotions, and not as simple relationships referring to a formal membership within the group. This feeling of "intimacy" inside the group was captured in some expressions used by the respondents, such as "we have a family spirit in the association" and "we are all friends". In contexts where scepticism and fear marks engagement in the public sphere, such feelings and relationships provide people with a sense of security and trust (Onodera 2018). While this finding can be confirmed among my respondents, the feelings of family and friendship helped make civic activism more attractive to many young respondents after the wave of collective disengagement from political and civic life in recent years.

Conclusion

The notion of political disavowal discussed in this chapter refers to a form of activism among young Algerians who engage in the public sphere on the basis of their negative understandings about politics. Through humanitarian, social, and environmental volunteering, they have maintained and promoted certain qualities of activism, but without engaging in partisan politics or protest movements. As a result, they have established a form of activism that does not interfere with politics on the one hand, but still separates them from people who are not involved in the public sphere on the other.

During the *hirak*, with many of the young people that I interviewed having participated in its dynamics, the demonstrators rejected all efforts at political mediation and framing of the movement by those in power. Only the military power could manage the presidential elections, thereby sparing the country from the deadlock of political non-representativeness that emerged just after Bouteflika's demise in April 2019 (Dris-Aït Hamadouche 2020). Does this signify an outright rejection of politics by young people? When criticising the dysfunction of contemporary democratic societies, despite the multiplicity of spaces for expression, Innerarity (2017, 76) argues the following:

> What is not going so well is politics, in other words, the possibility of converting this plural set of forces into projects of political transformation, giving orientation and political coherence to these popular expressions and configuring quality public spaces where everything is deliberated, discussed and synthesised.

The studied young people clearly reflect this finding when they highlight political disavowal as the main driving force behind their engagement in the public sphere. Before the *hirak*, when they refused any engagement in political parties or protest movements, they had not only contested the existing politics but had at the same time made claims for a different type of politics. In an implicit and soft manner, their ideas and actions contradicted many existing political practices. Leadership, participatory and inclusive democracy, friendship, and family spirit are some of the alternative practices that they seek to diffuse through their volunteerism in civil society organisations. Their activism can also be understood as an aspiring citizenship utopia via participation in civil society. They view this sphere as appropriate for achieving their project of affecting social and political change without engaging in partisan or protest politics, both of which are viewed negatively by young respondents but also by other citizens seeking deep political change during the *hirak*.

Notes

1 I used the purposeful sampling method to select my interviews, and I applied the thematic content method to analyse the discourses that emerged during the interviews.

2 Concerning the young people who affected a certain political disavowal, they all have a university-level education and were between 19 and 33 years of age. In terms of gender, seven were men and five women. They were active in associations and informal voluntary groups in the following fields: two were members of an association working to protect the historical heritage of the city of Oran, four were members of associations concerned youth development, two were activists in environmental protection associations, and two were members of charitable associations.
3 This refers to questions regarding the forms of political engagement, which range from formal forms (voting, political parties) to informal forms (demonstrations, sit-ins), and to attitudes about the functioning of political life.

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4 Communication in the coronavirus crisis

A case study of communication practices of activists in Johannesburg in the COVID-19 pandemic

Angela Chukunzira

Introduction

As the world grappled with the spreading COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, there was a fundamental shift in community organising methods. The norms of everyday life were disrupted and, in many ways, measures that were being taken globally to contain the spread of the virus were being duplicated locally in terms of lockdowns, with highly restricted movement and complete halts to non-essential services. Like many other places, South Africa was not spared a stringent lockdown, which for many people translated into a greater reliance on technology to keep in touch with friends and family, while students and teachers braced themselves for online teaching and learning. But what did this mean for poor, working-class activists in Johannesburg? The threat of hunger and the impacts on livelihoods and safety in the pandemic were priorities that the activists had to address. Yet, despite the odds being against them in many ways, they mobilised themselves and were able to distribute food and conduct popular education in their communities. This chapter examines how community activists used WhatsApp and Zoom and incorporated them into their existing communication repertoires. It is based on online ethnography, participant observation, and face-to-face interviews with activists in Gauteng Province, especially Johannesburg, in South Africa, as well as my own experiences as a community activist. It highlights the complementary role of innovative organising methods and how they contributed to the success of the newly emergent social movement: the Community Organising Working Group (COWG) in Johannesburg.

The Community Organising Working Group

By early March 2020, when the first positive case of COVID-19 was announced in South Africa, civil society organisations (CSOs) – including faith-based organisations, trade unions, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – were increasingly expressing their concerns over the social issues

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linked to the spreading of the virus. These included police brutality when reinforcing curfews and the extreme hunger affecting the poor who lost jobs and income. Eventually, this led to the formation of the C-19 People's Coalition (C19PC), an alliance of hundreds of social movements, trade unions, community organisations, and NGOs fighting for a just and equitable response to the pandemic, culminating in a partly online, partly face-to-face meeting at the Tshisimani Centre for Activist Education in Cape Town. Provincial task teams were formed in all nine provinces in South Africa, which were both thematic and issue-based. The C19PC was largely a national and horizontal organisation drawing membership from the various elements that were part of this broader movement. Its Programme of Action (POA) was a ten-point document that demanded just measures in combatting the virus based on contributions by the various movements and then endorsed by over 100 organisations.[1] In Gauteng Province a Zoom meeting was held on 23 March for the provincial task team. The COWG, which is the focus of this chapter, was established at this meeting alongside other working groups such as the Food Security Working Group and the Media and Finance Working Groups, and is based in Johannesburg, South Africa's largest city. Its initial activities took place across 16 different townships and informal settlements and involved 16 community leaders and some professionals who contributed professional skills and expertise. The group's mandate included promoting awareness of the threat of the COVID-19 virus, and the development of grassroots organising, to be achieved through popular education and food distribution. The prior Zoom meetings that had been held at national and provincial levels exemplified what could be done together when people were physically separated; however, these meetings were relatively easier to set up and conduct because they mainly included professionals who had a class advantage – that is, the finances to cover the cost of internet data and the skills to use Zoom – enabling ready participation. Yet this was to be COWG's modus operandi: online Zoom meetings for mostly working-class activists. On 30 March, the COWG also created a WhatsApp group that enabled the mobilisation of people from pre-existing networks.

The COWG was characterised by a diverse membership that blended different strengths to enhance its effectiveness, manifested in terms of experience, age, gender, geographical location, nationalities, race, skillsets, and class. The ages of the members ranged from 22 to 65, with the majority being in their forties; there was an almost equal representation of both genders. These differences were a fundamental paradox in ensuring the group's success. Moreover, the majority of COWG's members were activists who had been involved in previous civil society struggles, some with experience gained in the anti-apartheid struggle, although most were involved in post-apartheid social movements. However, not all activists had such experience; some were active community members and, as "budding activists", were recruited into the COWG by referrals from experienced activists who believed that they would carry on the work that should be done. The COWG

was formed from a collective of individual and interorganisational networks and micro mobilisations that existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, mainly through links formed by participation in the new social movements (Diani and McAdam 2003; Walgrave and Ketelaars 2019).

The COWG primarily consisted of activists who lived in the different communities in which they operated: informal settlements and "townships", which, in the South African context, refer to racially segregated public housing estates and areas, established during the apartheid rule (Donaldson 2014). It also had professional support members. The difference in class composition was reflected in education levels and access to electricity, which played a role in ensuring that Zoom could be used within the movement, as is further elaborated below. The support members included a lawyer and a professor who were the initial convenors of the group. There was also a professional who assisted with finance and reporting, drawing on prior experience in working with NGOs. An architect who understood township and settlement design worked with communities across Gauteng and assisted with designing the posters. My own role was that of facilitating communications, such as the setting up of Zoom meetings and writing minutes.

Although the support members did not live in the communities where the COWG was active, they were still able to connect to other group members because they operated partly online and were activists known by most of the team. Consequently, their professional life reflected a commitment to activism, which played a role in enhancing their trust and credibility among other activists. Furthermore, while many townships and informal settlements in which the COWG operated were in and around Soweto, others were located further away in other regions of Johannesburg. The different geographical locations across Gauteng gave the COWG a truly provincial structure,[2] with WhatsApp and Zoom as the main means of internal communication. Externally, they used an array of methods including door-to-door mobilising, pamphlets, loudhailers, murals, T-shirts, branded masks, and banners. Yet the use of Zoom became central to the COWG's operations while the use of WhatsApp complemented it. As this chapter further explores, Zoom was a place for discussions and deliberations while WhatsApp was where Zoom links and pictures were shared, minutes were distributed, and agenda items were placed. The COWG also operated with about 250 volunteers in the townships who helped with the mobilisations and distribution of pamphlets and food parcels in collaboration with the Food Security Working Group. Funding for food distribution and popular education was initially mobilised by the C-19 coalition with financial support from international donor agencies and NGOs. The funding was also used to mobilise for airtime and data costs to run the Zoom meetings. This was important because they formed the basis of COWG's communication.

Social movement communications literature has covered the intersection of social movements and media and their dynamics (Dwyer, Hitchen, and Molony 2019; Fominaya and Gillan 2017; Mattoni 2012; Omanga 2019). The

use of WhatsApp and Zoom within movements has been understudied due to the methodological consideration that access to these internal forms of communication is mostly supplied by being an "insider". Nevertheless, there is a growing body of literature on these two platforms and how they are used by social movements.

WhatsApp and Zoom use in social movement scholarship

The existing literature on the interaction of social movements and social media has rapidly evolved, becoming more complex and incorporating a more holistic approach. The past decade alone has seen tremendous shifts in how movements communicate. For example, scholars have examined the integration of WhatsApp and, more recently, the use of videoconferencing within movements facing the COVID-19 pandemic (Hancock 2022; Omanga 2019). This is strongly linked to the rapid development and dynamic expansion of communication technologies, including social media; however, it carries a risk of what Treré and Mattoni (2016) term "communicative reductionism" whereby the historical and social complexities in which the social movements emerge are ignored and digital technologies are viewed as the main drivers of social movement actions. In other words, technological determinism refers to over-emphasising newer media and technological novelty rather than how movements use, or do not use these developments in the political contexts in which they operate. This ignores the fact that movements commonly assimilate innovations into their already existing communication patterns. Some scholars have, however, attempted to merge the interactions of social movements and media. For instance, Fominaya and Gillan (2017) term this the technology-media-movements complex (TMMC), while Mattoni (2012) suggests "repertoires of communication" to explain the different media practices that are used within movements, and Treré and Mattoni (2016) have employed the term "media ecologies" – all attempts to grasp the interrelations between media and social movements in order to disable technological determinism. This chapter highlights those concepts that grasp the complexity of media and movements to demonstrate that Zoom, alongside WhatsApp, was a tool used by the COWG that enabled it to operate smoothly. Yet there were other factors that contributed to the success of the movement at the height of the pandemic, as the next section will illustrate.

The study of a single communication medium in isolation risks reducing the complexity of the internet and its interconnectedness, and also undermines the evolution and role of the different platforms within a movement and the connections between multiple technologies (Treré 2012). Thus, the more holistic approach is central to grasping the use of communication technologies by social movements, although the role of WhatsApp in this context has only been explored recently in the literature, despite an existence that dates back to 2009. Some of the reasons for this delayed entrance into

academic research are methodological. Unlike other social media, the architecture of WhatsApp reduces its accessibility, as its semi-public nature ensures that one can only join a WhatsApp group by invitation (Milan and Barbosa 2020; Pang and Woo 2020). On the other hand, Treré (2020) argues that scholarship on digital activism often overlooks the internal communication practices of social movements and, because WhatsApp plays a role in internal communications, it is under-researched as a result.

The use of WhatsApp has been particularly prominent in the Global South (Treré 2020), something partly attributed to its affordability. It does not require a lot of data to use, especially given the feature that users can opt not to download photos and videos (Dwyer, Hitchen, and Molony 2019). In Kenya, for example, most mobile network providers have a zero-rating fee, allowing WhatsApp to be "free" (Omanga 2019); thus, it also replaces the traditional Short Message Service (SMS) and voice calls which are in many cases more costly. The immediacy and privacy within a controlled environment make it an intimate space for conversations, and users feel less exposed to sanctioning if they offer differing views (Milan and Barbosa 2020; Gil de Zúñiga, Ardèvol-Abreu, and Casero-Ripollés 2019). The architecture of WhatsApp allows for flexibility and immediacy, and it has features that allow messages, voice calls, sharing of photos, videos, documents, and even live location. For digital activism, the most prominent feature of the application is the groups, which allow up to 256 participants to share information. It also has a feature that enables voice note recording and numerous options for emojis, making the app more participatory, especially for less literate populations (Dwyer, Hitchen, and Molony 2019).

The use of WhatsApp for social movements has been complemented by other communicative practices. Although Zoom only became popular in 2020, it has been in existence since 2011; what is newer though, is the use of WhatsApp and Zoom simultaneously. Social movements in South Africa have not employed videoconferencing as much and there were several factors that explained this before the pandemic. It is, however, fundamental to note, as I pointed out earlier, that social movements interact within the media ecological complex (Treré 2012). Therefore, the adoption or abandonment of any media depends, among other factors, on the history of a movement as well as the resources at members' disposal.

Initial studies suggest that social movements have used applications such as Skype before (Treré 2012). Zoom, when considered as a communication tool for social movements, also falls into the category of "backstage activism", a term coined by Goffman (1990) to refer to spaces where the internal communications of movements take place and their ideas are ironed out before they are actualised. As Treré (2020) affirms, backstage activism has been highly understudied, once again partly due to issues of access. There is, however, a growing literature on the use of Zoom, especially since its popularisation during the COVID-19 pandemic (Joia and Lorenzo 2021; Serhan 2020; Wargadinata et al. 2020), with a focus on the challenges of online

teaching and learning. A number of studies also demonstrate how movements have used Zoom (Alexander 2020; Hancock 2022; Kavada 2022; Krinsky and Caldwell 2022), an adaptation that has occurred as the mobilisation of social movements has changed and new ways have been introduced (Della Porta 2020). Yet these studies do not investigate communicative practices in detail, as they focus on Zoom merely as a means of communication and not on how the platform is used in the hybridity of media ecologies within the movements. Furthermore, there is very little literature that links the use of Zoom to WhatsApp and other technologies in the context of social movement activism as exemplified by the COWG.

Methodology: Personal reflections on scholar activism

How, then, did I get interested in digital activism and involved with the COWG in South Africa? It was partly because I was fortunate – or unfortunate – enough to be "caught up" during the lockdown. As the pandemic spread, I was embarking on my studies in South Africa. I come from an activist background in Kenya and would "naturally" be interested in community organising, and a professor who was involved in convening the group inquired if I was interested in taking part. Soon afterwards, I was added to a WhatsApp group and attended a Zoom meeting while following the proceedings. It was a difficult undertaking at first because I was not familiar with the people behind the computer screens; moreover, I had only a little knowledge of the activism landscape in Gauteng because it was mostly new to me. The group consisted of 32 people when I joined, drawn from across Johannesburg and its surroundings. For this study, I collected the data in two ways: firstly, as an observing participant in virtual spaces such as the WhatsApp group and Zoom meetings; secondly, by conducting semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the activists as soon as some of the lockdown regulations had been eased.

Initially, it felt strange to join the Zoom meetings and participate in the WhatsApp conversations because I was not active on the ground in the townships and informal settlements where the two main activities of popular education and food distribution were taking place. However, my role in the group was to assist with communications. In practice, I wrote the minutes for the meetings and posted them on the WhatsApp group; I also assisted some of the members to familiarise themselves with using Zoom, which involved one-on-one Zoom calls with them to "practice" for the COWG meetings. This role helped me to gain trust among the members of the group, although, as a researcher, I was not initially a member myself. While I had not intended to carry out research on Zoom, as the reality of lockdown stretched and uncertainty as to whether I could conduct my original design loomed, I opted to research connections between Zoom and community organising. I was then able to get consent for the study from the COWG members through consensus in one of the Zoom meetings.

Literature on online data collection uses the term "netnography" to describe participant observation and ethnographically oriented research in online spaces (Kozinets 2015). There are many hurdles to collecting data online, a major issue being linked to the ethical challenges of being "allowed" into an online space. As the literature on WhatsApp, for example, points out, a major reason why people feel comfortable using WhatsApp groups is the intimacy that they provide (Milan and Barbosa 2020; Gil de Zúñiga, Ardèvol-Abreu, and Casero-Ripollés 2019); thus, being an active participant in the WhatsApp group and attending the Zoom meetings provided me with an opportunity to analyse how the two platforms were being used simultaneously. However, because of my positionality as an outsider to activist circles in South Africa and my unfamiliarity with the context of everyday life in the townships, this was not sufficient to grasp a holistic understanding of the participants without face-to-face interviews. These I conducted later in the different townships where the activists lived – some in their homes, others in community centres.

The combination of face-to-face interviews and netnography enriched my data, allowing me to reach a better understanding of the participants' experiences. For example, when I saw where they lived and their social environments, the challenges that they faced with connectivity became much more apparent. I could clearly see the infrastructure that surrounded their homes and the immediate problems that they had to overcome. On the other hand, my own biases were also challenged, as I observed class differences, perspectives, and diverse activist experiences.

Zoom and WhatsApp communication in the COWG

It would have been impossible to organise activist initiatives during the pandemic had it not been for the simultaneous use of Zoom and WhatsApp, as they not only played a fundamental communicative role for the COWG, but were the platforms where decisions were made; furthermore, all the activists had smartphones that allowed the installation of these apps. Given that the use of one would not have been possible without the other, I will begin by investigating how Zoom was used, as I consider it the main platform that ensured the success of COWG activities for a number of reasons: firstly because, through Zoom, it was possible to hold meetings. It was a forum for accountability and the exchange of ideas simply because, unlike WhatsApp, people could speak on this platform; indeed, being able to connect with others, although physically isolated, created a sense of community. Secondly, Zoom was where collective decisions and resolutions were made, ensuring that the COWG's work and mandate could be accomplished.

As the lockdown regulations changed, the use of Zoom and WhatsApp within the COWG also shifted. For example, there was considerable activity at the height of the pandemic and, therefore, the regularity of Zoom meetings and attendance was high; as the regulations eased and some members went back to work, attendance reduced, while, as funding dwindled, there

was less food to distribute. Volunteers had also been given a lunch allowance of 50 rand (approximately 3 US dollars), but this could not be maintained. However, the COWG evolved, and other initiatives and activities continued as the lockdown regulations were being eased.

The South African government phased the lockdown at different levels between the highest at 5 and the lowest at 1. At level 5 (26 March–30 April 2020), only essential services were in place, including pharmacies, hospitals, and food shops. The sale of alcohol and cigarettes was prohibited, along with all gatherings, and national and provincial borders were closed. The COWG undertook popular education initiatives through door-to-door mobilising and distribution of pamphlets, and identified the most vulnerable families in the communities in order to distribute food to them. At lockdown level 4 (1–31 May 2020), some work that was termed non-essential was resumed with extreme precautions; the night curfew was set at 8 p.m. to 5 a.m., while schools remained closed, and some COWG members went back to work. When level 3 (1 June–17 August 2020) was enforced, recreational establishments and schools were opened, and curfew hours were set at 11 p.m. to 4 a.m. This was when the COWG saw most of its members resume work. National days were also used as symbols for action. The COWG established a campaign dubbed Asivikelane, a Zulu phrase that roughly translates as “I protect you, you protect me”, used as a slogan in subsequent meetings. It was also during this phase of the lockdown that gatherings were allowed, and the COWG used this opportunity to engineer public mobilisations. For example, on Youth Day on 16 June 2020, the COWG mobilised a number of community actions, particularly popular education, under the slogan, “we are angry, we are hungry”. Banners, T-shirts, masks, loudhailers, posters, songs, and chants were widely used in this and at other events that the COWG organised on national holidays. Members then convened at the Hector Pieterson Museum in Soweto after holding community gatherings, raising issues that included solidarity with other movements globally. At this time, the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States was protesting the death of George Floyd, killed by the police. It was also a protest cry against the gender-based violence inflicted on women that had risen during the pandemic. On 18 July 2020, marking Nelson Mandela Day, popular education initiatives were undertaken in different communities, encouraging the members to mask up and sanitise – services that were conducted for 67 minutes to symbolise the number of years Mandela, South Africa’s freedom fighter and its first Black president, who spent many years of his life in service for his country, including being a political prisoner, and advocating for a non-racialism. On 9 August 2020, South African Women’s Day, the COWG members convened at Constitution Hill to commemorate the role of women in the national liberation movement. It was an opportunity to amplify the message of Asivikelane that we must protect each other to survive.

When the COWG began using Zoom, the meetings were ad hoc because, at the time, there were many deliberations and discussions to be undertaken.

Popular education had just begun, there was a lot of personal protective equipment (PPE) to be delivered, and constant communication was important. Identifying the most vulnerable households in the different communities was also an urgent task. But as the working group grew and drafted a mandate, it was agreed that Zoom meetings would take place every Thursday, with an agenda that was always posted and discussed in the WhatsApp group prior to each meeting. They usually included a weekly report on what was happening in the team leaders' localities. It was also an opportunity to discuss the challenges that were being faced or the successes that had been achieved. At first, the use of Zoom was not easy as there were many hurdles, which I describe further below. It took a lot of teamwork to ensure the group's success in using the application and, in part, this was due to the determination of the activists themselves, while the diversity of COWG membership and the different skills that it harnessed eventually ensured that Zoom meetings were successful. For example, the leaders took up chairing the meetings, and I personally took notes and later posted them on the WhatsApp group.

In many ways, the COWG created its own culture for meetings over time. In an ordinary meeting, the members would come in one by one, which often provided a chance for small talk among those participating, mostly on mundane subjects, such as the latest announcements in the national news, or what we should expect from the next presidential address. After a few minutes, those who had not joined would be called by phone, and this would be deliberated among the members present. In most cases, those who were unable to join would send their apologies to the WhatsApp group and they were excused prior to the meeting. The chair would then start the meeting by stating the items on the agenda and welcoming any additions. Attendees would raise their digital hands (a feature on Zoom) to contribute and the chair would moderate the conversations. Video calls were never used due to connectivity issues and because it would consume more data. Whenever a member was out of order or forgot to unmute themselves, the chair would remind them, while, if there were a problem, the chair could ask the host to mute a member. This was always done respectfully and not to shut somebody down while they were speaking. On the other hand, if someone could not speak either because of the connectivity or too much background noise, they would type their comments in the chat box. One interesting aspect of the culture that the COWG created online was that at the end of the meetings, the host would unmute everyone and people would say goodbye almost simultaneously before the meeting officially ended. Although there were all these features that allowed the meetings to proceed, they did not come without their own challenges.

As mentioned earlier, one of the issues that we faced was the problem of internet connectivity, which often had to do with the infrastructure in the vicinity of participants' locations. In some areas, it was difficult to get connected, as was further explained to me by some of the activists during face-

to-face interviews and interactions in the areas where they lived; some had to strain to get a network connection in their homes. This would then compromise the quality of the audio.

Another challenge that was faced was electricity supply as some activists lived in areas that were not connected to the electrical grid and depended on solar power to charge their devices, which was particularly difficult during winter months. Furthermore, when there were power cuts, it was impossible for some to connect, while a shortage of electricity would mean that the devices were not charged and therefore could not be switched on for online connection or might cut out mid-stream when the battery was low. In yet other cases, the activists considered leaders in their communities could not participate because they were involved in conflicting community matters at the same time, such as attending to a baby that had been abandoned outside their door. These issues were urgent community matters that could not be postponed and, therefore, took priority over a Zoom meeting. Furthermore, as most activists used their phones to connect to Zoom, this meant that when they received other calls in the middle of the meeting, they lost the connection and had to join again, thereby interrupting their participation. Interestingly, one activist (age 44) also pointed out to me that one of the weaknesses of using Zoom was that the meetings lacked "a real feel". By this he meant that he often found it difficult to gauge the honesty of other participants because he could not see them face-to-face, while background noise could indicate that people were not fully present in the meeting.

> Comrades … some of them are lying, you see … there were things that were being bracketed … I could tell someone was smoking ganja [cannabis] while we were in the meeting … all the background noise … they often contradict themselves while speaking.

Perhaps the greatest challenge was that some COWG members found using Zoom too difficult, although it was new to most of them; in fact, all the activists I interviewed had used Zoom for the first time when they got involved with the COWG. The learning processes for adapting to the use of Zoom were not uniform among the activists. This had to do with the issues of the digital divide that require skill for one to be able to use platforms effectively. As one activist (age 39) observed when reflecting on what it really meant to understand how to use Zoom:

> But using Zoom … what does it really mean? Uuuummm … Can we all be hosts? Can we all run webinars? Be like those panellists … Can we all share a screen? I mean, there are those technicalities that come with Zoom. Being able to connect to a meeting doesn't mean I can use Zoom effectively.

This reflection in many ways exposes the issues that the COWG encountered as the members adapted the newer technologies. As literature on the digital

divide shows, the use of social media does not necessarily equate to users being empowered; indeed, often social media users who are active online are privileged in multiple ways relating to their gender, race, ethnicity, class, or other issues (Mutsvairo and Ragnedda 2019; Nyabola 2018). On the other hand, activists with prior exposure to technology could confidently use and enjoy the conveniences of Zoom. Some were working for NGOs, one was working for a bank, another was a paramedic, and they had already been exposed to using computers and interacting with technology. Zoom was, therefore, just a continuation. In fact, when the lockdown was at its peak, those who were working in various organisations and had switched to working from home were using similar applications, which meant that they became more confident in the use of Zoom because of familiarity and frequent use. The confidence also meant that they could express themselves better and their participation was enhanced. The confidence to interact with technology, as the group interviews show, has a lot to do with exposure, which meant that Zoom was a better platform for self-expression. As one activist (age 22) claimed:

> I feel there is so much openness behind the screen. You can always switch off your camera and not be seen, right? … Whenever I spoke when the camera was off, I could say much more … I like working from behind the scenes with my personality.

The other challenge was the issue of language. Zoom, like most digital technologies, is primarily in English. Even though it is available in 11 other languages, none of the options are an African language. Some of the members experienced the challenges simultaneously, which meant, for example, that while they were facing a connectivity issue, they could not type in the chat box due to a lack of confidence in their linguistic ability. The issue of language is highlighted in some digital divide literature, showing how it affects online participation (Sam 2019). As one activist (age 41) told me:

> I don't understand Zoom … even now [after 7 months of using it], I don't understand Zoom. I know to raise my hand and talk only. To chat and do what, what I don't know, anything! I see some people chatting there … I don't know.

Although not all these challenges could be overcome, some of the ad hoc solutions provided demonstrated the working-class creativity that enabled the success of the COWG. For example, the issue of connectivity was overcome by calling activists and connecting them to Zoom via a phone call. This was done by more resourceful members who had multiple devices and sufficient airtime to sustain other members in meetings that lasted almost two hours. On the other hand, in my role as assistant of communication, I virtually trained some of the members to use Zoom, which boosted their confidence

and allowed better participation. In many cases, activists who had issues with electricity in their localities managed to charge their devices in time for the weekly meetings by planning to have data and a ready phone for the regular Thursday schedule. Here, the COWG members' determination enabled effective meetings for the group. Furthermore, although meetings were almost exclusively conducted in English, it was not uncommon for some members to speak in Zulu, and it would then be translated. In other words, inclusivity was practised to allow people to express themselves. One of the highlights of the success of the use of Zoom was that most meetings were well-attended. At the beginning of the pandemic, the COWG successfully hosted a webinar in collaboration with the University of Johannesburg library that sensitised the public to the work that the COWG had started on popular education during the lockdown.

The brief outline offered above exhibits the central role Zoom played for COWG activities. During the pandemic, it functioned as a crucial platform for internal communication, decision making, sociality, solidarity, and learning at a time when physical meetings were not possible. It is important, finally, to highlight the complementary role that WhatsApp played in this context. In April 2020, which was the peak of the lockdown, the average number of messages sent per day in the COWG group was 113. Importantly, as part of accountability, the members shared pictures that showed food distribution and popular education through the distribution of pamphlets. The links to Zoom meetings, their agendas, and the meeting minutes were also shared in the group, along with other documents allowing members to seek clarity on various matters. Before Zoom meetings, some members would feel free to add any items that they felt were of importance to the agenda. Of course, there were instances when members would go astray and post things that were irrelevant or information that was not verified, in which case the group administrator would call them to order, enabling the smooth running of the group.

The COWG also had several other WhatsApp groups among its members for coordination purposes. In many cases, there would be a smaller team that was designated to carry out a specific task, which would form a smaller group to facilitate coordination and minimise message traffic in the main group. For example, there was a small task team that was responsible for coordinating the event held on Youth Day on 16 June. This meant they were concerned, for example, with how T-shirts would be delivered, and with liaising with other teams to publicise the event.

Conclusions

This chapter has established that Zoom was a crucial digital platform that sustained the mobilisation, coordination, and activities of the COWG in Johannesburg during the pandemic lockdown in 2020; complemented by WhatsApp, it was central to the group's internal communication practices.

The architecture of these platforms made them suitable for organising numerous people in a large city, making their communication effective, and serving as a locus of members' accountability through weekly meetings. The internal dynamics of communication united the COWG, producing a shared identity that developed during the pandemic.

The chapter also shows that it is not only the internal communication practices that made the COWG successful. Many forms of external communication, including the use of traditional media such as loudhailers, pamphlets, banners and T-shirts, slogans, and symbolism, were also used to communicate the group's messages to wider publics. Another important factor that helped with popular mobilisation was that most members were seasoned activists who were respected leaders in their communities; their activism and community engagement helped to ensure that they could recruit volunteers from their existing networks to fulfil the group's mandate. Lastly, the group's social diversity was additionally beneficial as the different skill-sets the members contributed assisted the group in hosting meetings and ensuring accountability to donors.

Notes

1 See more at https://c19peoplescoalition.org.za/poa/.

2 The townships where COWG was active included Klipspruit, Pimville, Orlando, Nomzamo Park, Meadowlands, Diepkloof, Orange Farm, Eldorado Park, Thembehlile, and Protea South. These regions are south of Johannesburg, mostly around Soweto, except for Orange Farm which is approximately 35 km further south. Alexandra, Ivory Park, Tsakane, and Diepsloot lie in the northern regions of the City of Johannesburg, while Makause is located in the Ekhurleni municipality and Bekkersdal lies in the West Rand. The COWG operated in three municipalities: West Rand, City of Johannesburg, and Ekurhuleni.

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5 The Chilean awakening in a global decade of social movements

Geoffrey Pleyers

Introduction

The popular revolt that erupted on 18 October 2019 and came to be known as the "Chilean awakening" (Ganter et al. 2022) was unprecedented in its scale, impact, and meaning since the return of democracy to the country in 1988. More than two million people took to the streets in different parts of the country on 25 October 2019. In Santiago, 1.2 million people demonstrated – more than a fifth of the city's population. In the following weeks, and until the pandemic lockdown, thousands of citizens gathered in the country's squares, echoing Santiago's iconic Plaza Italia, which they renamed the Plaza de la Dignidad ("Square of Dignity"). Massive union marches were organised on a weekly basis, and popular neighbourhood assemblies and town councils were formed with Chileans from various social backgrounds and generations taking part in the movement. They adopted a broad repertoire of actions, ranging from classic demonstrations to symbolic direct action in shopping malls – to raise awareness of consumer culture and the working conditions of employees – and outside pharmacies, to denounce the high cost of medicines and demand a better public healthcare system.

While this was a profoundly Chilean event, the 2019 outburst was also part of a global wave of social movements that have shaken countries in all regions of the world since 2011 (Bringel and Pleyers 2017). This wave of movements and citizen uprisings was particularly strong in 2019, with outbursts in several Latin American countries (Muggenthaler, Bringel, and Martínez 2021) and dozens of countries worldwide. Such a "global wave of movements" (Glasius and Pleyers 2013) is not embodied in a network that coordinates activists from different continents, let alone in an international organisation. Actions and movements "resonate" (McDonald 2006) across individuals, experiences, and movements. Like the global movement of 1968 or the people's spring that shook Europe in 1848, the actors that take part act in a decentralised way and organise themselves at national and local scales. However, they share more than tactics, elements of their repertoire of action (such as the occupation of central squares in cities or the urban graphics), and forms of organising (including effective use of socio-digital

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media). Across continents and under different political regimes, citizens and activists make similar claims and share similar values, demanding more democracy, more social justice, and, above all, personal dignity, and respect from the state (Glasius and Pleyers 2013).

Analysing the Chilean Awakening in the light of this global wave of movements without falling into "methodological globalism" (Pleyers 2023b) requires overcoming the false dichotomy between the "national" and the "global". Like all movements in this wave, the Chilean Awakening is both profoundly national and an echo of a global movement; considering it a component of a global movement should not lead to denying its national character or its specificities. Instead, it invites us to see and analyse it in the light of features and dimensions shared with similar mobilisations in other countries, benefiting from the analyses and lessons learned from these movements to reach a better understanding of the features and challenges of the Chilean Awakening. From this perspective, a global sociology of social movements can help us understand the nature and challenges of contemporary social movements based on similar experiences in other countries.

In this chapter, I focus on features shared by the Chilean Awakening and other contemporary movements seeking democracy, social justice, and dignity, which I have organised into eight categories: scales and spaces of action; reticular and adhocratic forms of organising; claims formulated in terms of dignity, social justice, and democratisation; strong subjective dimensions; widespread expressive and artistic dimensions; spaces of encounters and experience; intersectional encounters and cross-fertilisation; the co-existence of a more pragmatic relationship to institutional politics and a stance against any specific political party. The chapter closes with reflection on the connections between social movements and social change, which is less linear and more complex than assumed by many actors and analysts of the effervescent moments of these movements.

The analysis draws on fieldwork research and interviews with activists that have taken part in citizens' movements for democracy, social justice, and dignity since 2011 in cities including Paris, New York, Moscow, Tunis, and Barcelona. In November 2019, I conducted 27 interviews with activists of different generations who participated in the daily occupations of the "Plaza Dignidad" in Santiago. This research draws on epistemic and methodological considerations for a global sociology of social movements, outlined in a recent article (Pleyers 2023b).

Mobilisations focused on the national scale

A feature shared by the movements, revolts, and outbreaks that have emerged since 2011 is the inscription of their struggles and demands in a national framework, as they mainly organise at a national scale (Glasius and Pleyers 2013). This focus distinguishes them from the movements for greater democracy or equality of the previous decade, which targeted international

institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and met at regional or global events such as the World Social Forums.

The 2019 Chilean Awakening was no exception. It was a deeply national event, which was acted out in the squares of every city of the country and in many villages. With a focus on national politics, public healthcare, and pension systems, it was deeply embedded in the Chilean political, social, economic, and cultural context. Citizens were outraged by various scandals that impacted on the national conscience, such as revelations about the mistreatment and abuse of children and adolescents in the institutions of the National Service for Minors, corruption scandals, and abuses by the political and economic elite. The 2019 uprising built on two decades of national movements, more particularly the student movement of 2011, the mass mobilisations against private pension funds (Miranda 2021), and the feminist movement of 2018.

Intense use of socio-digital networks

The emergence of socio-digital media changed how movements are organised and experienced (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Rovira 2017), to the point that some analysts have referred to them as “Twitter revolutions”. Socio-digital media provided platforms from which to disseminate the Chilean movement (also known by its hashtag #18O, which resonates with the Spanish #15M in 2011) and organise it, express its claims, communicate among participants, and share reasons for their outrage and repertoire of actions, offer alternative information and narratives to mass media, and reach out to other citizens.

At the same time, a major feature of most protests since 2011 is not the transition from the “real” to the “virtual” but the combination of digital media with the “territorialisation” of the movements, which often occupied public squares in city centres. Some of these occupations were permanent, such as on Tahrir Square in Cairo or Plaza del Sol in Madrid in 2011. Others consisted in intermittent occupation, where participants did not camp on-site overnight but returned every day to the same square at the end of the afternoon, as was the case of the Place de la République in Paris in 2016 and the Plaza de la Dignidad in Santiago in 2019. In other countries, the movement took the form of daily or weekly marches that occupied the streets and squares of the city centres as well as national political and media spaces. In most cases, alongside the main demonstrations, less visible initiatives, such as popular assemblies in neighbourhoods, are driven by the will to re-appropriate urban spaces in neoliberal cities, reinforce the social fabric and the bonds between citizens, and open up spaces for participation and local initiatives. These movements have combined digital activism and activism “in real life”, socio-digital and mass media, online campaigns, and mobilisations in the street and on the square (Gerbaudo 2012).

Other forms of organising, other forms of activism

A third shared feature of the outbursts and revolts of this decade is the success of decentralised self-organising and the fact that traditional organisations and militancy have not played a central role in the rise of such protests. Citizens took to the streets in the name of their personal and collective outrage rather than following a call from civil society organisations, trade unions, or political leaders. In some countries, the activists who occupied the squares banned the flags and banners of parties, militant organisations, and often even associations (see Türkmen 2016 for the case of Gezi Park in Istanbul). In response, some sociologists, militants, and public intellectuals, notably in Chile, have considered these outbursts "unorganised" and insisted on the "need to organise the movement" to achieve concrete results. Asef Bayat (2017) refers to these seemingly unorganised citizen protests as "social non-movements", which he understands as "collective actions of non-collective actors, … ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change" (Bayat 2017, 15).

In Tunisia, the revolution surprised many left-wing militants and the main trade union (Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens, UGTT), elements that were not involved in the early rise of the protest. This scenario would repeat itself in citizens' revolts throughout the decade. In Chile, militants from the Communist Party and leftist organisations with whom I spoke explained that they had been hoping for such a social revolt against neoliberalism for years but found themselves disoriented when the citizens' revolt broke out in October 2019, wondering about their role and place in this unprecedented movement. Some wondered which organisations were responsible, as they could not comprehend a movement without a formal organisation behind it. Yet the absence of formal organisation does not mean that these movements were disorganised. On the contrary, citizens and activists organised themselves efficiently, opting for fluid networks, affinity groups, and "adhocratic" networks, defined as "fluid organisational structures in which members initially adopt ad-hoc roles to fulfil a personal purpose, based on individual life projects that are then interpreted as collective objectives" (Henríquez 2020, 42).

On this point, the outburst of 2019 contrasted with the massive student movement of 2011, in which structured organisations, particularly student federations and some political parties, played a significant role (Disi 2018). This is not to say that trade unions did not take an active part in the Chilean outbreak in 2019. A series of strikes and union marches extended the dimension of the outburst (Osorio Lavín and Velásquez 2021), and allowed the movement to reach out to new sectors of Chilean society. The citizens' uprising also took up some of the main union claims, including the struggle for better working conditions and pensions, and against the private pension funds (Julián-Vejar, Osorio, and Pérez 2022; Miranda 2021).

However, as was the case in the Tunisian revolution, the Spanish 15M, Occupy Wall Street in New York City, or the yellow vest in France (Béroud

et al. 2022), union organisations did not play a central role in the emergence of the movement and its organisation, nor in the experience of the citizens who gathered in the squares or the popular assemblies. Labour issues were part of citizens' claims, but they expressed them through other frames, references, and actions. Many trade unionists participated in the protests as citizens rather than as members of a union organisation.

More than the presence or absence of trade unions, however, what has characterised the "post-2011 movements" are new relations, tensions, articulations, and collaborations between trade unions and citizen movements or networks (Béroud et al. 2022; Braga 2017). In Chile, the massive movement against the private pension funds were born out of convergences, tensions, and collaborations between a citizens' movement and trade unions (Miranda 2021). A similar logic preceded the active participation of trade unions in the outbreak of 2019 and the social and political processes that followed.

Dignity, democracy, and social justice

The Tunisian revolution of 2011, the first of this "decade of social movements", called itself "the revolution of dignity". At the end of the decade, Chileans also put dignity at the centre of their outburst. In Santiago, the square they occupied every evening was renamed Plaza Dignidad, while the walls of the city centre declaimed the word in countless slogans and street art designs. In the 1990s and 2000s, philosophers and sociologists associated dignity with the repertoire of recognition and "post-materialist" values. What characterises the 2010s movements, however, is the close link between socio-economic and cultural spheres in asserting and demanding *dignity*. For the activists I interviewed, dignity is closely associated with dimensions of recognition and with social and economic claims. As a young Tunisian I interviewed in 2013 explained:

> Dignity is the possibility of living without having to ask my mother for a handout every week when I am already 25 years old. If I have a job, I can earn a living, I can walk with my head held high.

Similarly, in 2019 Chilean citizens demanded to be treated by the state with respect, and for changes in the social and economic system that would ensure material conditions to "live with dignity". This was well expressed in the words of a 46-year-old man on Plaza Dignidad in Santiago:

> What most affects our dignity is the case of grandparents who have to live on 100 lucas [100,000 pesos], which in Chile is nothing. This money is barely enough to buy medicine. It is obviously an attack on people's dignity.
>
> (Interview, November 2019)

While social and economic claims have been at the core of square occupations and citizens' uprisings in the 2010s, these movements have stopped short of "anti-capitalist" claims that some left-wing intellectuals and militants have projected onto them. From the Arab revolutions to the 2019 outbursts in Latin America, citizens have demanded to be able to live with dignity on the salaries they earn, and to end the abuses and privileges of the economic and political elites. However, in no country have these citizens' movements for democracy challenged the foundations of the capitalist system, contrasting with the discourses and claims of significant swathes of the environmental, Indigenous, and alter-globalisation movements.

This was the case in Chile. Inequality and economic injustices were the main sources of the citizens' outrage and unrest (Araujo 2021) that fuelled the uprising. However, far from making anti-capitalist claims, most protesters demanded the right to live with dignity on their salaries, to be able to gather some savings to ensure a decent retirement, and not to have to indebt themselves at unsustainable rates to get access to higher education, while some called for a less unfair distribution of income. These claims reflect a break with the beliefs in the neoliberal and meritocratic model held by a part of the population (Cortés 2022), and with the idea that Chile was a prosperous "oasis" of stability and well-being. They also reveal the moderation of the movement's demands, which called for constitutional reforms and a less unjust form of capitalism, but did not seek radical change and an alternative model of society.

These movements and revolts also had a generational component. On the one hand, in several Latin American countries, notably Chile and Brazil, the first generation who grew up after the dictatorship led the movement, demanding more from democracy than merely being protected from dictatorship's abuses. On the other hand, from the Arab world (Khosrokhavar 2012) to Latin America (Brunner 2021; Disi 2018), the protests found one of their sources in the tension generated by the contrasting landscapes generated by the massification of higher education in political and economic systems that limit the possibilities of realising personal (and) collective aspirations, and condemn most young people to precarity and debt.

Subjective dimensions

Individual and collective subjectivities are asserted and constructed in social movements, which provide "spaces of experience" favourable to experimentation and processes of subjectivation, where the self-production of oneself as a person and the perception of one's impact on society mutually reinforce each other (Pleyers 2010). These spaces and events constitute an ephemeral but intense and meaningful experience for their participants, and often have a long-term impact on their social and political values and commitment (McAdam 1989), as well as on their worldview and the construction of themselves as individuals and citizens.

For those who took part in it, the 2019 revolt has not only been a collective and political process but also a deeply personal experience (Ganter et al. 2022; Sandoval 2023). Based on processes of personal subjectification, understood as the construction of oneself as a person and the conception of the life one wants to live (Bajoit 2012), the experience of the revolt led to participants' questioning the promises of the Chilean neoliberal social and economic model that claimed to be based on "meritocracy". During the evenings they spent on the squares, they recounted their lives, listened to others doing the same, and realised that their personal destiny was collective and that the difficulties they faced in daily life found their source in a model of society that is deeply unfair. This "opened their eyes", as many repeated in interviews and as street art claimed on the walls of the cities of Chile, and they revisited their life histories based on this new perspective. After devoting most of their time and energy to work (Araujo and Martucceli 2012), many interviewees expressed their desire to "get their life back". One worker present at Plaza Dignidad shared this in these terms during the interview:

> At one point, I asked myself, "At what point did we become like this?" because we lived stressed, tired. I worked in a bank. I went in at seven in the morning and sometimes I left at two at night! What kind of life did I have with my family? … Since 18 October, there has been something, a phenomenon, that I still can't identify. All I know is that I feel happy … It's such a selfish world. We were taught to be selfish. In these 20–25 years, we were not taught to be people, but to be "neoliberals" … I don't know what we became. When did this happen to us? When did this happen to me, locked up in the world of work, work, work, and I didn't realise how it happened. 30 years passed by me!
>
> (Interview, Plaza Dignidad, November 2019)

Expressive and artistic dimensions

Artistic creativity has emerged as a consubstantial part of all the square movements and citizens' revolts during the 2010s. Street arts, poems, songs, and performances have expressed outrage at injustice, anger at state violence, and demands for social justice. The Tunisian Revolution failed to provide a better future for its youth; however, it has profoundly permeated the subjectivity of many citizens, particularly among young people, transforming their relationship with the state, society, and themselves (Diaco et al. 2017). The expression of these subjectivities is embodied in particular in a dynamism and artistic creativity that touches all fields, from cinema and music to street art (see Laine, Suurpää, and Ltifi 2017 on the Tunisian case).

Artistic creativity has been a central component of the Chilean uprising. In the months that followed 18 October 2019, dozens of artists wrote songs dedicated to the movement, to the point that David Ponce (2020) speaks of a "sound uprising" (*un estallido sonor*). The outburst cannot be recounted, let

alone understood, without the countless poems narrating and disseminating the hopes, fears, and experiences of those who lived through it (Ganter et al. 2022). Other participants expressed their outrage and hope through embroidery and burlap. Street art and graffiti were of particular significance, populating and shaping the space of the movements and embodying the reappropriation of the neoliberal city by a popular movement. It provided the visible dimension of the transformation of these squares into spaces of experience, hopes, encounters among citizens, and confrontation with the police (Paredes 2021). Paintings and graffiti remained on the walls of downtown Santiago until May 2023: the sediment of the revolt and its creativity, recalling the energy and creativity of the revolt and maintaining its memory. Such residue acted as traces of the struggle and its hopes and values, and the alternative project for society it represented. It was not an abstract declaration but embodied in the experience of the people who gathered on these squares. The images prolonged the movement and its claims, addressing the actors who lived through it and still carry it with them, as well as the political authorities and passers-by (Henríquez 2022), questioning them about the injustices of a social and economic model that rules a profoundly neoliberal and unequal country.

Yet creativity and the affirmation of subjectivities are not merely the means used to promote a cause; they are at the core of resistance to the invasion of the world by the forces of neoliberal cities. The vindication of these subjectivities and creativity opposes the process of subjugation and formatting by an economic and cultural system.

Beyond convergence: Spaces of encounter

A key element of these movements is that they provided spaces where participants wove dense and deep social relations. The squares became "spaces of experience", understood as "places distanced from the capitalist society that allow actors to live according to their own principles, enter into different relationships, express their subjectivity and that favour processes of subjectification" (Pleyers 2010, 39).

In all the cities of Chile, the occupied squares became spaces of sociability where citizens shared the difficulties of their lives and their hopes. They opened up to the other not only with their convictions but also their political and existential doubts, the fragility of their experience, and their processes of personal subjectivation. These relationships of trust, openness, and attention to the other that characterised social relations in Plaza Dignidad contrasted with the extent of distrust that characterises Chilean society (Brunner 2021), both towards politics and among citizens. Friendships and mutual support networks were formed on the squares (Henríquez 2022), the ground on which mutual aid and local solidarity networks would emerge or consolidate during the pandemic to confront the failures of the state to address basic needs in popular neighbourhoods confronted with strict confinement measures (Pleyers 2023a).

All over the world, the square occupations also fostered encounters between people from different social backgrounds. People who usually “don’t mix”, either in everyday life or in social mobilisations, met, shared their lives, and suffered the repression together. Those who were in Plaza Dignidad will remember the flags of rival football teams flying above the statue on the square. Those who were part of the front line confronting the police will remember the support of some members of the football fan radicals, the “*barras bravas*”, who used their experience of confrontations with the police in the stadiums when defending the occupied square. The same happened in Cairo during the 2011 revolution when the “ultras” of rival clubs allied to defend Tahrir Square against the armed forces or the Gezi movement in Istanbul in 2013.

Intersectional movements

As mentioned above, the “movements of the 2010s” are characterised by a close articulation of economic and cultural (materialist and post-materialist) claims (Glasius and Pleyers 2013), and also an intersectional dimension.

The feminisation of social movements was already an essential element of mobilisations at the beginning of the decade. Women took centre stage in the Tunisian revolution, in the Spanish 15M, and even more so in the Gezi movement in Turkey in 2013 (Türkmen 2016), among others. This was reinforced throughout the decade, exemplified by the democracy movement in Sudan (Handique 2020) and the Women, Freedom, Life -movement in Iran in 2022 (Khosrokhavar 2023), to name the most emblematic cases. Transcending its protagonists, this feminisation shows the growing influence of feminist culture and practices in contemporary social movements (Suárez-Krabbe 2020), notably embodied in the importance of care to activists, expressed in their attention to other participants, the different style of leadership, and the production of spaces in which human relations can be expressed through mutuality.

The feminist dimension was crucial in the Chilean uprising, prolonging the 2018 national “feminist uprising” (Ponce Lara 2020), while the performance of the feminist collective Las Tesis resonated globally and was reproduced in dozens of countries. The aftermath of the 2019 uprising also saw the history-making feminist march on 8 March 2020. Echoes on a personal level and in producing relations between citizens are even more important. When I asked what the outburst had changed, a young activist replied, “Since 18 October, we talk about our emotions at dinner in my family” (interview with a law student, 21 years old, Santiago, November 2019).

Another intersectional dimension of the square movements in the 2010s that has been repeated in many countries has been the encounter between urban and “non-racialised” citizens with popular, “racialised” and/or ethnic actors, dominated in the national context by institutionalised racism and/or colonial practices. The active participation of oppressed minorities in the

"post-2011" movements contrasts sharply with the wave of anti-globalisation protests in the late 1990s and early 2000s. While the Zapatista movement was an inspiration shared by many of the young activists, alter-globalisation protests overwhelmingly gathered "non-racialised" (i.e. White), middle-class citizens, to the extent that the question, "Where was the colour in Seattle?"[1] (Martines 2000) became a major concern for the movement.

A decade later, the square occupations of the 2010s were spaces of encounters between citizens and activists from different social backgrounds. In New York, Occupy Wall Street was an important moment of interaction between students and middle-class activists and "racialised" (mostly Black and Latinx) activists from the city's more popular neighbourhoods. The relationships of trust and support they forged during the encounter led to solidarity actions when popular neighbourhoods were flooded by Hurricane Sandy in 2012, and to a vibrant Black Lives Matter movement in the city a few years later. In Istanbul, the 2013 Gezi Park occupation brought together religious citizens and atheists, and middle-class Turkish activists and Kurdish citizens oppressed and repressed by the regime, producing shared understanding, interpersonal trust, and mutual support for their causes; this converged in demands for a more democratic country and the rejection of increasing state control and repression. These encounters fostered a new perspective on Kurdish activists and strengthened the new pro-peace party in Turkey, the People's Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP), which won 13% of the votes nationally in the 2015 elections before being heavily repressed by the Erdogan government.

In Chile, the strong presence of Mapuche flags and Mapuche language graffiti on the Plaza de la Dignidad in Santiago and across the country became a symbol for one of the most significant dimensions of the uprising: the encounter between activists and urban movements, and elements of Mapuche culture, worldview, and identity. As Fernando Pairican and Juan Porma explain, "Mapurbidad[2] was not only present. It played a fundamental political and symbolic role" (Pairican and Porma 2022). The Chilean Awakening had a decolonial dimension and contributed to broadening what Pairican (2022) has called "plurinationality from below". Carrying Mapuche flags during the square occupation, young people sought to show the Indigenous component of their identity or their solidarity with the Mapuche people's struggle. They denounced repression of the movement, the robbery of Indigenous lands by the Chilean state (Pu Lov y las Comunidades Lavkenche en Resistencia 2017) and the invisibilisation of Mapuche identity and culture in the colonial construction of Chilean identity. Indeed, the encounters in square occupations and their aftermaths have transformed how many participants see their country. As happened in other Latin American countries with the Zapatista movement and with *sumak kawsay/buen vivir* (see Radcliffe, this volume), some parts of the Mapuche worldview have become an inspiration for a new generation of activists in thinking about our relationship with nature (of which we are a part), what living with dignity

means, and the pluricultural reality of Chile. It has translated into a different way of conceptualising democracy (Díaz Polanco and Pacheco 2002; Pairican and Porma 2022) that stresses the need to consider collective subjects and rights and to acknowledge and protect different nations and cultures in twenty-first-century democracies.

Relationship to institutional politics

It is an analytical mistake to reduce the outcomes of social movements to their impact on institutional politics while ignoring the complex relations between these two arenas and their actors, which evolved significantly during the movements and revolts of the 2010s. At the dawn of the decade, most actors in the citizen revolts and square occupations – including the Arab revolutions (Khosrokhavar 2012), the Spanish 15M, Occupy Wall Street, the Gezi Park movement, and the June 2013 protests in Brazil (Bringel and Pleyers 2019) – adopted an anti-party and anti-institutional stance (sometimes falsely labelled as “anti-politics”). They focused on non-representative and prefigurative practices (Pleyers 2010), implementing the horizontality and democratic values of the movement in the assemblies themselves, as well as in the thematic committees deployed in the squares.

The rejection of institutional politics and actors left a vacuum in electoral politics. In some countries, it was filled by charismatic progressive leaders whose discourses resonated with some of the demands being made and who managed to combine elements of “movement culture” with the logic of institutional politics (Della Porta et al. 2017), as was the case of Podemos in Spain, Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party in the UK, and the campaigns of Bernie Sanders and Alexandra Ocasio Cortéz in the United States. In Egypt, the well-organised Muslim Brotherhood filled the space, before being crushed by the El Sisi coup in 2014. In many other countries, the void was filled by far-right actors. Authoritarianism grew in Arab countries and the peaceful revolutions in Syria and Bahrain were crushed. In Turkey, the democratic atmosphere of Gezi gave way to an authoritarian turn, marked by the assassinations of Kurdish political, social, and cultural actors, along with the arrest of hundreds of President Erdogan’s opponents. In Brazil, the 2013 marches were animated by progressive demands and actors calling for more democracy, participation, and equality, better public services, and less state violence. However, a year later, movements from the far right took over the leadership of the protest cycle (Bringel and Pleyers 2019), promoting President Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment, the Temer government’s neoliberal policies, and, later, Jair Bolsonaro’s successful campaign. If we maintain that social movements contribute to the production of society, it is indispensable to recognise that it is not only progressive movements that produce society; conservative movements and the “global capitalism movement” do likewise (Sklair 1997).

Latin America movements are traditionally closer to party politics than those elsewhere. All over the continent, the movements of the 2010s opened

space for political co-optation. They also introduced political innovations, seeking to combine the logic of movements and party politics. For example, in Brazil, "plurinominal candidacies" at local and state elections, and a series of other political innovations, emerged in the aftermath of the 2013 protests (Faria 2020), resulting in a significant increase of women of colour and activists in municipal councils without losing the autonomy of activist collectives.

In this panorama, the Chilean case stands out as one of the most interesting representations of the translation of the movements into the political-institutional arena. The uprising contributed to the historic election of a 35-year-old former student leader to the Presidency of the Republic in 2021. Gabriel Boric belongs to a party alliance that emerged in the aftermath of the 2011 student protests, in a process partly similar to what happened after the Spanish *indignados* (Marzolf and Ganuza 2016). In Chile, the dynamism of social movements found its main political translation in the first constituent assembly. The majority of its members were elected from lists of candidates who were independent of political parties, most of them with strong roots in civil society and social movements, which resulted in one of the most progressive proposals for a constitution globally. This composition increased the challenge of connecting the ethical logic of social movements with the negotiation logic of representative politics (Garretón 2016), particularly with articulating this constituent process beyond the most progressive sectors of the Chilean population.

Thanks to the infrastructures and connections built after the 2011 student protest, some political translations of the 2019 uprising operated much faster than in other countries; however, some of the actors in these movements maintained a strong opposition to the practices of party politics. It translated, for example, into a campaign in favour of the null vote in the May 2023 elections for councillors, in which the proportion of null and blank votes reached 21%.

Social movements, politics, and social change

The impact of revolts and citizens' movements on institutional politics is rarely linear and often does not go in the direction of the movements. This is not specific to the political processes that unfolded after the citizens' uprising. A few weeks after May 1968, with the largest workers' strike in France since the Second World War and the student revolt that became a global symbol, the national elections of June 1968 delivered the most pronounced victory for right-wing parties since 1945. In the more recent history of the Americas, only five years separate the mass protests of Junho 2013 (June 2013) by citizens demanding a fairer and more democratic Brazil and the electoral victory of far-right leader Jair Bolsonaro. Five years is also the period between Occupy Wall Street and the election of Donald Trump to the White House.

In Chile, a succession of historic social movements, including the student movement of 2011 and the massive protest against private pension funds, did not prevent the return to the presidency of Sebastián Piñera, the businessman who most embodied the system that these movements denounced. After a first mandate between 2010 and 2014, his re-election in 2017 invites us to moderate assumptions of the immediate impacts of progressive movements on institutional politics and not to ignore the agency and adaptability of actors who sought to maintain the "Chilean socio-political matrix" (Garretón 2016). Piñera's second election demonstrated the ability of right-wing parties and actors to adapt to new contexts created by social movements and to limit the depth of the social changes driven by the student movement (Cortés 2022); however, it did not invalidate the dynamics of the social movements – quite the contrary. Mobilisation against private pension funds reached its peak in 2017. A year later, in 2018, the same thing happened to the feminist movement. In 2019, the explosion occurred, and a year after its explosion, the Constituent Assembly process began.

The connections between social revolts and institutional politics are never straightforward. One should recall that the primary purpose of social movements is not to change institutional politics but to change society. Reducing social movements to their impact on institutional politics or the electoral arena is an analytical bias that prevents us from understanding some fundamental dimensions of these actors and the essential part in the change that they drive. Although June 1968 gave the largest electoral victory to the French right in the twentieth century, the historical impact of these elections was less than that of the social and cultural movement that immediately preceded them. Nobody remembers the elections of June 1968, while May of the same year had a profound impact on French society, remaining a turning point and a global reference. Likewise, the impact of the feminist movement cannot be summed up in a series of laws that have asserted gender equality, granted the right to vote, or provided legal access to abortion. It is more than that, transforming women's and men's subjectivities, behaviours, and visions of the world in everyday life in professional, educational, and public spheres (Federici 2018; Suárez-Krabbe 2020). A fundamental dimension of movements and revolts, such as May 1968 in Paris and 15M and the *indignados*, is precisely to question the centrality of institutional politics in the mechanisms of social change (Arranz Guilarte 2021; Rancière 2015). The progressive movements of the 2010s remind us that democracy is not only about institutions and elections. It is about living democracy as an experience, in everyday practices, and as a personal ethic (Pleyers 2023c).

Conclusion

Analysing the Chilean outburst within the wave of citizen movements and revolts that have shaken countries and political regimes in all regions of the world since 2011 provides a broader understanding of the contributions and

challenges of the Chilean movement in regard to the social, cultural, and political dynamics it fostered and strengthened.

The fate of the citizens' movements and the social and political dynamics that unfolded in these countries in the 2010s, reminds us that social change towards a more just and democratic world is not a linear process. It goes through advances and setbacks, passing through the euphoria of sharing with thousands of people in public squares and political and social victories, and the disillusionment when electoral processes reveal that the actors of the democratising movement are a minority in the country's population, or that the state has managed to repress democratic aspirations in a violent but effective manner.

Similarly, the lessons of social movements in different countries invite us to integrate the role of reactionary actors and movements more effectively into analyses of contemporary social movements. They also temper the illusory optimism of a rapid and limbo-free mutation to a more just and democratic society. Chile has already gone through this stage. Six years after the historic student movement of 2011, Sebastián Piñera was returned to the Presidency of the Republic. The failure of the progressive actors to institute a process that would provide Chile with a new constitution is a reminder that the people who "woke up" in the 2019 uprising only constitute a part of the Chilean population. Among progressive intellectuals, there is also a tendency to look at and analyse only one side of the social and political landscape.

At the same time, it is becoming increasingly clear that the "Chilean awakening" was not limited to its political impact; rather, it reflects the operations of social movements in the strong sense that Alain Touraine (1981) assigned to the concept: actors who take their struggles to the level of historicity and seek to transform a society's central cultural values. The uprising has shaken many dimensions of Chilean society and of the citizens who participated in it. It has instigated transformative processes in multiple spheres, from politics to everyday life and family relations, resulting in a profound transformation of what it means to be Chilean in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1 A reference to the protest against the WTO in December 1999 that took place in Seattle, USA.

2 Mapurbidad refers to the Mapuche identity, culture, cosmovision, and way of being in the world.

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Part II

Decolonising the state

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6 Everyday citizenship and decolonising utopias in Cotacachi county, Ecuador

Sarah A. Radcliffe

Cotacachi: An intercultural space for citizenship?

Citizenship comprises the formal legal relation between individuals and a state, yet the meanings, practices, preconceptions, and experiences of citizenship are deeply moulded by wider forces of colonialism, development, and global norms of modernity and democracy. Colonial systems of labour and social categories established gradations of rights, even after political independence (Sadiq 2017), while western liberal presumptions and institutions for citizenship retain enduring international influence despite the far-reaching effects of globalisation and neoliberalism on the transnational and socio-economic dimensions of rights, belonging, and state-citizen relations (Isin 2012). In Latin America, the economic and racial legacies of colonialism have endured, even as the confluence of rights and neoliberalism brought citizens onto the streets in diverse social movements (Meltzer and Rojas 2014).

Critical analysis of citizenship as an ordinary, daily constructed relationship also informs this chapter's discussion. Political geography attends to the "continual re-articulation of the relationships and sites through which citizenship is constructed" (Staeheli et al. 2011, 393), consisting of sites of ordinary lives, as well as spaces of formal power and public interaction. In this framework, law and systems of rule determine *de jure* and *de facto* citizenship, while norms and relative social positioning shape everyday experiences of claims on resources and rights, meaning that citizenship can be exclusionary despite formal equality. Relative social positioning and norms mean certain gender, racial, ethnic, and other groups are less than full citizens, with promised but not substantive inclusion (Brandzel 2016). For instance, the 1998 constitution recognised Ecuador as pluricultural, yet discrimination by race, class, and region remain the social norms (Cervone and Rivera 1999). Lynn Staeheli and co-authors highlight that interacting status and positioning are experienced as "part of daily life, something we enact" (Staeheli et al. 2012, 631), suggesting some agency in everyday lives and systems of rule. The chapter draws on research into contested local-level implementation and reworking of Ecuador's *buen vivir* policies (Radcliffe 2018). In 2017–2018, qualitative interviews and observations were undertaken with

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residents, civil society organisations, and local government in three Indigenous (near-)majority areas in the Andes and Amazon.[1]

Cotacachi is a large – predominantly rural – county. At the time of fieldwork, three-fourths of residents lived in rural communities scattered across the Andes, the semi-tropical Intag valley, and coastal Las Golondrinas. Among approximately 40,000 residents, just over half identified as *mestizos* (that is, non-Indigenous or partially Indigenous), and over 40% identified as Indigenous Kichwa (many speak Kichwa as well as Spanish), and a further three percent as Afro-Ecuadorians. The county's urban hub – which carries the same name – nestles in a broad, volcano-dotted plain. Around the central square sit the Catholic church, municipal offices, and the civil society organisation Assembly for County Unity of Cotacachi (Asamblea de Unidad Cantonal de Cotacachi, AUCC in its Spanish acronym). These key institutions address the needs of a widely dispersed, historically underprivileged, markedly unequal, and vibrantly multiracial population. Local governance at the county level – as across Ecuador – largely falls to the municipality, whose elected representatives and public servants are accountable to this diverse constituency. Building a powerful vision for an inclusive and just local citizenship began with an Indigenous movement occupying public space to challenge colonial modern labour and governance regimes. During fieldwork, the district attempted to construct ordinary citizenship through a mesh of locally organised civil society groups, whose work and access to the municipality generate wide legitimacy. Residents felt that the municipal government was informed about local needs and interests, and public services were accountable and fair in a way unrecognisable in the mid-twentieth century.

Until recently, Ecuador's local decision-making and systems of rule maintained highly exclusionary and unequal patterns of representation, resulting in second-class citizenship for Indigenous, low-income, and rural groups. From the mid-nineteenth century, the state delegated authority to owners of *haciendas* (that is, large agricultural estates, using labour from nearby settlements) and local functionaries, who held "a prerogative to exploit and discriminate against [Indigenous people] at will" (Huarcaya 2018, 416). The Andean system of *huasipungo* required Indigenous farm labourers to work 4–6 days a week for a landowner at half the wage rate or in exchange for use of small farm plots (and gleaning rights), in a forced labour regime which treated workers as property (Huarcaya 2018; Moreno 2014). Established under colonialism, the *huasipungo* dehumanised rural workers and kept formal political, civil, and social rights beyond their reach. From the 1960s, agrarian reforms abolished *huasipungo* but did little to address unequal distribution of lands and access to resources and dignity. During fieldwork, estates of 100 ha covered nearly two-thirds of the county, intensively producing cut flowers for export. The canton's average farm size was 2.88 ha, and over a third of rural dwellers had no official land title. In these precarious economies, low-income households relied on fragmented subsistence landholdings, migration for waged work, and public sector jobs.

From the mid- to late twentieth century, local central state appointees, *mestizo*-White landowners, and urban dwellers wielded hegemony over the spaces of formal power (the municipality), spaces of public interaction (streets, markets, public offices, and church), and sites of ordinary lives. These *de facto* regimes of rule entailed the "submission, exploitation, discrimination and mistreatment" (Alvear 2021) of racialised, rural, and low-income populations, despite the award of voting rights in 1979 to those without Spanish literacy skills (Cervone and Rivera 1999). Recounting experiences of her parents' generation, a Kichwa leader said:

> Religious [doctrine] obliged them to remove their hats [for *mestizo*-White people]. In hospital because they were Indigenous, they had to wait till last on the pretext that they couldn't speak Spanish. In buses, they weren't allowed to sit down. It was really strong.
>
> (Aurora, 51 years, interview)[2]

Also in Cotacachi, municipal officials forcibly recruited Indigenous people for cleaning and urban public works, a common occurrence until the 1970s. A *mestiza* urban woman told us, "When [Indigenous people] went to mass, the municipal police used to make them clean the square. Now there aren't the abuses there were, but our friends and colleagues continue to live with that [experience and memory]" (Teresa, 2018, interview). Local government allocated resources to urban infrastructures and powerful groups' claims, which further entrenched unequal service provision and infrastructure. In 2015, over 60% of the *cantón*'s rural and Indigenous residents lived in poverty, three-quarters had unmet basic needs, one quarter of households were overcrowded, and Indigenous and rural groups had incomplete access to formal education (Municipalidad Plan 2015).

Despite these inauspicious circumstances, rural and racialised Andean groups mobilised to challenge prevailing power. The local Andean Union of Indigenous and Mestizo Communities (Unión de Organizaciones Campesinas e Indígenas de Cotacachi, UNORCAC) began organising communities in the mid-1970s. Led by young Indigenous intellectuals, UNORCAC demanded land rights and public infrastructure (Moreno 2014). Civil rights were also central, including demands for ending racial segregation on buses, exclusion from public buildings, and police violence. UNORCAC voiced the right to live without discrimination and inequality as an ordinary citizenship based on dignity. Founded in 1977, UNORCAC contributed to innovative thinking about citizenship regionally and nationally, from before illiterate suffrage.[3] UNORCAC's demands appeared utopian in the face of colonial modern rule, and in this respect stood alongside diverse Andean utopias that struggled for claims and dignity since the Spanish conquest (Postero 2007).

Constructing citizenship

> [Cotacachi's] inhabitants are capable of visualising what as a collective they want for the future, and in turn take the actions necessary to make that future into reality.
>
> (Municipality ordinance on the Assembly for Cantón Unity of Cotacachi, 2016)

Colonial modern dispossession and disdain have been confronted by goals for an intercultural society, diverse and egalitarian, deeply heterogeneous but capable of respectful dialogue. Cotacachi's trajectory and participatory governance have garnered a wide literature that documents the contributory factors of representative democracy, neoliberal decentralisation, and strong Indigenous movements in this and other counties. This scholarship tracks how Andean and Amazonian Indigenous movements founded the multiracial Pachakutik political party, which successfully contested local elections from the mid-1990s. As a result, Indigenous mayors and councillors began to adapt municipal politics and policies, generating significant transformations in so-called "alternative municipalities". These dynamics were expressed in Cotacachi with the election and subsequent re-election of Kichwa economist Auki Tituaña as mayor (1996–2009; re-elected in 2019). Reflecting wider Indigenous thinking, Tituaña initiated a major shift in citizenship meanings and practices (Tituaña 2000), which is examined here through a focus on residents' understandings and evaluations of practices and institutions of local citizenship.

With mayor Tituaña and his team,[4] the municipality introduced more participatory and accountable relations with rural, Indigenous, and remote locations in the county. The rural UNORCAC became a zonal representative for 43 Andean communities, Afro-Ecuadorian and *mestizo* farmers (with a powerful women's coordinating committee), while nine organisations of Intag valley residents comprised the Consorcio Toisan, and 21 urban neighbourhoods formed the Federation of Cotacachi Barrios (Federación de Barrios de Cotacachi, FEBAC). UNORCAC worked for "dignity and resistance of Indigenous peoples, food sovereignty, … and to confront any form of discrimination, intolerance and racism" (UNORCAC 2007). Alongside these major civil society organisations were diverse women's groups (four in total), tourism, sports, and savings groups, environmentalists, and water committees. Together with zonal organisations, and Las Golondrinas' Afro-Ecuadorian and *mestizo* residents, these civil society groups together formed the Assembly for Cantón Unity of Cotacachi (AUCC). Cotacachi was the second place in Ecuador to introduce participatory budgeting in 2002, predating 2010 legislation requiring it. An annual cycle of consultation and budget priority setting involved urban neighbourhoods, communities, then zones and parishes, culminating in a two-day annual assembly. Furthermore, committees

comprising representatives from local organisations alongside elected politicians and council staff met regularly.

The AUCC was unique in Ecuador, acting as a key arena for municipal decision-making and for public oversight of governance. Since the first participatory discussions in 1997, the AUCC institutionally embedded and socially legitimated itself, becoming "a permanent connection between civil society and the municipality" (Moreno 2014, 62). At the time of fieldwork, the AUCC's role included "oversight, participatory budgets, diagnostic of inequities and socio-territorial disequilibrium" (Municipalidad AUCC 2016). The AUCC was informed by Andean Indigenous thinking, thereby "extending ancestral practices of community management and participation of rural Indigenous and peasant zones" (Municipalidad AUCC 2016). The AUCC reflected plurality and heterogeneity well beyond Indigenous identities; according to an urban *mestiza*, "*the* social movement here is the county assembly; it's very, very diverse". That plurality was incorporated at each stage of an annual cycle of consultation, participatory budgeting, and planning, all subject to civil society ratification, and oversight via the AUCC Assembly and its constituent organisations. As a result, the local government was trusted to deliver a dignified standard of living across Indigenous and *mestizo* groups (Ortiz Crespo 2013). In our research, local people felt the municipality was informed about their needs and interests. As a middle-aged Kichwa woman explained, equality had risen:

> It's improved, in the budgets. We work with a participatory budgeting system, across the three zones… We struggled for that, the participation is particularly strong among Andean communities – there's more participation, marches, and Indigenous women participate more than men.
>
> (Luisa, 2018, interview)

In this context, local development and decision-making were perceived as "not an initiative of municipal technocrats [but] what civil society wants" (UNORCAC 2007, 9). Extending participation, the county's development council had a citizen majority, drawn from the three geographical zones and diverse social groups (including women's, sports, irrigation, and forestry committees, agroecology groups, tourism, small producers, and so on). In its multifaceted activities, the Assembly was widely understood by local residents as a space to achieve equality as it organised discussion around themes of rights (Berta, 2018, interview). Recalling memories of previous rule, an interviewee told us:

> Before, there were [Indigenous leaders'] deaths because of conflicts [with *haciendas* and police]. Now people are being brought together; the municipality, UNORCAC, even colleagues from the police.
>
> (Eunice, 2018, interview; Ortiz Crespo 2004, 68)

Cotacachi became the only Ecuadorian county with an *autonomous* participatory system (Municipalidad AUCC 2016), as AUCC gained legal standing to manage the cycle of participation, oversight and monitoring steps that sought to ensure the municipality remained oriented towards widely consulted goals. For instance, communal work parties for public infrastructure pursued “principles of plurality, interculturalism and inclusion” once a month to complete public works; 64% of community members participated.

> The municipality does good work – they accept proposals, and recommendations. It’s participatory work, always through assemblies, meetings. It creates a mandate for the local government.
>
> (Aurora, 2018, interview)

As noted, UNORCAC’s original demands included fair treatment for Indigenous and rural people in public offices. According to our interviews, residents expected interactions in public offices to meet a rigorous standard. Berta, a Kichwa woman in her twenties, explained: “Before, there was nothing; we were asked to wait. We weren’t treated well. Seeing this, we said that it’s necessary to have respect. For an Indigenous person, *any* person – there must be respect.”

While far from perfect, local residents generally said that public services were delivered in more accountable and respectful ways than previously. Asked about the previous two years, a woman from an UNORCAC-affiliated community said, “It’s become quite improved; yes, they’re efficient – they attend to you quickly. Although sometimes today like I say, they don’t treat you well; they’re not respectful” (Eunice, 2018, interview).

Residents, including rural farmers, felt listened to in a more horizontal relation. Municipal employees frequently knew members of the public due to high rates of organisation membership. An older Kichwa woman noted how in public service offices “as I’m in [an organisation], they’ve treated me well; the interaction has been very nice” (Luisa, 2018, interview).

Respectful and consultative dynamics across differences were rooted in the concept of interculturalism, which addressed the need for negotiations and dismantling of colonial-modern hierarchies. Cotacachi county committed to interculturalism in the mid-1990s to overcome intersectional exclusions and build inclusive participation. Described locally as “citizen participation without racial, class, gender or ideological discrimination”, it was understood to be necessary to meet all groups’ needs (Arboleda et al. 2012; Muñoz 1999, 45), and applied in health, human rights, and other sectors (Moreno 2014; Ortiz Crespo 1999).[5] Interviews suggested that challenging prejudice remained associated with Tituaña, whose legacy included a notable change in spaces of public interaction, arising from his vision for an experimental social practice. The public forums of the AUCC and its constituent civil society organisations ratified and practised the political principle of interculturalism and transformed it into more of a daily occurrence.

In summary, Cotacachi's ordinary citizenship was significantly transformed between the initial social movement visions over 40 years ago. Through a combination of national changes in *de jure* political and civil citizenship, and bottom-up civil and social agendas, the district offered a marked improvement for many. Undoubtedly, the majority of the population continued to have lives of impoverishment and precarity. Nevertheless, decision-making processes and interactions with local government were transformed across the domains Staeheli et al. (2012) identified, namely spaces of formal (municipal) power, public interactions (participation), and sites of ordinary lives. As Luisa told us "there isn't any more a relation of one person over another; there's a different treatment now, without disdain or mistreatment".

Diversifying citizenship

As noted above, citizenship emerges in relation to the interlocking of race, gender, location, and generation which shape "interactions of status and positioning" and qualitatively impact citizen experiences (Staeheli et al. 2012). Understanding Cotacachi's citizenship utopias involves looking more closely at measures to include and provide dignity to historically low-status social positions. In 2015, the county reaffirmed its commitment to "the restitution, exercise, and guarantee of rights … with an inclusive focus" (Municipalidad Plan 2015). Cotacachi established mechanisms to address diversity that replicated nationwide institutional arrangements; however, its practices and frameworks re-embedded minimal national standards in a broader rights-based praxis informed by Indigenous and subaltern knowledge and experiences. As a result, the formal spheres of local politics, public spaces, and – to some degree – everyday encounters began to challenge postcolonial intersectional hierarchies.

Cotacachi's approach and praxis of acknowledging and addressing intersectional exclusions were strongly informed by coordinated multiracial women's activism. A long history of women's movements across rural and urban, *mestizo*, and Indigenous groups saw important initiatives around violence against women, and intercultural health (Moreno 2014). Additionally, women's organisations prepared organic agricultural products and cooked meals, and identified, cultivated, and sold medicinal plants informed by a politics of wellbeing (Fueres, Morán, and Hill 2013). With respect to formal rights, in 2007, women's organisations identified the need for a local ordinance against violence against women, which was finally endorsed in March 2018. In parallel, women mobilised to provide institutional support for women experiencing violence including a refuge. First developed by the women's Coordinadora, a proposal garnered support in Cotacachi's unique decision-making and resource-allocating process (Moreno 2014). At the time of fieldwork, a dedicated office provided legal and psychological counselling to women affected by gender violence, with monthly visits to

non-Andean areas. A Kichwa-speaking team member ensured that monolingual women could access services (interviews, 2018).[6]

In other dimensions, Cotacachi followed provisions of the 2008 Constitution and subsequent legislation on decentralised governance. All municipalities were required to address the needs of defined "priority groups", and design a local equality agenda that informs municipal decision-making and budget allocation. In Cotacachi, these initiatives were led by a woman, and a man with disability at the time of the research. Local equality agendas drew on frameworks and expertise centred in five national Equality Councils for gender, nationalities, and peoples (primarily Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorians), intergenerational issues, disabilities, and human mobility. To varying degrees, the equality councils operated with de-historicised, discrete social categories rather than synthetic and intersectional frameworks (Radcliffe 2018). While elements of national approaches were found in Cotacachi (workshop observation, June 2018), the district's distinctive epistemological-political praxis infused more critical meanings and practice. First, civil society organisations and local government employees stressed rights-based reasons for prioritising selected groups.[7] In comparison with national categories (Radcliffe 2018), local informants highlighted a relational and justice-oriented agenda (interviews, 2018).

Table 6.1 Cases of movement between civil society and local government, Cotacachi 2017–2018

Pseudonym	*Civil society organisation*	*Local government (elected representative ER, or employee W)*
Pedro	Andean youth organisation	Directorate of Social Participation (ER)
Gloria	President of AUCC-linked urban federation; one-time AUCC employee	Department for human rights and priority groups (W)
Teresa	Over career, active in urban youth organisation, a women's organisation, president of *cantón* tourism group; AUCC president	Consultant to strengthen women's organisations (W)
Renata	Over career, UNORCAC-linked community leader, senior community leader; employed in national peasant-Indigenous union	Parish and county (ER)
Liliana	Over career, community and county-level health volunteer and project employee; UNORCAC treasurer; representative on county ancestral medicine commission	Department for human rights and priority groups (W)

Source: original research interviews.

> It's a principle this idea of equality in diversity. Yes, it's in the discourse of [Cotacachi's] local government and social organisations. It's related to interculturalism, and to the recognition of Indigenous nationalities and Kichwa [particularly]. Also equality in diversity is discussed in terms of rights. It seems to me that there is this idea when you actually guarantee rights.
>
> (Teresa, 2018, interview)

Moreover, Cotacachi understood priority groups' needs in relation to experiences of historic and current violence, such as the abandonment of elderly people, or disabled individuals' social exclusion (Gloria, March 2018, interview). A Kichwa leader explained to us, "we want to see the problem in the round in order to create policy. The county plan says that it will work on the theme of violence" (Berta, 2018, interview).

Attending social violence was incorporated into municipal governance from the 1990s, when mayor Tituaña emphasised the urgency of dismantling White-*mestizo* physical, verbal, and psychological violence against Indigenous and Black groups. Training programmes to sensitise municipal civil servants, and local radio broadcasts were introduced. With attention to multifaceted identities, geographical, and livelihoods, the work of AUCC and its constituent groups exceed de-historicised national policy "siloed" equality agendas.

From the 1990s attempts were made to employ more non-*mestizo* staff in the municipality. Cotacachi sought to diversify the groups, experiences, and knowledge represented in local government.[8] Despite a slow start, as a community member near Cotacachi town told us:

> Now there are more Indigenous people [in local government], with [the current mayor]. With Auki [Tituaña], there were more *mestizos* in his team, whereas now there's Indigenous professionals – you see more Indigenous people.
>
> (Eunice, 2018, interview)

The principle that the county's heterogeneity should be reflected in municipal offices was a widely accepted one among our interlocutors.[9] A rural Kichwa woman in her late twenties echoed this:

> The [current] mayor said that he would work with Indigenous people, in [county] offices, in leadership. We talked so much about interculturalism, but we had to practise it. There's a percentage of us Indigenous people who are working.

In 2014–2015, Indigenous professionals made up over one third of senior state functionaries in the district (Municipalidad Plan 2015, 156–157). Longstanding inequalities, however, resulted in uneven gains: directors,

especially in fields such as finance, were often *mestizos*. Nevertheless, the municipality arguably become the workplace of more individuals informed by subaltern epistemologies, social experiences, and trajectories that were rarely found in state bureaucracies elsewhere in Ecuador. At the human rights office, Liliana brough grassroots organising and sociocultural values and Kichwa fluency to public service: "In forming myself as a person, I could see these values of manners or generosity towards others. So, it made me think; the [central] government should see these spaces and cover these needs" (Liliana, 2018, interview).

Building an intercultural vision and praxis to pluralise representation, Cotacachi represented to commentators "a new political landscape where it is usual to find authority embodied by Indigenous peoples, Afro-Ecuadorians, peasant farmers, young people and women" (Arboleda et al. 2012, 18). While inclusion in Cotacachi fulfilled national requirements, the district's long standing anti-exclusion politics inflected action with elements of anti-colonial, intersectional, and intercultural goals, meanings, and practice. According to fieldwork, these attitudes and practices became ordinary, and carried no connotation of the 2008 constitution or the central state's technocratic politics. Residents understood violence and justice, equality, and diversity relationally, which in turn shaped substantive citizenship in the public sphere. Social diversity in public services became a common sense, encompassing plural knowledge and experiences in local governance.

Defending citizenship

Whereas Ecuador's constituent assembly represented a vigorous explosion of national social movement agendas, the 2008 constitution codified progressive agendas in ways that subsequently constrained their material impacts and social meanings (Radcliffe 2012; Radcliffe and Radhuber 2020). Furthermore, central government experts prioritised top-down technocratic policy models combined with populist rhetoric to pursue the rapid expansion of petroleum and mineral exports (De la Torre 2013). Bureaucratic professionals and national policies dominated the nation's public sphere, while arenas for contestations were increasingly fraught for social movements. The arc from social movement agenda to depoliticised technical-professionalism occurred with the concept of *buen vivir* ('living in plenitude'), as decades-old, hard-earned Indigenous learning was re-oriented and institutionalised in centralising, modernising and developmental policy (Radcliffe 2012). State *buen vivir*, commentators concur, sidelined alternative practices and conceptions of inclusive and egalitarian citizenship.

Buen vivir was not, however, a single, path-dependent, citizenship politics. "At the local level, different logics of doing government could be introduced into existing settings, opening spaces for the practice of Buen Vivir by transforming the mechanisms of the modern colonial state itself" (Lang 2019, 176). The defence of local agendas of interculturalism, crosscutting

representation and incorporation of grassroots diversity into governance created spaces for anti-colonial logics. In Cotacachi, as in other areas (especially in Amazonia), the dissonance between national and local agendas pivoted around extractivism. Pursuing the expansion of hydrocarbon and mineral exports from 2006, the national government – under the Alianza País party – sought oil, timber, and resource concessions. Cotacachi garnered government interest for the Intag zone's Llurimagua copper mine. This intervention directly countered the county's 1996 self-declaration as an ecological county, its ongoing opposition to mining, and commitments to biodiversity conservation. Issues came to head in 2009 when candidates for the government's Alianza País party won the municipal elections and attempted to reshape decision-making by dismantling Cotacachi's decade-old institutions of civic participation (Jorge, 2018, interview; Alvear 2021; Lalander 2009; Ortiz Crespo 2013) and expanded extractive activities. In one woman's words, the period 2009–2014 was characterised by a controlling, "very urban, conception" (interviews, 2018). Andean communities found the Alianza País municipality remote and unconnected to their claims, needs, and citizenship (Guandinango Vinueza 2013).

The threat of extractivism and the risk to Cotacachi's locally meaningful political culture became the prompts for local action, bolstered by widespread indignation at the government-allied municipality's inept interactions with citizens, who were accustomed to consultation and voice. Environmentalists, small farmers, and tourism advocates led local resistance to national plans for raw material extraction. Disillusioned with the state's narrow interpretations of *buen vivir*, local utopian narratives turned to the possibilities of alternative economies based on agroecology, organic coffee, and ecotourism. Increasingly dissatisfied with heavy-handed attempts to exclude AUCC from governance, a coalition of civil society networks (including UNORCAC and AUCC) contested and won the 2014 local elections (interviews, 2018). Thus although extractivism and urban expertise held Cotacachi county for five years (2009–2014), the model of intercultural, participatory, and diverse citizenship regained leadership (albeit without Tituaña). Experienced civil society activists, former municipal employees, and elected representatives united under the banner of *vivir bien*, a deliberate reworking of central government's *buen vivir*. This coalition sought to lower public expectations while recuperating heterogeneous civil society input. Constraints on municipal autonomy informed realism about the scope to address all needs, and the pace of new infrastructures (interviews, 2018). Its mission nevertheless retained familiar features: "a lively democracy, equitable territorial planning, *vivir bien*, and delivery of good public services with a focus on rights" (Municipalidad Visión 2014). The language of *vivir bien* signalled the municipal government's aim to achieve good (enough) lives without overreaching (interviews, 2018).

However, the *vivir bien* municipality's commitment to AUCC was ironclad: a local ordinance confirmed the latter was integral to local decision-making,

and consulted public planning. Public approval was granted at the annual assembly and communicated to the mayor's office. Additionally, public funds were allocated to support civil society organisations that were the bedrock of AUCC (approx. 3–5% of budgets until 2019) (interviews, 2018). These steps reaffirmed citizenship meanings and practices that generated pride in Cotacachi's unique set-up. In interviews with residents, the AUCC's processes were described as inclusive and democratic. A middle-aged rural Kichwa woman argued that local movements defined *vivir bien*: "sometimes there are large proposals which can't be completed in the short term … We know that the budget doesn't cover everything … We are one with the municipality – our people are there" (Aurora, 2018, interview).

Whether the local vision and process will remain if extractivist political economies change is difficult to predict. In the meantime, *vivir bien* symbolises the assertion of an Indigenous-led, now multiracial, utopian citizenship against a technocratic, extractivist and centralist nation-state.

Citizenship utopias and praxis

What can we learn about citizenship utopias from Cotacachi? As discussed below, the district's combination of justice agendas with radically intersectional processes gave rise to a shared sense of social membership. Moreover, membership expressed itself in, and reaffirmed, local governance processes and interactions. Cotacachi's *sui generis* institutions and processes generated synergies across civil society, and between civil society and local government. These dynamics in turn created a well-informed public. Together, these elements produced an ordinary citizenship that – despite major structural, social, and political constraints – provided lessons for making citizenship utopias into granular daily realities.

Membership in Cotacachi's local citizenship did not work through static arenas of representation, with civil society and movements separated from a Weberian bureaucracy. Rather, diverse civil society groups were represented directly and indirectly in the statutory organisations in AUCC, and civil society actors remained openly critical of the municipality, suggesting cooptation is not currently an issue (Cameron 2009). Gender alternates in leadership meant, for instance, that a male, urban *mestizo* president had to pass to a female president with a different social position. Over their lifetime, individuals could move between social movement and municipal roles, and switch the social groups they represented (reflecting multifaceted social positionings) (see Table 6.1).

These office holders and activists described life paths weaving together civil society and municipality, reflecting sustained close relations between local government and local populations. In 2016–2018, AUCC's diversity was continuously renewed in its constituent civil society organisations, as representatives and volunteers were elected every couple of years. AUCC had multiple positions to be filled, as did UNORCAC and 43 rural communities,

the Consorcio Toisan, the women's Coordinadora and so on. In UNORCAC's women's organisations – the oldest in the AUCC – numerous women had been leaders in UNORCAC itself, 29 community women's groups, and organisations for midwives, health volunteers, agroecology producers, and women in parish councils. "The participatory process is beautiful; we are supporting each other's organisations, all under equal conditions" (Teresa, 2018, interview). Indigenous residents perceived that local government included "people like them", and could describe acquaintances' trajectories between social activism and municipal roles.

Civil society organisations and leaders moreover played a key role in circulating information, encouraging discussions, and informing publics about key issues in the district. Participation in a grassroots or countywide group entailed learning about rights, governance, policy, planning, and sometimes expert knowledge (on water, environment, women's rights, and so on). As such, they served as informal "schools for citizenship" because leaders – sometimes members – acquired organisational experience, learnt about laws and alternatives, and gathered information. As noted, the municipality provided funds and staff support for new leaderships across civil society groups to ensure quick and powerful transitions into participatory workshops and exchanges on diverse topics (interviews, 2018; Moreno 2014). Yet civil society organisations acquired skills and knowledge beyond training sessions, as knowledge production was nurtured among ordinary citizens, some with limited formal education. These counter-publics made possible "oppositional interpretations of … identities, interests and needs" (Fraser 1990, 67). For instance, Liliana, a rural Andean woman, held various government, federation, and community roles:

> I've gone through so many phases, taken so many steps … and it changes you as a person. How can I explain it? One becomes a person with more solidarity … more patience, and feels other peoples' needs … I've not gone through [formal] studies and sat at a desk, but had experiences in my family, in communities.
>
> (Liliana, 2018, interview)

Given constructive interactions between civil society and the local state, such knowledge production eased individuals' transitions between organisations and local government, and provided a non-state training route for street-level civil servants (cf. Gordon 2023). In comparison to civil society's widespread exclusion from planning and knowledge production across Andean countries (Cameron 2009), this represented a significant substantive right. In Cotacachi, the regular cycle – and large size[10] – of meetings, consultations, workshops, and assemblies across the territory brought knowledge productions and praxis repeatedly into the public sphere. The combination of mobile role holders, high levels of public knowledge, and regular public meetings

together sought to normalise procedures as ordinary (Staeheli et al. 2012), although in many respects they were extraordinary.

At completion of fieldwork, considerable challenges remained in Cotacachi, arising from wider political economies and colonial intersectional exclusions. A primary challenge was that much of the Intag zone was under mining and forestry concessions. Although Cotacachi residents and municipality worked energetically on food sovereignty, agroecology, eco-tourism and sustainable production to ensure that wealth stayed in the local area, the administrative and political structures provided few levers for comprehensive economic counter-action (Jorge, 2018, interview; Ortiz Crespo 1999). Moreover, public services were not equally distributed, due to restricted funding (except for central government schools, and mining infrastructures) and logistical difficulties of providing for remote, often rural, households and communities. Particularly in the newly incorporated Las Golondrinas area, the municipality struggled with no budget increase. Rural areas grappled with limited public transport, while the arrival of individual North American retirees placed additional pressure on community land. Other challenges arose from enduring postcolonial exclusions. Indigenous women identified themselves as politically and epistemologically under-represented; they contributed disproportionately to communal work parties, yet UNORCAC had never been led by a female president. Older and female Indigenous residents could not rely on Kichwa language municipal services from the majority of monolingual Spanish employees. The AUCC recognised the need for gender equal interculturalism in an urban-centred politics.

Conclusions: Decolonising citizenship?

The Cotacachi case highlights the generative outcomes of coalitional politics that foregrounds equality in diversity, and the importance of recognising and confronting historic harms. Harnessing the dynamism of social movement counterpublics, local government sought to reflect and represent its diverse context and thereby shift to a more egalitarian and responsive ordinary citizenship for residents. These coalitions, equality in diversity philosophies, and confrontation with dehumanising legacies were rooted in anticolonial action and thinking. In this case, histories of exploitation and dispossession were transformed into spaces of encounter, dialogue, and negotiation. Whereas the local government system historically compounded exclusionary norms, an alternative pluralised equitable vision and practice of wellbeing emerged.

Black and decolonial feminist scholars advocate for re-interpreting the plantation as a guiding metaphor to critically *interrogate* colonial-modern institutions and race-class-gender domination (Hill Collins 1993). Developing these arguments, geographer Katherine McKittrick (2011) suggests analysing plantation spaces of brutalisation and abandonment, while remaining alert to the generation of anti-colonial grammars and practices in those same spaces and relations. “Without dismissing the brutalities of isolation and

marginalisation," she argues, we can identify "…protean plantation futures as spaces of encounter that hold in them useful anti-colonial practices and narratives" (McKittrick 2011, 955, 950). In the Andean context, the *hacienda* was central to structures of domination (Moreno 2014). Yet in Cotacachi, anti-colonial practices and expressions were born out of activism within *and* against *hacienda* modalities of racial-gendered-located exclusions and dehumanisation. Together these protean anti-colonial epistemologies, visions, and practices condensed into an experimental, contingent, alternative future for residents. In the 1970s, the district's intercultural practices appeared utopian in light of brutal hacienda marginalisation. However briefly, the spaces of encounter created and validated in Cotacachi demonstrated the potential of intersectional, coalitional politics working against the violence of normative citizenship (Brandzel 2016).

Cotacachi's process hints at decolonising *dynamics* of society, politics, and citizenship, rather than representing a singular decolonial event (Radcliffe and Radhuber 2020). The grounded praxis of interculturalism anticipated a political society with actively and ongoing decolonising "forms of living, doing, being and thinking" (CONAIE n.d.; Walsh 2009). By reaffirming epistemic parity across and within social differences, interculturalism represented an intervention against coloniality and informed a political ontology beyond dominant narratives of nation and citizen (Meltzer and Rojas 2014). Jubilation erupted among Cotacachi residents when Ecuador's Constitutional Court declared in December 2021 in favour of Los Cedros woodland. Under the 2008 Constitution, the woodland had rights to thrive and reproduce itself, through the agency of Cotacachi municipality. Cotacachi is not a citizen utopia, although the case suggests that citizenship utopias can inform social activism into recalibrating historically entrenched exclusionary citizenship. Its routinised articulation of social differences, plural knowledge, and anti-colonial approaches to justice and inclusion – for humans and nature – comprised a significant experiment in the making of better futures.

Notes

1 Additionally, public service offices and scheduled public meetings were observed, and municipal and provincial websites were analysed for information on plans, programmes, and discourses.
2 Pseudonyms protect interviewees' privacy.
3 Cotacachi's local democratic practice informed constitutional changes around interculturalism and plurinationalism in 1998 and 2008.
4 Municipal leadership reflected new generations of educated and networked Indigenous groups, dynamic ethnic federations, and transnational exchanges.
5 Andean Indigenous federation ECUARUNARI defined interculturalism as "imaginative solutions to change the relations between different groups, from the perspective of difference and unity in diversity" (Muñoz 1999, 44).
6 Some respondents criticised the closure of the women's refuge and a switch to pursuing maintenance payments (Luisa, June 2018, interview).

7 National legislation required municipalities to allocate 10% of budgets to priority groups (racialised populations, the elderly, women, children and adolescents, and people with disabilities).
8 In 2012, the national government introduced quotas for public service jobs for Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants, women, youth, and people with disabilities (Walsh 2015). Our research highlights the divergent meanings and contests over affirmative action at local levels in Indigenous (near-) majority areas.
9 In an Amazonian district, our research found Indigenous residents and municipal employees engaged in fierce disputes over affirmative recruitment quotas.
10 The annual assembly had over 600 participants, around one-third women.

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7 Black feminist and anti-racist activism

Past and present of struggles for racial justice in Cuba

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Introduction

The Cuban Revolution (1959) represented the materialisation of an economic and political programme based on the ideals of social justice. It overthrew the oligarchic regime of the time and began to establish a new revolutionary system based on public policies aimed at benefiting the country's most disadvantaged and marginalised populations. One of the main measures of the revolutionary government was to issue laws and economic and social reforms, such as the first (1959) and the second (1961) agrarian reforms, that would guarantee the improvement of the rights of workers and peasants (Valtonen 2001, 460). Education, including literacy, and universal and free public health were other priority areas, aimed mainly at such impoverished sectors of the population (Afro-descendants and the rural population), which had been the most forgotten by previous governments (Delgado García 1996; Leiner 1987). The mobilisation of the people through mass revolutionary organisations, with a special focus on the worker and peasant sector, the unemployed, and women, was considered to provide the impetus and guarantee for the implementation of revolutionary laws and programmes to reach the entire population (Triplett 2022).

The mass organisations included, among others, the Workers Central Union of Cuba (Central de Trabajadores de Cuba, CTC), Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (Comités de Defensa de la Revolución, CDR) and the Federation of Cuban Women (Federación de Mujeres Cubanas, FMC). The latter, for example, present in most parts of the country, has engaged up to 80% of Cuban women over the age of 14 (Reaud 2002, 239). The CDRs, in turn, have integrated up to 85% of the Cuban population into their organisations (Reaud 2002, 239). Popular movements such as these have reflected both the Marxist–Leninist ideological character of the revolution, and the thought of José Martí, national hero of Cuban independence, with the premise, "with all, and for the good of all". The state and civil society gradually merged into a single collective force, whose political representation has been the Cuban Communist Party (Partido Comunista Cubano, PCC), the only political party, and defined in the current constitution as "the highest leading political force of society and the state" (2019, Article 5).

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In its sixty years, the Cuban socialist system has passed through many crossroads, including the hegemonic pressure of the United States, whose embargo on Cuba has been in force since 1962, and the fall of the former communist system of the Soviet Union and the socialist countries of Eastern Europe in 1991 (Valtonen 2001; White 2015). Today, Cuba faces major challenges and several interrelated dilemmas, including those related to gender equality and racial justice, which require urgent economic, political, and social responses. The challenging social situation has been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and the "economic realignment", which unified the nearly twenty-year-old dual-currency system in 2021, raising prices and reducing people's purchasing power (Fundora Nevot 2021). The current multiple crises have severely affected the Black population, who are in a more vulnerable position than the rest of the population in terms of livelihoods, employment, wages, and quality of housing; "with its historical dispossession, it suffers a series of deficiencies now multiplied" (Zurbano 2021, 166).

Among the pending social issues is the position of the Cuban revolution towards social activism. Since the beginning of the 1990s, and again today in a different context, social groups and activists have started to emerge beyond socialist mass organisations, including anti-racist groups, Black feminist groups, and LGBTQIA+ activists. Their themes revolve around such issues as diversity, inclusion, and decoloniality. Focusing particularly on feminist anti-racist activism, we define it as "a contestatory social practice, which pays for the challenge of anticipating political and academic conventions by producing situated knowledge and a series of concepts and approaches endorsed in social practice" (Zurbano 2021, 152). However, as the state and civil society have tended to be one and the same entity in socialist systems (Kornai 1992, 46) such as Cuba, revolutionary leaders have generally been suspicious of social activism, social movements, and civil society. By focusing on the perceptions and viewpoints of feminist and anti-racist activists, this chapter highlights the importance of new social activisms that promote diversity to safeguard equality and social justice as fundamental principles of the revolutionary process. Similarly, the chapter suggests that the revolutionary process could benefit from making anti-racist activism more visible, particularly as enacted by Afro-Cuban women whose contributions have not yet been fully recognised. Thus, the chapter joins in the calls of Cuban intellectuals and politicians who have suggested that Cuban socialism needs to begin to provide spaces for the diversity of human subjectivities, capacities, and preferences (Heredia Martinez 2021).

In summary, the chapter discusses social activism in Cuba, focusing particularly on Black feminism and anti-racism, investigating how, why, and to what extent Afro-Cuban women as activists have been promoting feminism and anti-racism. Research on anti-racism activism in Latin America has increased over the last years (Moreno Figueroa and Wade 2022; Moreno Figueroa and Wade 2024; Ranta and Zenteno Lawrence forthcoming). This chapter also explores the extent to which the Cuban state has recognised – or

not – the contributions of Black feminists and anti-racist activists to state policies and programs. It is important to focus specifically on Black women's activism because, while the revolution has often been seen as advancing the position of Black people, research on racial justice in Cuba has noted that Afro-Cubans never had similar affirmative action policies as women and peasants, for example (Morales Domínguez 2002; Zurbano 2021); additionally, the intersecting inequalities affecting Black Cuban women have been the most invisible. Through academic-activist research, this chapter draws on researcher Rodríguez Malagón's experiences as a Black Cuban feminist and anti-racist activist, as well as semi-structured and qualitative interviews with feminist and anti-racist activists in western Cuba and in the Cuban diaspora in Finland.[1] We argue that through the deconstruction of deep colonial and patriarchal ties and wounds, activists claim and seek the visibilisation of their agendas. However, while activists' contributions are necessary as part of resistance and alterity, state institutions often continue to ignore, appropriate, and delegitimise their achievements and proposed ideas.

The chapter is organised as follows. The first section begins by describing the origins of feminist and anti-racist activism during the colonial and republican era in Cuba. The second section addresses feminism, anti-racism, and the challenges they faced during the first decades of the Cuban revolution. The third section focuses on activism during the 1990s and early 2000s. Finally, the perceptions and actions of Black Cuban feminists concerning the current institutional programmes of gender equality and anti-racism are discussed.

Black feminist activism in colonial and republican Cuba

In Cuba, anti-racist activism can be traced back to the historic resistance of Black women and men to the slavery and colonial plantation economy that were in place from the sixteenth century to the late nineteenth century. This oppressive and violent system, which was the backbone of Spanish colonialism, denied the humanity and dignity of generations of enslaved Black populations, using the notion of race and the ideology of racism as tools of economic exploitation and cultural denigration (Martínez-Alier 1989; Mintz 1974). Slavery engendered structural and institutional racism and, therefore, "in Cuba being Black was a blemish, a disadvantage at all levels of social life" (Morales Domínguez 2002, 60). Although the proportion of men among those enslaved, as well as the rest of the immigrant population, was significantly higher than that of women (Johnson 2001, 24), and historiography has focused substantially on the role of men in the politics of rebellion, Black women also actively fought against slavery and participated, organised, and led slave rebellions and cimarron revolts (Finch 2015; Rubiera and Hevia 2017), including, for example, two enslaved women, Carlota and Fermina Lucumí, who led one of the most extensive and organised slave rebellions in sugar mills in Matanzas in 1843 (Houser 2015). Afro-Cuban beliefs and

rituals played an important role in African-descent women's activism (Finch 2015), drawing on the long history of organising Black resistance within ethnically structured brotherhoods, societies, and councils (Fernández Robaina 1997; Oilda, 1996).

In the late nineteenth century, Black activism operated amid the struggle for Cuba's independence to which the abolition of slavery was also intimately connected. The racial question can be considered the most important and complex issue to shape Cuban nationalism (Ferrer 2011). Although the war against the Spanish united different parts of the population, the demand for national unity and the subsequent ideology of creolisation – or *mestizaje* (becoming multiracial) – often meant specifically "the creolization of the Black person" (Morales Domínguez 2002, 60–62). However, Black women and men sought social, cultural, economic, and political inclusion, and the deconstruction of multiple colonial forms, including the production of science and knowledge that maintained and legitimised their racialisation, such as eugenics. They used literature, poetry, music, and pedagogy as tools in their resistance struggles, denouncing multiple positions of oppression. In the Republican era (1902–1959), most of the Black and *mestizo* (Mixed-Race) population was uneducated and impoverished by the war, and were unemployed or working in lower-paying jobs and without state social support (Morales Domínguez 2002, 67). Nor did they have political opportunities (Morales Domínguez 2002, 67).

In Republican Cuba, there was a wide range of projects, institutions, and actions for racial justice (Zurbano 2021, 140), including the founding of the Independent Party of Color (Partido Independiente de Color, PIC) in 1908 and its armed uprising in 1912 that ended with the massacre and dissolution of the party in which many Black women had participated. However, despite the difficulties, women "succeeded in promoting their own demands through intellectual, political, and union activism" (Almeida Junco and Rodríguez Malagón 2023, 226). Unfortunately, their role was not recognised by the feminist movement, "which shows the lack of unity and the undervaluation of the problems of [Afro-Cuban] women" (Almeida Junco and Rodríguez Malagón 2023, 226). Even so, Black women's activism was essential in the battles for civil and political rights, including the 1934 universal suffrage (Brunson 2022). The effect of the work carried out by Black women resulted in the consecration, for the first time, of their hitherto silenced agendas in the Third Women's Congress (1939). As spokesperson was the intellectual María Dámasa Jova, a Black feminist, educator, and poet, whose congress speech marked a milestone in history, challenging the power of bourgeois feminism through her anti-racist and feminist discourse. Thus, she was one of the first Black women actively to engage in politics (Rodríguez Malagón 2021). She was followed, for example, by Esperanza Sánchez Mastrapa, a feminist activist, communist, and the first Black woman in the Cuban Parliament, who drew political and public attention to the fact that discriminatory practices relegated most Black women to low-paid jobs such as domestic, agricultural,

and factory work, as well as the informal sector, without the possibility of promotion and social ascent (Brunson 2022).

The 1959 revolution brought its own challenges to Black feminism. While racism was addressed better than before, feminism became a bourgeois issue in revolutionary rhetoric, thus silencing debate about multiple feminisms for decades. We now move on to discuss this topic in more detail.

Feminism and anti-racism during the socialist revolution

The Cuban revolution began an ambitious process of inserting women into the economy, work, politics, education, and cultural life. Women became important actors in the popular and military defence of the revolution, as well as in the development of its agricultural and industrial production. Importantly, the revolutionary government "sought to include women in society in a way that was previously – both quantitatively and qualitatively – unthinkable" (Triplett 2022, 84). The Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) was founded in 1960 in response to the demand for greater participation of women in the revolutionary process, uniting various collective struggles of women around social, political, and identity problems. It became an "institutional [channel] of articulation that mobilized, socialized, and politicized women with the values, attitudes, and behaviours of the ideal revolutionary citizen" (Triplett 2022, 92). However, with the unification came new challenges. The diversity of agendas and reflections within the FMC ceased to be discussed, creating gaps that are still present today, as exposed by activism. According to Díaz Canals (2013), although the FMC did not completely reject the social activism that originated from within the mass organisation, the very word feminism became suspicious when understood as having bourgeois origin. Furthermore, when addressing the issue of women, it was often understood as a singular problem, and diversity issues (race, sexuality, etc.) were not considered, and sometimes there was even homophobia (Díaz Canals 2013).

During the revolutionary process, many of the spaces for racial justice activism disappeared. According to the revolutionary discourse, Cuba had managed to eradicate racism and build "a raceless society, one in which the color of the skin would have no influence on individual life chances" (De la Fuente 2001, 67). This idea of a unified Cuba, without race or colour, had already been present in the independence ideology of José Martí (Spence Benson 2016, 9–13), but the demand for national unity and the fear of social fragmentation were also prominent in revolutionary Cuba, which faced the continuous confrontation of the United States (Morales Domínguez 2002, 79). It was argued that the structural conditions for racism in Cuba had disappeared because the revolution had eliminated social classes and created economic equality for all (housing, health, education, employment). Consequently, racism was associated only with features of "imperialism, capitalism, and the white elites, enemies of the revolution and representatives of US interests" (De la Fuente 2001, 67). Since the racial issue was seen as part of

the capitalist past, anti-racist awareness and education were abandoned (Heredia Martinez 2021). According to Clealand (2017, 2), racial difference became irrelevant and racial consciousness was considered "incompatible with revolution".

It is evident that racialised Cubans benefited considerably from the structural transformations of the revolution. By the 1980s, their educational and employment opportunities had expanded, life expectancy and health indicators improved, and upward social mobility became possible (De la Fuente 2001, 67–72). Despite this, less progress was made in areas such as housing conditions, equality between neighbourhoods, violence, and crime. The Black population still suffered the most from inadequate housing conditions, residing in poor and degraded neighbourhoods, and they were over-represented in the prison population (De la Fuente 2001, 72–74). Although, thanks to the efforts of the revolution, their education levels were almost equal to that of the White population, deep asymmetries continued in access to the most demanding jobs and better wages (Morales Domínguez 2002, 72). This asymmetry can be explained, for example, by clientelism and informal networks of power (Morales Domínguez 2002, 83), but also by racist attitudes. According to research conducted by the Centro de Antropología in 1995, 58% of Whites believed that Blacks are less intelligent and 65% believed that Blacks do not have equal values and decency (Morales Domínguez 2002, 73).

Yoselin,[2] a 53-year-old teacher who was interviewed for this study, commented on the discrepancies between discourses and everyday life as follows:

> When [the issue of racism] is discussed, it is always that, "thanks to the Revolution of 1959, we have been able to eliminate racism. Blacks, Whites, we all receive exactly the same education. Blacks, Whites, we all have the same opportunities to advance" … That was the political discourse. In reality, then things happened that did not follow this rhetoric … The fact that the political discourse is of a certain type, does not mean that the reality corresponds to it.
>
> (Interview, December 2021)

Nanet, a member of an anti-racist feminist project, offered this view:

> Even if there were attempts to erase differences between Whites, Blacks, and Mulattos,[3] they increased at individual levels. Even if we were all equals by law, in the expressions of everyday life, it was not like that, and much less so with the new forms of economic management that have been taking place since the 1990s.
>
> (Interview, July 2022)

Much like elsewhere in Latin America, racial equality became the state discourse at the expense of the actions of racialised persons themselves.

However, since the beginning of the 1990s, a tendency towards a counter-discourse can be identified from such spaces and actors that were not necessarily authorised by the revolutionary state. This included artists, intellectuals, activists, and, to some extent, universities. The anti-racist agenda was promoted, for example, in the Congress of the National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC) in 1998 and the other congresses that followed. In the next section, we investigate how racism began to be discussed more freely as part of growing concerns about poverty and inequality, as Nanet also mentioned in the previous quote.

The impacts of the special period on feminism, anti-racism, and activism

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the communist bloc in Eastern Europe caused a deep economic crisis and food emergency in Cuba, commonly known as the special period. Tourism, foreign remittances, and small-scale entrepreneurship became the main pillars of the economy. Poverty and inequalities increased, and racist prejudices circulated more easily (De la Fuente 2001). The Black and Mixed-Race population were underrepresented in the tourism sectors and the new private economy (for example, only 2% of the owners of the new private agriculture were Black or Mixed-Race) and received few remittances from abroad since more than 80% of Cuban immigrants, at the time, were White (Morales Domínguez 2002, 74). In terms of the role of women, according to Pertierra (2008), a process of relocation by gender began in which the household renewed its meaning as a priority space for women. Under conditions of material scarcity and declining urban architecture, women's burden of finding and preparing food, maintaining hygiene, and maintaining the household increased enormously (Pertierra 2008; see also Härkönen 2016). In other words, there was a backlash in terms of women's emancipation.

At the same time, however, a period of unprecedented freedom for social activism and civil society initiatives emerged. New social and political activity boomed, led by diverse kinds of community leaders, feminists, religious groups (including the expansion of Afro-Cuban religions), and cultural organisations, who individually and collectively articulated proposals for the elimination of racial discrimination and racism. Among the anti-racist organisations and platforms of the early 1990s were La Cofradía de la Negritud and Proyecto Color Cubano, in addition to the important role played by such institutions as the Fernando Ortiz Foundation, the Institute of Anthropology, and Casa de África in facilitating the new proliferation of regional and international contacts and networks between Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin American researchers, activists, and artists (Zurbano 2021, 147–148).

One of the new forms of feminist organisation was the Magín group, established in 1994 in the aftermath of the formation of the Ibero-American network of women in communication (Fernandes 2020, 24). This was a group

of women communication professionals who came together with the aim of changing the image of women in the media, confronting sexism, racism, and gendered stereotypes that reinforced patriarchy. It had approximately 385 members in Havana, and groups of about 20 people in the provinces of Pinar del Río and Santiago de Cuba (Fernandes 2020, 25, 125). Among them were several Black women who would later become referents of anti-racism struggle: for example, Daisy Rubiera (writer, activist, historian, and later one of the founders of the Grupo Afrocubanas [2011–2019]), Georgina Herrera (activist, poet, and novelist), and Norma Guillard Limonta (activist, Black feminist, and later founder of one of the first lesbian groups of the country in 2005; on Grupo Oremi, see Saunders 2012). Magín capitalised on the emerging international gender discourse, partnering with Latin American and transnational feminist networks, UN agencies, and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) (Fernandes 2020, 24).

Feminist activism also emerged among the research community, including the launch of the Women's Studies programme at Casa de las Américas and the Chair of Women's Studies at the University of Havana. However, some activists have criticised these programmes for not including diverse feminisms, ontologies, epistemologies, and decoloniality. The leader of an anti-racist community project, for example, suggested in our interview that Cuban academia tends to "devalue the capacity [of Afro-descendants] to exercise criticism and awareness of [their own] reality [because] it ignores other knowledge than the western colonising perspective" (interview, July 2022). Notwithstanding, academic institutions were safer spaces for emerging feminist groups and, for example, sociologists at the University of Havana made more progress on diversity. The work of the Mirta Aguirre Chair of Gender and Media, which was installed at the José Martí Institute of Journalism, was also praiseworthy. It rescued the heritage of Cuban feminism and articulated intensely with the Latin American and Caribbean feminist movements, which were a great inspiration for Cuban feminists and an opportunity to learn transnationally. This led to the founding of new feminist groups, including Galfisa, a social studies collective with an action-participatory research methodology that contributed to the creation of equal conditions for women and men, and promoted debates and exchanges related to alternative emancipatory knowledge, among other things.

From another perspective, emerging anti-racist and feminist activism coincided with broader processes of cultural reform at the dawn of the millennium. We must highlight the important voices of Afro-descendant women within the hip-hop and spoken word movement, including, among others, Las Krudas, Magia MC, La Positiva, Unión Perfecta, Instinto, Mariana, Lucy, and Afíbola. This artivism – a combination of art and activism – became a dissident space for the enunciation of subaltern Black feminisms. They created their own symbolic universe deconstructing patriarchy, machismo, and racial discrimination, and the discourse of feminist hip hop became a symbol of emancipation (Martiatu 2009). In general, the rapper

movement of the 1990s was considered a vanguard of anti-racist struggles in Cuba, although the authorities judgementally used to call rappers "radical Blacks" (Fernandes 2020, 123).

In the early 1990s, the government tolerated – and even promoted – the emergence of new forms of action in civil society. Fidel Castro, party leader and president, began to use the previously despised concept of civil society at international conferences (Reaud 2002, 240) and national forums, encouraging debates on civil society as part of the reshaping of the nation's new future in difficult times (Geoffray Laure 2014, 225). The Cuban Ministry of Justice was eager to demonstrate internationally that it had more than 2,000 civic associations on its records, most of them fraternal, cultural, and sports associations (Dilla and Oxhorn 2002, 17). Similarly, development cooperation grew rapidly and, in 1994, newly established development NGOs were implementing approximately 100 projects with European and Canadian partners (Dilla and Oxhorn 2002, 20).

However, between 1996 and 1998, having recovered from the initial economic shock following the collapse of the Soviet Union, official rhetoric regarding NGOs and civil society tightened. In 1996, the Communist Party issued its own official definition of "a socialist civil society", which referred to traditional revolutionary mass organisations and some authorised NGOs. Several civic groups were shut down. This included Magín, whose application for NGO status had not been approved, and whose work was increasingly seen as a channel through which foreign interests could be implemented in Cuba (Fernandes 2020, 28–29). Their activities ended quietly (Fernandes 2020, 28–29). According to Sonia Moro, an activist from Magín, the Central Committee of the Communist Party showed its patriarchal nature and the connections between patriarchy and power when it attacked the feminist agenda of the organisation (Álvarez 2017). The effects of this party conduct have been long-term, and are still visible today, as expressed by Sandra Álvarez (2021), activist and psychologist, founder of the first Cuban Afro-feminist blog Negra Cubana Tenía Que Ser:

> I don't think there is a feminist movement in Cuba today … Activism, as it is known in the twentieth century, is relatively new in the country … A "movement" is not a group, nor several projects, nor a community, but constitutes a "something" much more, not only in quantitative terms, but above all in content, structures, synergies between different components, alliances, goals.

Cuban officials continue to monitor the forms and limits of political, social, and civic actions, allowing some new forms of political participation and activism (Geoffray Laure 2014). New activisms are tolerated and supported if they work within the framework of Cuban socialism and do not translate into alternative political movements. The leader of an anti-racist project shared her opinion on anti-racist activism in an interview in July 2022:

> Any activism work that confronts the systemic construction of racism is under suspicion, either because it is seen as questioning power structures or because [our activisms] are seen as opportunistic political agendas that seek to discredit the achievements of our social system. Sometimes these suspicions translate into uncomfortable questioning [about our actions] that reveal prejudices, as well as lack of knowledge and trust in our activism … When we want to collaborate and promote mutual learning of each other's methodologies and work styles, tensions and censorship arise, as well as invisibilisations, which increase our fatigue and our historical wounds.
>
> (Interview, July 2022)

An anti-racist and LGBTQIA+ activist from another group put it more candidly in an interview. According to her:

> There is no space for dialogue between anti-racist activists [and state officials], nor is it planned. There is a misunderstanding in the political discourse, and instead of motivating our work, they prevent the creation of NGOs. Those NGOs that the state authorises respond in some way to its interests … It has been hard, and it is even harder today, because now activist groups are treated with greater repression and many activists have been sanctioned.
>
> (Interview, July 2022)

Hence, activists feel that the necessary socio-political conditions do not exist for Afro-descendant organisations to occupy a space in the public arena (see also Martín Sevillano 2014). In fact, to date there is no association that specifically represents Black people and in particular Black women (Martín Sevillano 2014). It is important to note that the only official organisation that still represents all women is the FMC.

New government programmes against racism and gender discrimination

In the area of anti-racism, projects such as Grupo Afrocubanas, established in 2011, have emerged, with the presence of Inés Maria Martiatu, Daisy Rubiera, Sandra Álvarez, Carmen Gonzáles, and Paulina Márquez. Afro-descendant women from diverse disciplines, contexts, knowledge, and ideologies united in a project with a common goal: to recover Black feminist thought from its colonial historical, social, political, and cultural heritage (Rubiera 2019). Grupo Afro-Cubanas managed to collect the multiplicity of experiences of Cuban Black women and place them as central protagonists, make them visible, and demonstrate the value of collective memory as a tool in the face of the historiographical oblivion of Black experiences, racism, and persistent racial discrimination.

Diverse and multidimensional feminist activism has developed (Abreu 2019). A new feature is the use of the internet, particularly blogs, including

Negra Cubana Tenía Que Ser and Directorio de Afrocubanas, both by Sandra Álvarez, and the blog Bitácora de Viaje, by Yasmín S. Portales-Machado, which denounces gender gaps and racial discrimination. On the other hand, throughout the country, there is local and community activism, led mostly by women interested in entrepreneurship, cuisine, aesthetics, religion, music, literature, and painting, among other things. The anti-racist and LGBTQIA+ activist mentioned earlier told us about her experiences in the anti-racist group El Club del Espendrú as follows:

> [It was] my most palpable experience of activism with a decolonising, pedagogical, and educative approach, where we deconstructed and reconstructed imaginaries. It was so unique the way in which El Club del Espendrú reformulated the social history of Black peoples in Cuba from praxis.

In terms of collaborations, these groups have spontaneously formed a common front in opposing the worldwide rise of anti-gender movement and gender-based violence, as well as the religious fundamentalism that has also begun to take shape in Cuba. Afro-Cuban feminist activists have also managed to put pressure on the nation's decision-making bodies, including in the case of the recently approved Family Code (2022), which, among other issues, legalised same-sex marriage and adoption rights, an issue promoted by activists from the beginning.

However, some activists feel that state institutions have appropriated their ideas and struggles without recognising their work. This critique relates mainly to contemporary government policies regarding gender equality and anti-racism, namely, the National Programme against Racism and Racial Discrimination (Programa Nacional contra el Racismo y la Discriminación Racial, PNCRD) (2019) and the National Plan for the Advancement of Women (Plan Nacional para el Avance de las Mujeres, PAM) (2020). Both are programmes that are implemented based on commitment to the United Nations' 2030 Agenda. In addition, the administration is institutionally committed to the United Nations International Decade for People of African Descent (2015–2024).

Both the PNCRD and PAM programmes represent a recognition of the racial problem and gender equality in Cuba and they have been a legal boost, but the implementation of both still represents a challenge. The PNCRD has been criticised for being an insufficient attempt to address the issue of racial justice. One of the interviewed anti-racist feminists suspected that that Cuba has committed itself to an anti-racist policy primarily because the UN has demanded it, as she expressed in her interview:

> The demands of activism are not clear on public agendas, and there is no official interest in linking [the PNCRD] to other social demands affecting women and people of colour. The government only plays with [the PNCRD].
> (Interview, July 2022)

In the same sense, the leader of one anti-racist project in Havana suggested that although "there are institutions designed to support such sensitive issues [as the abolition of racism] in Cuban society today, no actions or strategic alliances are envisioned for it". Activists used to suggest that state officials who speak on behalf of anti-racism should learn from the experiences of anti-racist activists and racialised people, and have a more frequent dialogue with them. The Cuban pedagogue and activist Párraga commented in our interview:

> Activism has challenged [governmental] social justice agendas and despite the economic crisis that most affected Afro-descendant women, these women have managed to articulate, at the community level, a strength that the PNCRD must take advantage of to fulfil its objectives, taking into account that [anti-racist policies] advance more slowly than other [government] programs. These women [activists] have made people aware of what it means to be Black in Cuba and in the world.
>
> (Interview, July 2022)

According to the activists interviewed, the PNCRD fails to explain why racism and racial discrimination persist in socialist Cuba today. It does not have an intersectional focus, nor does it articulate with the long bibliography of anti-racist Cuban thinking, including the findings of sociology, literature, statistics, and feminisms. In its diagnosis of the racial problem in the country, the PNCRD seems to be referring to the old thinking of Cubanness as an *ajiaco*. This hearty soup of meats and vegetables was anthropologist Fernando Ortiz's early twentieth-century metaphor for the formation of the Cuban people through transculturation and *mestizaje* (González Lescay 2020). It is an interpretation of raciality in Cuba that responds to political interests, but not to the concrete experiences of racialised people, who in their daily lives still face racism, as one of the activists explained: "For as long as I can remember, I have been a victim of [racial] prejudice" (interview, July 2022).

Thus, the PNCRD should be based on the lived experiences of racialised people. On the other hand, some of the diagnoses of the PNCRD are based on Cuban social scientific studies that analyse racism only through its link with poverty, which reduces the racial problem merely to economic aspects of racism. Consequently, it has been assessed that of the recent Cuban social policies that seek to promote higher levels of equity, "the PNCRD is probably the one that presents the greatest difficulties [both] in its conceptual formulation and in its practical application" (Espina Prieto et al. 2021). It also has to do with the fact that the programme does not define a coordinating institution for its implementation, that is, "the issue never reached the institutional or legal status it requires" (Zurbano 2021, 145).

The PAM programme, for its part, has been the normative response to the sexism and gender inequalities that still persist in Cuban society. It reflects

political will, but just by its mere existence does not exhaust the problem. In practical terms, the PAM programme does not pay special attention to the diversity of women (Black, trans, lesbian, etc.). In its execution structure, it does not include activists, projects, or feminist networks. In fact, the programme does not even declare itself feminist, nor does its governing body or the FMC. Herein lies one of the dialectical contradictions that has remained throughout the revolutionary process: the rejection of feminism. A social revolution that is anti-feminist is not conceivable, since feminism, in theory, implies anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist, and anti-racist struggles. In conclusion, both the PNCRD and the PAM lack public debate and participation at the societal level that might contribute to their content and implementation and enrich them beyond specialists, political leaders, and state institutions. They also need and would benefit from the analysis, actions, and contributions of Black feminist activists.

Conclusions

The Cuban revolutionary process needs a decolonising vision in terms of its relationship with social activism. Activists are a tool of action in public life; they are indispensable to achieve a just, equitable, and democratic society. In this chapter, we have focused on such feminist and anti-racist activism that dialogues with the socialist process. For these reasons (while considering the strong criticism levelled at them), the visions of the ideal citizenship of the activists discussed in this chapter are situated within the parameters of the Cuban socialist system; yet they demand to be better heard and recognised as active social subjects. Even so, in times of current crisis in Cuba, another type of activism has also emerged, with anti-racist aspects, which seeks a deeper political change, as is the case of the Movimiento San Isidro, a group of independent activists and artists, and the related Movimiento 27 de Noviembre (Zurbano 2021, 169). Therefore, today there are several, and at times conflictive, anti-racist activisms that negotiate the visions and practices of desirable citizenship. Feminist and anti-racist activisms are particularly noteworthy as they draw on the everyday experiences of women and people of colour when faced with intersecting inequalities and multi-level discrimination. In other words, they often go hand in hand not only in terms of suffering, but also in creating spaces for collaboration and mutual learning.

The Cuban revolutionary process still has racial and gendered inequalities. It has kept repeating the discourse of having abolished racism and patriarchy through the adoption of socialism. Thus, discussions about the everyday experiences of women and racialised people have too often been overlooked. Promoting popular participation through centrally led and organised socialist mass organisations changed the dynamics of civil society. Despite this, activism has existed, particularly in the early 1990s. Contradictorily, although contemporary Cuban public policies are more sensitive to gender equality

and anti-racism than before, activisms in this regard have been losing the strength they had when their demands and denunciations were not yet part of the political agendas. Thus, it is indispensable in Cuba today to reflect on the role of activism, and to recognise its important role in supporting diverse feminisms, and in particular Black feminism. There are many activists, mainly Afro-descendant women, who have contributed enormously to the social struggles that have been vital in the search for equity and justice. No society, no matter how egalitarian, has been exempt from the coloniality of knowledge and power, and much depends on its current stance on diversity.

Notes

1 The interviews in Finland were conducted by Hanna Pulkkinen, a student of cultural and social anthropology at the University of Helsinki, under the supervision of Eija Ranta, who leads the Research Council of Finland-funded project “Social Justice and Raciality in Post-Utopian Latin America” (2021–2026). We acknowledge her important work.
2 All names have been anonymised.
3 Mulatto is a word used in Cuba for multiracial/mixed-race persons. In Cuba, the word is widely used, even by anti-racist activists, and many do not consider it derogatory.

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8 Higher education under neoliberalism

A perspective from South African student activists

Tony Nyundu and S. A. Hamed Hosseini

Introduction

It was in the year 2015 that university students in South Africa formed a national protest movement famously known as the "hashtag fees must fall" (#FeesMustFall or #FMF) to raise their grievances and dissatisfactions over the role of the state in public higher education (HE). #FeesMustFall is a student-led protest movement that began in mid–October 2015 in response to an increase in fees at South African universities (Bosch 2016, 159). This movement sought to address issues such as university fee increments, inaccessibility of HE by students from a poor working-class background, westernised universities and curricula, and the outsourcing of university workers. The movement was predominantly on the streets. However, it also had a significant social media presence and students relied on the trend name "hashtag fees must fall" to keep the audience of the movement informed about shared student grievances and what transpired during the protests. While acknowledging the online presence of the movement, in this chapter, we focus on the physical aspect of the movement, thus removing the hashtag to emphasise this, and calling it below as the FMF movement.

By drawing on the literature and the activists' voices collected through in-depth interviews, this chapter explains: (1) how neoliberal reforms have been adopted in and affected the HE sector in South Africa and how the movement emerged in this context and what social bases and historical preceding it had; (2) how the FMF student activists perceived and challenged the practices and ethos of the neoliberalist shift through their movement; (3) the role of race, class, and gender in the FMF movement; (4) how the state responded through repressive measures such as the use of physical violence, criminalisation of activists, and the suspensions and expulsion of students from universities; and lastly (5) what the movement achieved and what it failed to achieve and how it eventually evolved. The chapter concludes by discussing the implications for an inclusive and context-specific understanding of neoliberal HE in the field of transformative global studies.

The arguments in this chapter are based on the results of a study that employed a qualitative approach using a sample of 21 university student

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activists over two different cohorts, of which 12 came from the University of the Witwatersrand (commonly called as Wits, a historically white university and still considered to be a white and elite university by students) and nine from the Tshwane University of Technology (or TUT, considered to be a Black and poor university). Of the total of 21 participants, 14 of them were male and seven were female. 17 were from the Black race, three were White participants from Wits, and TUT did not have any White participants. Other race groups included one Indian from Wits and one Asian from Wits. Lastly, 12 of the participants reported being politically active with national political parties in South Africa. Nine participants were not politically affiliated. A snowball sampling technique was employed to gather all other participants. Interviews were conducted in English and participants who wanted to express themselves using their mother tongue were accommodated through the proficiency of one of the researchers in South African languages. All participants appear under pseudonyms. The study employed critical thematic analysis in the sense that it aligned the findings of the study with the critical social theory. Themes and sub-themes were constructed from a thorough reading and re-reading of the transcripts or field notes that make up the corpus of data.

Neoliberal higher education as a context to the FMF movement

The changing nature of HE and government policies through implementing economic liberation has become the subject of growing intellectual and scholarly attention. The outcomes of the change in policy focus can be linked to the globalisation of neoliberalism that has perpetuated inequality within and between societies while advancing the economic needs of the already rich at the expense of the poor (Chomsky 2019; Steger and Roy 2010). Neoliberalism as an ideology involves the combination of the political commitment to individual liberty and neo-classical economics devoted to the free market and opposed to state intervention in that market (Harvey 2005). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) have played a primary role in persuading countries to promote the practices of a free market, free trade, individualism, tax cuts for business and industry, cutting spending on welfare and safety nets for the poor, and having lean governments (Ginsburg et al., 2003; Harvey 2005).

In South Africa, and prior to its economic liberalisation between 1950 and 1994, the apartheid government imposed a series of social and economic constraints on the country's four main racial groups – Blacks, Coloured, Asians, and Whites (Mariotti 2012, 1100). During this time, there was a system of racial capitalism that only favoured White workers and White businesses (Schneider 2003, 24). Accordingly, the HE sector was also structured based on racial segregation through the University Education Act of 1959 (Davies 1996). It was in 1977 that the apartheid government agreed to provide secondary, tertiary, and technical education to African workers in the "White areas" of South Africa (Kraak 1989, 210). However, at the same

time, HE shifted away from certain principles, just to name a few – being an apparatus for liberation from an authoritarian and unequal system, a vehicle for political conscientisation, the promotion of critical thinking and analysis, and a platform for preserving and promoting multi-ethnic and multi-cultural social cohesion in the process of nation building (Kraak 1989, 210; Motala and Vally 2002, 174; Vally 2007, 41–42).

The inequality that disadvantaged the Black, Coloured, and Asian students when entering HE in South Africa, finally compelled the post-apartheid governments since the mid-1990s to deal with two impulses within the education sector: a commitment to deal with education inequality perpetuated through racial discrimination by the apartheid regime, and a commitment to maintaining social order and the education system without compromising the educational norms, structures, policies and practice (Badat and Sayed 2014, 129). It was also in the year 1994 under the African National Congress (ANC)[1] government that the education policy was framed within the government's wider and contested macroeconomic developmental strategy under neoliberal reform (Badat and Sayed 2014, 132). The strategy underpinned neoliberal ideas and failed to improve the required equality necessary for an inclusive socio-economic development and sustainable progress (Badat 2016a). This macroeconomic developmental strategy continues to perpetuate unequal access to HE among students of different racial groups in a more nuanced way than the apartheid government did (Schneider 2003, 24).

In 1995, the President Nelson Mandela's administration attempted to redress the social, political, and economic inequalities through the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) policies by making education accessible to all people – young and old, men and women, urban and rural dwellers and so forth (Gebremedhin and Joshi 2016). However, the shift from RDP to President Thabo Mbeki's macroeconomic policies dubbed the Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) in 1998 (and President Jacob Zuma's National Development Plan [NDP] in 2012–2013) compromised the redress by advancing neoliberal policies (Ntshoe 2004, 204; Tsheola 2002). Many Black people had high hopes that the democratically elected government was going to help redress the politics of segregation and disenfranchisement perpetuated by the apartheid regime. The ANC government made promises for better service delivery including the "offering of free education"[2] to the previously disadvantaged. Their failure to step up to the promise was also a major cause of the emergence of the FMF movement in 2015. The FMF movement also sought to address the "broken promises" made by the post-1994 government on issues that are impossible to deliver apart from the sake of winning elections (Kgatle 2018).

On the preceding developments and social basis of the FMF movement

The FMF movement, according to Bond (2016), encompassed the primary demand to have a fee-free tertiary education and the secondary demand for a

zero percent fee increase in 2016. According to Mpofu-Walsh (2016, 79) "'free education' can mean different things such as free tuition, or it could mean free tuition with accommodation, meals, books, study materials, a stipend for living expenses", and additionally for some students, a stipend for travelling between their home and university. In essence, the FMF movement was about the "manifestation of the deep-seated disaffection with structural, racial inequalities and the lack of funding of HE for poor Black students at universities" (Maringira and Gukurume 2017, quoted in Langa 2017, 37).

The FMF protests were the most recent and powerful uprisings that tackled university and societal issues. According to Cloete (2015), it was the largest and most effective student campaign post-1994, with support from White students, Black and White academics, academic support staff, and external stakeholders. It "challenged the political system, and within days, threatened to subvert university authorities and forced the national government into significant policy concessions" (Booysen 2016, 46). The FMF movement followed the footsteps of a student organisation known as the South African Student Organisation (SASO) formed in the late 1960s by an anti-apartheid activist, Steve Biko. The agenda of SASO included the following:

> promoting Black Consciousness; advocating for freedom and the rights of Black students who were neglected by the apartheid government and existing student organisations such as the University Christian Movement (UCM); reviving and organising opposition to apartheid; educating students about racial oppression, mobilising, and organising students in secondary schools.
>
> (Badat 2016b, 100; Mangcu 2012, 158)

Various scholars contest the origins of the FMF movement. Some say it emerged and gained confidence from the #RhodesMustFall (RMF) movement that started at the University of Cape Town in March 2014 (Hodes 2016; Nattrass 2015). The RMF movement spoke unequivocally against symbols of colonialism, such as the statue of John Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town, and called for decolonisation of the education system (Taneja 2017). Looking at the FMF movement, Bond (2016, 197) argues that "it was the university of the Witwatersrand's 10.5% increase in tuition fee that on the 4th of March 2015 spurred the original national awareness of the crisis". Mpofu-Walsh (2016, 78) claims that Wits's management alleged that the falling exchange rate forced a fee increase in 2015 because of dollar-pegged library expenditures, but in the previous years, Wits doubled its private donations and in 2014 made 40 million rands (approximately 2.5 million USD) interest from its net foreign exchange.[3] In other universities like the University of Stellenbosch and the University of Pretoria, motivations for the FMF protest included a shortage of student accommodation (Hodes 2016). At TUT, the emergence of FMF did not gain popularity in 2015 in the same

way it did at Wits and other historically White universities. This is because protest movements against the financial exclusion of poor Black students taking place in poor universities prior to the FMF were overlooked mainly by the government and the media (Langa 2017; Vilakazi 2017). For instance, TUT's south campus alone (the campus where student protests first emerged) which is in Soshanguve, Pretoria,[4] had approximately 28 separate student protests over access to basic services, high university fees, insufficient funding, and academic exclusion between 2005 and 2010 (Vilakazi 2017).

Though anchored in the economic needs of students (the need for financial assistance), FMF should be understood as a multifaceted movement; culturally, socially, and politically. It is built on the connectedness of myriad reasoning – to name just a few, it speaks to the class struggle to attain economic liberation, to challenges of access to the spaces of HE, about race differences, and in some universities, the poor or lacking student accommodation and also language barriers (Bond 2016; Contraband Cape Town 2015; Hodes 2016; Langa 2017; Vilakazi 2017). For instance, the spinoff protest movements – using social media hashtags #OpenStellenbosch and #AfrikaansMustFall – emerged from the FMF movement in 2016 and spoke against the exclusion of Black and non-Afrikaans speaking students from the University of Stellenbosch on the basis of language (Contraband Cape Town 2015). Afrikaans is a language of Southern Africa derived from Dutch by the settlers in the seventeenth century. In a documentary titled "Luister", students report that lecture sessions meant to be delivered in English were delivered in Afrikaans – thus excluding and undermining the presence of Black and other non-Afrikaans speaking students in the classroom (Contraband Cape Town 2015).[5]

While most scholars stipulate that the FMF movement started and was championed by students in elite and historically White universities, Bond (2016) suggests that this is not the case, as protests had already begun at the University of KwaZulu Natal a few weeks prior to the emergence of FMF at Wits. One should, however, acknowledge that the famous phrase #FeesMustFall was first coined by students at Wits and was thereafter adopted by students who had already been protesting against university fee increments in poor and Black universities prior to the protest actions at Wits. Also, it should be kept in mind that conflicts surrounding fees between students with university management in historically poor and Black universities can be traced earlier than the year 2014 (see Vilakazi 2017). Students have been protesting against financial exclusion at TUT since 2005, although not per a famous name #FeesMustFall, but their protests have received far less attention from the media and other social researchers.

Badat (2016a) argues that the FMF movement was started and mainly driven by students from the middle class, failing to acknowledge the protests that took place in poor and historically Black universities a few weeks prior to FMF at Wits in October 2015. It is not clear how he conceptualises "middle class" in this context, for example, whether he profiled the class status of students from their personal accounts or whether he relied on the status of the universities to

inform his conclusion on the class status of FMF protesting students. Participants in this study, particularly those from TUT, challenge the claims by Badat (2016a) in two ways. First, some were involved in the protests against university fee increments prior to the FMF of October 2015 at Wits university. Second, most students in this study claim to be from the poor working class. In what follows in the next section is a discussion of a notion coined "Black Tax" as evidence of the class status of students in the FMF protest movement.

Exploring the role of race, class, and gender in FMF

In the context of race, class, and gender, the literature on FMF is clear that the FMF movement was anchored on race and class. However, researchers present contrasting views on the aspect of social class. One of the avenues explored in this study is around the notion of Black Tax, which is a metaphorical term publicly used to refer to the money that Black professionals or students in contemporary South Africa contribute to looking after their families who were never able to create wealth or financial stability because of the colonial and apartheid regime that disenfranchised the Black population (Mkhize 2019, 64). Black Tax was informative, and even challenged some of the current research on the FMF movement including the role of race and class. For instance, Badat (2016a) argues that the FMF movement was largely driven by students from the middle class at Wits and the University of Cape Town. Godsell and Chikane (2016) and Vilakazi (2017) argue contrary to Badat (2016a). Badat's (2016a) argument focuses on elite and historically White universities while Godsell and Chikane (2016) and Vilakazi (2017) argue from the context of poor and historically Black universities. They argue that it is not only in the FMF movement that Black and poor students championed student protests over the financial exclusion from universities, but builds on earlier instances of student protesting since 2005.

With regards to social class, findings in this study point out that most students in the FMF at Wits and TUT came from poor working-class backgrounds as they performed some responsibilities that fall within the frames of Black Tax. Participants in this study presented Black Tax as a burden that delays their economic freedom. Most participants explained how Black Tax affects their day-to-day lives, and reasoned that it further motivated them into embarking on the FMF protest movement. All participants who commented that Black Tax negatively affected them were from the Black race cohort. See a few of their comments below:

> I was fortunate enough to get a job in my 2nd year. I pay for my fees, and they are like R104,000 [6596 USD] per year … A huge portion of my salary goes to my fees in hopes of a better future. My mother lives in a shack, I need to build her a house and I would like her to quit her job [as a domestic worker].
>
> (Tee, a Black male from Wits)

> Now I must build a house for my parents. I must make sure that I shift them from their current standard of living. There are things of my own that I have to sacrifice but first, I have to mend their own mistakes, then after I can start my own life… As we speak, my salary ranges between 5k and 10k [317–634 USD a month], so imagine if you are earning that, you've got five people that are dependent on you, it's not enough.
>
> (Danny, a Black male from TUT)

Regarding the category of race, we encountered challenges in accessing fair representation of each of the different race groups in South Africa (Black, White, Coloured, Indian, Asian, and those identifying as "other"). However, the three White students contributed to the FMF movement not only through empathetic presence but also through strategies during the clash between students and the members of the South African Police Services (SAPS). For instance, see Radowitzky's comments below:

> I remember one time we were in front of the great hall and private securities were trying to kick us out. I took about five or six blows trying to protect my comrades. I saw that was one of the ways I could contribute in those small spaces. One day, one leader realised that we needed to barricade a space, she came to find me specifically and she said I should organise some people to make a wall. There was a recognition of my involvement and that I could be trusted with doing something like that. So, I formed a wall.
>
> (Radowitzky, a White male from Wits)

The presence and contribution of White students and academic staff in the FMF movement are affirmed by Cloete (2015) who argues that the FMF movement was the largest and most effective student campaign post-1994, with support from White students, Black and White academics, academic support staff, and external stakeholders. The involvement of White activists within the FMF movement was crucial for the movement's solidarity and growth, as it demonstrated that even within the current democratic dispensation, there were White individuals who empathised with the struggles faced by Black students in universities.

Concerning the gender category, the findings in this study indicated that activists that were both male and female were as equally passionate and ambitious about leadership in the FMF movement and experienced the same repression from the state during the protests. However, female activists in both universities (Wits and TUT) had adverse experiences from both the state and their male counterparts. While the state was tough on them, they experienced sexist responses from the male activists, which included undermining female activists who assumed leadership roles. However, they remained in solidarity with the FMF movement despite the presence of patriarchy, and toxic masculinity that condoned sexism. This is contrary to

assertions by Mama and Teresa (2007) who argue that the presentation of female activists as weak compared to their male counterparts is likely to encourage political apathy toward female activists. See below comments on gender relations during the FMF protests:

> If you speak of people who were problematic in FMF it was us [men] because we have never been exposed to such spaces where a female activist would want us to engage in issues of gender imbalance and intersectionalities. We were never interested in those things. Here at TUT, we used to think that women had no interest in taking up leadership positions but we realised that they are having interest, the problem was with us [men].
>
> (Sampha, a Black male from TUT)

> There is a time female activists came and told me that … [one of the female leaders] was trying to address the movement, male leaders [and some of the female activists] were speaking over her without hearing her views. So, we tried to challenge that as the feminist movement in FMF …
>
> (Zoe, a Black female from Wits)

What FMF presents in the context of gender is the complexities and the need for social actors to understand the intersecting identities that contribute to the negative experiences of women in spaces that are mostly dominated by men. The intersection of their gender (female), race (Black), and social class (poor) (Crenshaw 1991), continues to render them vulnerable within university spaces and social movements. Overall, there were tremendous contributions made by students from different race, class, and gender groups towards the solidarity and achievements of the FMF movement despite the presence of internal conflicts.

New pedagogical spaces through action

In our research, we explored the processes by which student activists gained a critical understanding of the HE system in South Africa. Although this pedagogical aspect of FMF activism seems evident, it has not been addressed by current literature. Roughly, half of our participants gained knowledge of the neoliberal HE reforms (or sectoral changes) only after participating in the FMF movement. Half of the participants who were not aware of the sectoral changes were politically active students at their universities. However, they all stood in solidarity against the socio-political and structural changes, reasoning that such changes perpetuate socio-economic inequality. As Onka, a Black female activist at Wits observed:

> I wasn't aware of the sectoral changes. But I think they are very problematic because now you are commodifying education, something that in our constitution is defined as a basic right … It also perpetuates this unequal society that we live in and people who can't make it to public institutions, who can't afford private institutions end up taking loans. Obviously, if you are taking a loan, you are indebting yourself then now how do you break this cycle of poverty?
>
> (Onka, a Black female from Wits)

About half of the participants in this study said they were aware of the sectoral changes before joining the movement. Most of them were Black students from Wits university. However, participants (including those who became aware through their involvement in the protests) expressed negative views on the commodification of HE. As they attested:

> I have always known [about sectoral changes in South Africa]. I always read the newspapers. When I was growing up in Soweto [a township in South Africa] there was the privatisation of water and electricity. I became aware of these through organisations like "Operation Khanyisa" [a movement advocating for the provision of affordable electricity in townships] approximately around 2001.
>
> (Zoro, a Black male from Wits)

> I was aware because I grew up in a political family, my dad is in politics … And I joined COSAS [Congress of South African Students] around 2011 … So, it's really unfair to privatise education when it's something you need, it's not a want, it's a need you must necessarily have in order to survive.
>
> (Noe, a Black female from TUT)

Participants who were aware of sectoral changes prior to the movement reported a number of ways through which they became informed, such as reading historical texts and policies like the Reconstruction and Development Programme, Growth, Employment, and Redistribution, and the National Development Plan, following the demands made by other social movements in the townships where they resided, and family discussions. Those who were not aware, initially became aware during the FMF protest movement, thus strengthening the argument that FMF, like other social movements, was also educational.

State's response to the FMF movement

In what follows below is an account of the response by the state to the FMF movement drawn from the perspectives and experiences of FMF student activists. The employment of neoliberal practices has increasingly proven that the state is often unable to garner the consent, or even the reluctant acquiescence,

necessary for tension-free and non-authoritarian political governance (Bruff 2012, 114; Hosseini, Saha, and Adamczyk 2022). Governments are frequently compelled by neoliberal policies to employ coercive state apparatus for the protection of capital accumulation (Tansel 2017). This new phenomenon, known as authoritarian neoliberalism, requires nation-states that adopt and protect neoliberal ethos to do so by increasing "social control, restrictions, penalisation, and exclusion of certain social groups" (Eraydın and Taşan-Kok 2014, 111).

Other state responses may include increased social surveillance in public spaces and punitive institutions and buildings to maintain law and order (Della Porta 2017, 18). Akçalı (2021, 97) points out that high security and surveillance under neoliberalism sustain authoritarianism. Findings in this study indicate that authoritarian neoliberalism was apparent and functional during the FMF protests. Participants highlighted the militarisation of the police force that exacerbated physical violence, criminalisation of student activists, increased social surveillance, and the use of bribes to hijack the agenda of the movement. See students' comments on violence and criminalisation below:

> The violence was instigated by the presence of security [and police] on campus … When freedom of movement is restricted by the presence of heavy security it's kind of frustrating. This led to the occurrence of violence. I remember at some point I was walking outside the dining hall and there was a rubber bullet passing on my face. Like, I did not do anything, just being seen moving meant I was a target to be shot at.
>
> (BK, a Black male from Wits)

> I remember the first day we protested in Parktown outside med school. It was a peaceful protest, being gentle and everyone was sitting next to the road. Next thing we were told [by the police] we are blocking the road. So, we moved and the next thing we know there were stun grenades and tear gasses flying everywhere. From my memory, I don't remember police being provoked.
>
> (Que, a Black female from Wits)

The students' comments echo Xaba's (2017, 99) findings in that violent acts were first instigated by the state and universities against peacefully protesting students who subsequently retaliated against state violence with violence. Our study confirms Xaba's (2017) observations, and is further affirmed by Faith from TUT who argues that FMF activists were provoked to respond to a violent state using violence.

> At TUT we are very peaceful. What management does is that when we are peaceful, they come with arrogance. They will send police to shoot rubber bullets and to disperse you, even when we are peaceful. That is when students start to get crazy now then retaliate as well.
>
> (Faith, a Black male from TUT)

Nonetheless, the high presence of private security and the militarisation of the police force – the use of rubber bullets, stun grenades, and pepper sprays, were tactics reported by the student activists to bring the movement to its demise. In the context of protest movements, militarisation is "the process of arming [the police force], organising, planning, training for, threatening, and sometimes implementing violent conflict" (Kraska 2007, 3).

With respect to the criminalisation of student activists, most participants confirmed that they witnessed student arrests and some of them were arrested themselves. Following are comments from the participants who were arrested:

> I was arrested in 2015 and police would make you sleep for an hour and then come back with so much noise to count us in the holding cell and continuously do it after each hour interval. So basically, you could not sleep. It is a light level of torture. I just could not understand why we would be counted repeatedly while locked up. It was not like some could walk out to the bathroom or something. Just little gestures of irritation to make sure we would not be arrested again.
>
> (Tee, a Black male from Wits)

> I was arrested in November 2016. I don't want to lie to you, I don't know how and why I was arrested. When I got to the police station, there was no police officer who recalled arresting me, and they said they don't know how I got there. But still, I was not released. We went to court, and we were fined R500 [approximately 32 USD] for bail. We kept attending the case in court, but they [the state] kept on postponing saying they are still busy with the investigation. I went to court last year in June [2018] and the magistrate dismissed the case.
>
> (Amina, a Black female from TUT)

Some of the experiences of these students while in prison – such as sleep deprivation and being detained without reason – are indicative of a state determined to punish the dissident and weaken the FMF movement through criminalisation of activists with the intent to weaken protest movements (see also Duncan 2014). Student activists did not link the violence during FMF protests to neoliberalism in the HE context. However, some related the violence to the historical context of colonisation and apartheid. See Onka's comment below.

> Our struggle [during apartheid] has always been violent … Even now during FMF there was violence, and it didn't make sense to protest non-violently to a government that was responding to us with violence.
>
> (Onka, a Black female from Wits)

The employment of violence through militarisation of the police and security forces and the criminalisation of activists are similar to experiences of activists in other protest movements in the world – this includes the violence in

Chile during the “Chilean winter” in August 2011 Pousadela (2013),[6] student arrests in the Umbrella Movement of Hong Kong in September 2014 (Yuen 2020) and many others.[7]

Student activists of FMF in our sample summed these authoritarian behaviours as other forms of responses by the state to hijack the agenda of FMF and to bring the movement to its demise: the use of bribes through scholarships and overseas trips, leaking of FMF itinerary with the governing political party, the suspension and/or expulsion of student activists from universities, the use of curfews, and the number restriction of group movements on campuses. Some of these claims may lack tangible evidence; therefore, they need further investigation and undoubtedly should be explored in a broader national context.

Even though we report on the negative responses by the state to the FMF movement, there were also positive responses and some small achievements of the FMF movement which are both material and non-material, and they are confirmed by participants in this study. The material achievements include a zero-fee increment in the year 2016, conversion of National Student Financial Aid Scheme from a study loan to a bursary for students from households with annual income of 0–350,000 rands (approx. 0–21,300 USD), and establishment of a funding scheme known as the Missing Middle for students from households with annual income of 350,000–600,000 rands (approx. 21,300–36,500 USD), cancellation of supplementary exam fee, insourcing of workers and more. The non-material achievement includes transforming students’ awareness of the sectoral changes in HE.

Conclusion

Literature on neoliberalism confirms the views of renowned critics like Chomsky (2019) and Giroux (2013), arguing that HE under neoliberalism turned to be subservient to the market rather than the community. HE under neoliberalism has functioned primarily to advance capital and profit for the elites instead of empowering racially, sexually, and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities through the equal provision of self-empowering knowledge and skills and facilitating progressive change through reproducing critical, independent, and transformative modes of thinking and practice. This is apparent in both the Global North and the Global South. However, the case of South Africa invites us to consider historical accounts when arguing about the impact of neoliberalism in HE. For instance, it should be kept in mind that state repression and militarisation in South Africa is a historical and deeply embedded process that transcends through racist–colonialist logic (Ismail 2011). This may not be as strongly manifested in the Global North as in the Global South.

In addition, a neoliberal HE endorses western-centric knowledge and epistemologies in the Global South, while overlooking Indigenous (in our case, the Afro-centric) ways of knowing and understanding the world – along with the historical realities of oppression and disenfranchisement of citizens

perpetuated through racist-colonialist logic. Neoliberalised HE is perceived to be playing a key role in the neo-colonial restructuring of the Global South (Dawson 2019, 2). As Akçalı (2021) puts it, neoliberalism changes the way states function in different contexts and thus can have different faces and dynamism than being understood as a simple phenomenon. Therefore, for a better understanding of the specific dynamism of neoliberalism in each context, one also needs to consider the local responses to it.

The FMF student protest movement, as one of these major responses in the context of South Africa, emerged as a national movement in 2015 and 2016. In the subsequent years, the movement shifted from being a national movement as it continued in localised forms in selected universities that had not achieved the original demands. The movement reached its demise in 2020 when national university operations were moved from contact to online settings due to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

The FMF movement can be seen as a continuation of other historic movements in South Africa, such as the Soweto Uprising during the apartheid regime,[8] and as the continuation of the principles of SASO which was a voice for Black students against discrimination and other forms of oppression by the apartheid government. This echoes the gradual popular disillusionment with not only neoliberal HE but also the governments' promises in the post-apartheid era. Like the movements of the past, the FMF protests envisioned South Africa as a democratic country that upholds the spirit of equality, peace, and social justice.

However, the FMF uprisings went beyond previous student movements, as they developed a deeper awareness of the structural changes taking place in post-apartheid South Africa. They questioned the socio-political dispensation resulting from shifts in the African National Congress politics driven by neoliberalism. Additionally, the movement was notable for its use of internet-based communication, such as social media platforms, which signalled a new way of organising and mobilising. Moreover, the FMF movement demonstrated a greater awareness of gender at both the collective action and institutional levels.

Notes

1 The first democratically elected government that took over South African governance from the apartheid regime since 1994 till to date.
2 ANC's 1994 national election poster on education promise, available at www.sahistory.org.za/archive/vote-anc-free-quality-education.
3 All currency conversions in this chapter are based on the time of writing this chapter (early June 2022).
4 Soshanguve is a (Black) multi-ethnic township situated about 30 km north of the Capital Pretoria in South Africa.
5 *Luister* is an Afrikaans word meaning "listen". It is a documentary about language racism at Stellenbosch University in South Africa. The documentary is not directly linked to FMF but speaks in parallel to it, especially on antiracism and university transformation (see www.youtube.com/watch?v=sF3rTBQTQk4).

6 Chilean Winter refers here to university student movement in Chile that protested against "weak" education system and neoliberal education in 2011.
7 Umbrella Movement refers to a movement in Hong Kong which stood, in 2014, opposed to government regime change, violence and so forth.
8 Soweto Uprising (1976) was a basic education student protest against the use of Afrikaans language as a medium of instruction imposed by the apartheid government to Black schools in the township of Soweto (see www.sahistory.org.za/article/june-16-soweto-youth-uprising).

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9 Fighting for racial equality

Hope, disillusionment, and perseverance in post-revolutionary Tunisia

Henri Onodera and Reem Garfi

Introduction

On 25 March 2022, Tunisia played a football match against Mali in the FIFA World Cup qualifiers. During the second half, a Tunisian radio presenter noted on air that luckily the Malian players wore colourful outfits instead of black, otherwise "the world would be all dark" – framing it as a passing joke, his remark instigated quick public responses. It first gathered criticism on social media, and local associations soon followed. Among the latter were Mnemty ("My Dream") and Aqalliyat ("Minorities"), who condemned it and called for legal action. The string of events was reminiscent of the spread of racist hate speech online in Tunisia after Equatorial Guinea had expelled Tunisia from African Nations Cup back in 2015. However, this time, the associations could refer to existing legislation, namely, the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination Act adopted in October 2018 (or the organic "Law 50" of 2018). The notions of racism and racial discrimination, that earlier were considered to be taboos in Tunisia, had gained recognition partly due to this law that enables legal action against all forms of racial discrimination.

Indeed, the Law 50 resulted from years of campaigning by local activists, associations, and their international partners and its adoption was celebrated as the first such legislation in the Middle East and North Africa (Mzioudet 2022). Before the Tunisian Revolution in 2010–2011, such civil society activities were nearly impossible to organise due to the oppressive reign of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987–2011). These activities emerged only after of the revolution that had raised public hopes for dignity, socioeconomic justice, equality, and representative democratic politics. Soon after Ben Ali fled the country and his authoritarian regime was dissolved, dozens of new political groups and parties based on old opposition and newly forged affiliations were established. In this context, the first Black Tunisian associations and activist groups emerged in public life to voice their grievances, and to demand recognition and racial equality.

In this chapter, we explore the emergent activism against anti-Black racism in Tunisia since the revolution. We specifically focus on the wider context of

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racialisation and everyday racism, and the efforts of activists and civil society organisations (CSOs) to promote racial equality in the post-revolutionary period. It will be argued that they have experienced both setbacks and minor successes and while the Law 50 has left many disillusioned, these activities collectively contest implicit racial hierarchies of Tunisian nationalism and reframe what "being a Tunisian" could mean. This research is based on 28 interviews (by Onodera) with 19 people who have participated in anti-racist activities during the post-revolutionary period in Tunisia.[1] It is also based on autoethnographic reflection (by Garfi) and her personal experiences as an anti-racist activist since 2020. We have also examined a number of online resources, such as Facebook and webpages, and reports published by Tunisian CSOs and international organisations.[2] Importantly, the chapter draws on pioneering studies by scholars and activists, especially Ines Mrad Dali, Huda Mzioudet, Maha Abdelhamid, and Afifa Ltifi, while also benefiting from the works of Marta Scaglioni and Shreya Parikh.

In what follows, we will first provide an overview of the challenges faced by those racialised as "Black" and offer a brief background to racial discrimination and racism in contemporary Tunisia. The second section delves into the experiences and efforts of activists and CSOs against anti-Black racism since the Tunisian revolution until the early 2020s. Finally, the concluding section offers final observations and discussions. Hopefully, this chapter contributes to the growing body of literature and, above all, does justice to those who have been generous with their time and passion to share with the authors their views, experiences and lived realities.

Being "Black" in Tunisia

> It's almost like the social ladder is non-existent for Black people in Tunisia. And it rarely happens that you see a Black successful person in Tunisia, whether in politics or art … I think the lack of representation is a very big issue … and it's understandable, because racism is an issue that is in denial. There are people who deny it – people, who minimise the suffering that the Black community goes through.
>
> (Interview, April 2022)

Thus said Reem (one of the authors), 26, a student and anti-racist activist in one of our early meetings, to explain the lack of both visibility and life chances Black people face in today's Tunisia.[3] Having a Black mother and a non-Black father – a rare marriage that commonly faces social rejection – many non-Black Tunisians are confused to categorise her racially for her mixed background. However, she is adamant about her "Black" identity and has since 2020, participated and volunteered in civil society activities to combat racism, and anti-Black racism especially. Her experiences echo what many other activists and scholars have observed: Black Tunisians often face

outright denial of their experiences with racism in Tunisia (e.g. Hamrouni and Abdelhamid 2016; Mzioudet 2018; Parikh 2021). While over 10% of 12 million Tunisians can be considered to be "Black", their compatriots have often denied the existence of racism (*'unsuriyya*) in the country.[4] Instead, some have blamed the activists for having personal complexes, if not for promoting quasi-sectarian identity politics that effectively creates an unwanted divide in society.

Indeed, the activists' claims to recognition and racial equality run against some of the central tenets of Tunisian nationalism, including the notion of "national unity" (*wahda wataniyya*). The latter was crucial for the post-colonial condition, and it continues to inform popular sentiments and to justify normative discourses of equal citizenship since the independence in 1956 (Scaglioni 2018). Similar to other postcolonial contexts, the project of building a modern nation-state under President Habib Bourguiba (1957–1987) and, later, President Ben Ali, implied continued state efforts to homogenise the society and to promote "Tunisianness" (*tawanasa*) as a specific brand of national identity. These efforts aimed not only to dismantle the pre-independence tribal structures in society but effectively, the existing diversity in terms of ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities (Dali 2005; Ltifi 2020). While state rhetoric under Bourguiba and Ben Ali acknowledged Tunisia's diversity and history as a hub of Mediterranean civilisations, it has placed its Arab-Islamic identity at the core, as inscribed in the consequent national constitutions. As scholar-activist Afifa Ltifi writes:

> Their color-blind policies intended to ingest heterogeneous entities and homogenize the nation, have inadvertently emphasized black Tunisians' difference and underestimated the impact of racialized servitude on their identity formation. The rigidity of color-blind national policies that professed to enshrine full citizenship and suppress the memory of slavery neither washed away the stigma of slavery nor rendered black Tunisians equal to the majority.
>
> (Ltifi 2020)

Indeed, the past and ongoing predicaments of Black Tunisians are closely intertwined with the history of slavery in North Africa. The Tunisian coast and especially its capital, served as important posts in the trans-Saharan slave trade during the Ottoman period (1574–1881) and many of today's Black Tunisians are descendants of former slaves (Montana 2013).[5] Although Tunisia abolished slavery officially first in 1846 and later in 1890, the manumissions were an uneven process that largely benefited the White "elite" slaves of European descent (or *mamluk*-s) (e.g. those of Circassian, Balkan, or Northern and Eastern Mediterranean origins) who integrated well into society, including its highest echelons, in the course of the French colonial rule (1881–1956) (Dali 2005). In contrast, the Black slaves (or *'abid*-s) from elsewhere in Africa faced socioeconomic marginalisation, subordination and

racial discrimination well into the twentieth century. This applies especially to the southern regions, where large concentrations of Black Tunisians live: some families continue to depend on their former "masters" for generations and offer the latter cheap or, at times, free labour in exchange for food and a place to live, or a plot of land to cultivate (Dali 2005). Thus, some of the former slave-master relationships have continued to inform racialised attitudes in parallel with patterns of dependency and patron–client relationships until today.[6]

Racialisation and everyday racism

In brief, the legacies of slavery continue today in many forms, including socioeconomic marginalisation, persisting prejudice, and everyday racism. Many activists we have met underline that racism permeates social life in Tunisia: it is first and foremost a lived cultural and social experience and only then, a political issue. In other words, the state could do much more to provide them with equal life chances, belonging, and social protection. However, it is the prevailing social norms that hinder their access to education, the labour market, public political life, media, and cultural production. In this light, racism presents itself as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that is shaped and maintained by history, culture, and social structure. Following Bonilla-Silva, it can be considered as racial ideology that involves a racialised social system in society whereby "economic, political, social, and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories" (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 469). In other words, being racialised as "Black" is maintained by categorisation and stratification of people based on their phenotypic traits (skin colour, facial features, hair, and so on) and their assumed biological descent (Hochman 2019).[7] Most Tunisians, including those racialised as "Black", have diverse family genealogies due to *metissage* (partly resulting from the historical practices of *concubinage*), mixed backgrounds and phenotypic differences. Someone considered to be "Black" in Tunis would not be necessarily considered as such in Southern Tunisia where people have much darker skin complexion.

In this light, "Blackness" in Tunisia, as elsewhere, can be considered to be a socially constructed, relational, and constantly negotiated category. It is thus socially reproduced and is not based on biological facts (Scaglioni 2018, 74–75; see also Hochman 2019). Blackness is also relational and constructed in relation to other racialised categories and groups – especially Arab and Amazigh (or "Berbers" to whom many Tunisians claim ancestry) – that imply "Whiteness" in the Tunisian context (cf. Phoenix and Phoenix 2012). Consequently, Black Tunisians are commonly considered to be "slave descendants" and find themselves alienated (and victimised) in a racialised social system that reinforces this very prejudice. We have heard several stories and witnessed what others have already noted about the repeated acts of racism in everyday life (e.g. Abdelhamid 2018; Elwaer 2017, 15–16). It is not

uncommon for Black Tunisians who were born and raised in the country, who speak Tunisian Arabic as their mother tongue and who are Muslims, to be socially approached as foreigners or generic "Africans", if not slandered with racist slurs like *oussif* (lit. domestic servant), *'abid* (lit. slave) or *kahlouch* (lit. blackie). These are highly derogatory words: the first two imply a relation of servitude and subordination, and the third a direct reference to skin colour, while all carry forceful claims to the innate inferiority of the other, backwardness, and an enslaved ancestry of the other.

Additionally, the already mentioned upward mobility of White "elite" slaves (or *mamluk*-s) and their descendants to a position of higher social status not only contributed to socioeconomic disparities but it also constructed Eurocentric beauty standards along "Whiteness" which, as a consequence, devalues Black people. It is often kindergartens or schools – or when entering the public sphere – that provide Black Tunisian children with their first experiences of racism from adults and children alike. Being considered as being not only as "dirty" or "ugly" but as less capable and less intelligent than the majority, speaks to a sum of prejudices that also prevail later in the job market. Due to structural marginalisation and lack of higher education, most jobs available are manual and low-paid. Even higher education does not necessarily secure satisfactory prospects of career advancement at the workplace.

In sum, all these factors combined contribute to public perceptions that Black Tunisians, compared to the majority, are less fitting to take on visible or leadership roles in public life. However, there are important regional differences. In Tunis, for instance, having higher education, social networks, and "cosmopolitan capital" (cf. de Koning 2009) places some in positions of privilege compared to those living in impoverished neighbourhoods or villages in the southern regions and interior Tunisia. The latter regions have for long been marginalised in terms of socioeconomic development since the colonial era (Challand 2020; see also Chapter 10, this volume).

In addition, while men and women are both sexualised as to their assumed licentiousness and sexual excess (Scaglioni 2020, 139–140), this especially affects women. Black Tunisian and sub-Saharan women face misogynistic attitudes and sexual harassment in public spaces or at work. On one hand, the prevailing beauty standards inferiorise them, and their skin colour and hair often attract public ridicule and shaming. On the other hand, their bodies are the subjected to very mystic and dehumanising sexual objectification. The best example of this is *kahla tasaffi al-dam* (Black woman purifies blood), a sentence used by men to sexually harass and "catcall" Black women. It originates from a traditional Tunisian lore from the times of slavery, which claims that sleeping with a Black woman purifies a man's blood and cures his diseases.

While "Blackness" is socially constructed and reproduced in these kinds of instances, it is far from an abstract category; it has direct racial consequences for those racialised as Black (Bonilla-Silva 1997). In other words, lifelong

experiences of racial prejudice are prone to create a painful sense of alienation, injustice, and anger. In a sense, Black Tunisians are constantly hailed or interpellated into a hierarchical racial ideology (Phoenix and Phoenix 2012, 56–57) and its implicit assumptions of their innate inferiority, backwardness, and "second-class" citizenship. As suggested above, the experiences of racism may differ and are shaped by intersections of class and gender as well as differences in educational attainment, social connections, assumed lineage, and place of residence. Those who bear the most direct forms of racism, including physical violence, are the migrants from sub-Saharan countries.[8] In 2021, their numbers were estimated officially at 21,500 and included students and professionals, who resided in the country legally, and those who arrived through illegal means seeking a path to Europe (Institut National de la Statistique 2021). They are usually the most marginalised whereby racism intertwines with xenophobia and extractivist labour relations.

Struggle for racial equality

As noted above, anti-racist activism was virtually unheard of before the Tunisian revolution in 2010–2011.[9] The early transitional period opened new spaces for political pluralism and civic activism. Soon after President Ben Ali fled the country, and the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique, RDC) was dissolved, the National Constituent Assembly (NCA) was elected in 2011 to draft a new Tunisian constitution. The number of new political groups and parties, civil society formations, and informal activist groups multiplied rapidly, as the early transitional period raised public hopes for social justice, equality, and democracy. The end of Ben Ali's authoritarian regime and grip over civil society and opposition activities presented an opportunity to voice out societal topics – such as racial equality – formerly considered to be taboo (Mzioudet 2022).[10] This included formerly suppressed groups, such as Amazigh (or "Berber"), Christian, Jewish, and gay and lesbian communities, who organised themselves to redress their historical grievances and communal rights (e.g. Pouessel 2012).

Similarly, the first Black Tunisians' associations emerged in this context. First, the ADAM Association for Equality and Development (Association ADAM pour l'Égalité et le Développement) which was established in May 2012. It organised various activities that included petitioning and calling for anti-racial discrimination legislation. A year later, it was largely disbanded due to internal differences (Abdelhamid 2018, 7). However, the former members remained active in anti-racist campaigning, including pioneering research on Black communities (Abdelhamid, Elfargi, and Elwaer 2017) and some of them co-founded the Voices of Black Tunisian Women, the first intersectional feminist collective, in 2020. In the wake of the revolution, the second association, Mnemty, was officially established in 2013, presided over by Saadia Mosbah, and continues to be the foremost Black anti-racist

association to date. Its activities have included petitioning for the Law 50, raising awareness and conducting research on Tunisia's Black community and collaborating with African migrants' communities. After the revolution, other associations were also established – including Aqalliyat, or Minorités (Association Tunisienne de Soutien aux Minorités) and ADD (Association pour la promotion du Droit à la Différence) in 2011 – that have worked on many ethnic, racial, religious and sexual minorities (Dali 2015; Mzioudet 2021).

In the early phase, the Black Tunisian activists adopted a range of activities, including organising awareness raising campaigns and protests so as to sensitise and mobilise a critical mass. At a political level, they pushed for legislative changes to the first post-revolutionary constitution. Mnemty worked directly with NCA members to include the notion of discrimination in the text, and in March 2014, former ADAM members and other Black Tunisian citizens organised a march from the southern island of Djerba to central Tunis (Mzioudet 2021, 52). They arrived to protest at the NCA on 21 March, marking the UN International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, to express their demands for legislation against racial discrimination. In the end, the 2014 Constitution included many clauses to align with international human rights standards, but none criminalised racial discrimination. While the final text in Article 21 stated that citizens are "equal in front of the law without discrimination", the wording was ambiguous and did not specify racial, or other, forms of discrimination (Parikh 2021). In retrospect, some activists consider it to be among their biggest lost battles. However, the idea of anti-racist legislation had already been put forward by civil society activists during these events.

Beyond the arena of policy making, the internet and social media provided alternative spaces for Black Tunisians before and after the revolution. Maha Abdelhamid, a co-founder of ADAM, established a Facebook group called Assurance de la Citoyenneté sans Discrimination (Ensuring Citizenship without Discrimination) in April 2011 and her postings and open letters, signed as "Black Tunisian citizen" (Citoyenne Tunisienne Noire), commented on current events from anti-racist perspectives. This group, and some others, served as a rallying point and, as Houda Mzioudet (2021, 51) observes, a "safe space" for Black Tunisians (both residents and abroad) to share their personal testimonies, protest calls and anti-hegemonic narratives of what it was like to live and grow up in Tunisia (Dali 2015, 66–67). Similarly, former and current Mnemty members have emphasised that, for them, the important early activities were the weekly meetings, at times gathering up to 40 persons, at the home of Saadia Mosbah, the association's president. "Mohamed", who participated in several meetings, characterised them as "therapy":

> At the beginning, we spent a lot of time [talking]. There were new people at each meeting. Everyone talked about the pain (*douleur*) they were

> feeling, the things they had experienced, their experiences. … It was during these meetings when I understood that I wasn't actually alone, I wasn't an isolated case. There were also other people who lived through similar things and had similar issues. … It was like therapy, actually. It was like working on ourselves (*un travail sur nous-mêmes*).
>
> (Interview, November 2022)

These spaces, both online and offline, were important for raising critical awareness to disrupt the normalisation of racism in their everyday lives. Participants had grown up in a society that casts them as inferior to Arabs or Berbers, or as "second-class citizens" who face high barriers to gain public visibilities and roles. In public culture, including films, schoolbooks, and visual art, Black Tunisians have historically been rendered invisible and rarely given important, agentive roles in the narratives, only in side roles or as suspicious characters. Being at times invisibilised, at other times misrepresented, has also informed the activists' long-term demands for reforming the national school curricula and, especially, the contents of the history books.

Although the activists' claims to rights and recognition were initially rejected by the non-Black majority, including other human rights actors (Abdelhamid 2018), they gradually managed to push the notion of racism and racial discrimination into public debate. To that end, they organised various events and campaigns, including open debates and cultural events, often with local and international partners. These activities often coincided with two important dates. First, as mentioned above, the UN Day against All Forms of Racial Discrimination on 21 March and, second, the events on 23 January that commemorated the date on which Ahmed Pasha Bey (1837–1855) decreed the abolition of slavery in Tunisia in 1846 (Oualdi 2021). The activists worked also with the Truth and Dignity Commission or IVD (Instance Verité et Dignité), that was established in 2014 as the main body of transitional justice, and that was the first state instance that acknowledged the existence of racial discrimination in Tunisia (Mzioudet 2022).

In 2018, the passage of Law 50 was considered to be a victory for local activists in a volatile context.[11] Prior to its adoption, there was significant public momentum supported by various civil society actors, such as the EuroMed Network for Human Rights, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Committee for the Respect of Freedom and Human Rights, and several other associations, as well as politicians like member of parliament (MP) Jamila Debbech Ksiksi from the Ennahda party (Mzioudet 2022, 73–76; Parikh 2023). The law was adopted in the Assembly of the People's Representatives on 9 October 2018. Before its adoption, civil society formations had petitioned for a national strategy to combat and prevent racial discrimination, but the final version of the law, consisting of 11 clauses, did not include these preventive measures. Nonetheless, the law represented a symbolic victory as it provided, in principle, state protection

and criminalised all forms of racial discrimination, imposing fines of up to 3,000 Tunisian dinars (approximately 1,000 euros) and prison sentences of up to three years for offenders.

Between hope and disillusionment

> In all honesty, there is no movement of Black people (*haraka li as-suud*) in Tunisia. The activists and associations have not been able to create a movement of Black people here.

In March 2022, "Abdel", a young Black Tunisian, who had been actively involved in anti-racist activism for ten years, expressed his disappointment in the absence of a substantial Black movement compared to other marginalised groups in Tunisia, such as the Amazigh, Christians, or the LGBTQ+ community. Despite some notable moments of activism and sense of purpose, such as the collective campaign for Law 50 in the late 2010s, Abdel and many others have become disillusioned with the law's ability to promote racial equality in Tunisia. In hindsight, it was seen as a symbolic gesture and an affirmation that legislative action alone is insufficient in addressing racism as a deeply rooted impediment to social justice in Tunisia. The law lacked preventive measures, such as educational reforms, and its diluted version of the original proposal gave the impression of a cosmetic change that, according to some activists, effectively projects a progressive image to the international community. The law intended to establish the National Commission against Racial Discrimination as a public body to combat racial discrimination but, as of 2023, it has not been implemented, and there is little awareness of the law by the public, nor the police and the judiciary, who would be responsible for its enforcement.

In 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic hit Tunisia hard. The recorded infection and death rates at times topped all other African countries, halting not only the economy and public political life but almost all civil society activities. Nevertheless, activists engaged in raising awareness of the law, opened telephone lines for victims of racial discrimination, and provided legal and logistical support for them. Minority Rights Group (MRG), a London-based NGO, worked with Mnemty to train Tunisian lawyers and judges about the law, and with Observatoire pour la Défense du Droit à la Différence to produce periodic reports on discrimination cases. Also, the Points Anti-Discrimination (PAD) network, Avocats Sans Frontières, Terre d'Asile, and Tunisian lawyers offered legal and media support in cases of discrimination and mistreatment, including those of migrants from African countries. In the absence of the National Commission, these initiatives, albeit partial and periodic, have effectively taken some of its due responsibilities. In 2020, other important developments took place during the pandemic. The police killing of George Floyd in the United States in May instigated global

protests under the banner of #BlackLivesMatter, including one of the largest anti-racist protests thus far in central Tunis on 6 June 2020.

At the same time, Abdel's concern above regarding the lack of a Black movement in Tunisia has led to another kind of disillusionment shared by others. He had hoped for a collective effort by Black Tunisians to address racial inequality. However, activists point out that many do not want to acknowledge racism as a personal or social issue and, even if they did, they are hesitant to publicly engage with it through CSOs. Importantly, speaking out against one's employer or landlord is undesirable as it directly affects livelihoods and future prospects (see also Mzioudet 2022, 69). In addition, limited resources, conflicts between individuals and associations, and competition for visibility can hinder local mobilisation and cooperation initiatives. In a postcolonial context, the issue of foreign funding is also highly contentious and attract various claims and conspiracies about the true motives of activists and civil society actors (cf. Abdelhamid 2018, 10). Consequently, some Black activists are accused of working for the "West" and being thus unpatriotic and, also for politicising the issue of racism and their "skin colour" for their own benefit. Additionally, the challenges of mobilisation are exacerbated by the geographical and social distance between educated and liberal-oriented activists based in Tunis and the marginalised, more conservative populations in Southern Tunisia (Dali 2015; Mzioudet 2022, 78–81).

The anti-racist activism in Tunisia does not fit the traditional model of a social movement characterised by a movement organisation engaging in sustained collective actions to express collective demands. Instead, it takes shape in both online and offline spaces and involves a diverse range of individual and associational actors at local, national, and global levels. While Black rights activism in Tunisia can be seen as a new social movement that partly revolves around Black identity, it exists as a "submerged" reality of social networks beneath the surface of events, protests, and other forms of public collective action (Melucci 1985). There is an added dynamic between formally organised associational actors and those who prefer less structured approaches. A notable example of the latter is the aforementioned Voices of Black Tunisian Women, founded in 2020 as an informal collective. It was established to provide a safe space for expression and deliberation for Black Tunisian women, who felt sidelined in the #AnaZeda movement, or the Tunisian chapter of the global #MeToo movement. As intersectional feminists and academics, the active members engage in academic seminars both online and offline, give interviews to global media outlets, and produce written works on racism and racial discrimination in Tunisia to amplify their views, analyses, and experiences to wider global audiences.

In general, the objective of activists has been to bring about societal transformation by changing people's attitudes, thereby enabling Black Tunisians to be recognised as full-fledged members of Tunisian society. The aim is not to perceive or portray them as a victimised ethnic minority, but as equal

citizens who should have the rights, opportunities, and visibilities they deserve. While encountering numerous challenges and setbacks, some maintain the will to strive for societal changes that may not materialise during one's lifetime but, at least, aim at resisting and reversing the present so that it is less unbearable for future generations. Others cultivate a sense of optimism, believing that collective action can bring change. They observe that some transformations that have occurred since the revolution, offering hope for the future. As regards Law 50, only a few court rulings have been based on it, but these have been significant for both the individuals involved and the wider anti-racist campaigners. The first penal case involved a student's mother in the coastal city of Sfax, who received a three months' sentence and a fine of 300 dinars (approx. 90 euros) after making racist remarks against the student's teacher. As for civil cases, the first ruling came in October 2020, allowing Hamden Atig Dali, resident of Djerba, to remove the stigmatising term "Atig" from his surname, which implied "freed by" the Dalis, or the former masters (Parikh 2021).

While the full potential of Law 50 is yet to be realised, these cases have demonstrated that collective actions may result in gradual change. The new legislation required considerable efforts from the claimants, lawyers, and activists to mobilise support and to generate visibility for the legal processes whereby the state, in principle, should protect its citizens against racial discrimination. As of 2023, several ongoing cases have instilled hope among some activists that the law addresses some of the structural issues that perpetuate racialised social systems in Tunisia. Sometimes, however, even small indications of racial equality can be meaningful. During Ramadan 2022, for instance, activists were delighted to see a young Black Tunisian woman as "any other" in a TV commercial. Such instances, albeit rare, provided them with hope that seeing Black Tunisians in visible roles will gradually become common in public life.

2023: A point of no return?

Thus, in the early 2020s, some positive developments provided the activists with a degree of precarious hope. However, several processes were rapidly changing the state-society dynamics in which the activists were operating. While some could persevere and in fact diversify their activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, the parliamentary politics – a prime arena for civic lobbying – was at a standstill for nearly two years. The Assembly of the People's Representatives was effectively discontinued between July 2021 and March 2023 by the decrees of President Kais Saied, elected in 2019. By this manoeuvre, Saied undermined not only the Islamists' parliamentary majority but more secular-oriented opposition parties and groups, including CSOs. The new constitution, pushed through an unpopular referendum in July 2022, gave the president excessive powers at the expense of parliamentary and judiciary autonomy. Also, Tunisians had suffered from high inflation,

rocketing prices, and food shortages even before the pandemic and the beginning of the Ukraine war in 2022. For Tunisia, dependent on cereal imports especially from Ukraine and Russia, the war all but exacerbated the economic crisis and the life chances of ordinary citizens.

In March 2023, when the parliamentary process resumed, the activists already had other concerns. Tunisia had witnessed a rapid upsurge of racism and xenophobic violence against migrants from sub-Saharan countries. It emerged against the backdrop of vocal campaigns by ultra-nationalist groups, such as the Tunisian Nationalist Party, which spread misinformation and hate speech not only against migrants but also against the activists and CSOs working with them. The ultranationalists' claim was that migrants arrived as a part of a "foreign agenda" aims to "replace" the Tunisian people or, in other words, to turn Tunisia Black and non-Muslim (Marks 2023). They claimed that Black African migrants were criminals and violent and, as such, a threat to Tunisian families and, also, the main reason for the ongoing economic crisis. On 21 February, President Saied gave a speech that echoed these opinions and accused migrants – and foreign-funded CSOs – of a wider conspiracy that aimed to change the "demographic composition" of Tunisia.

In a way, these public stances helped to legitimate the global alt-right theories of "great replacement" at the highest levels of state discourse (Geisser 2023). Although Saied later modified his stance, in what followed, many civilian "mobs" attacked African migrants, ousted them from their homes, and confiscated their belongings in various parts of the country. Some women were sexually assaulted and raped, and migrant families – including children – were detained *en masse* by the police, while profiling and also asking for identity cards from Black Tunisians. Between February and April, hundreds of migrants chose to leave the country by any means, be they repatriation flights organised by their embassies, or clandestine sea routes towards Europe.

Consequently, concerned Tunisian activists and groups tried to pool their resources to provide food and shelter to homeless migrants who set a camp, in the absence of state protection, outside the International Organization for Migration (IOM) building in Tunis. Despite these efforts, the situation was reminiscent of a looming humanitarian crisis. On 25 February, a large protest against racism and xenophobia was organised by civil society actors, including the Front against Fascism, a rapidly forged network of Tunisian associations. The demonstration gathered mainly non-Black Tunisians, students, youth, and more seasoned activists, who marched and chanted powerful slogans – such as including "All migrants are welcome" and "We are all Africans" – in support of the migrants who stayed inside at home, or wherever they could, for security reasons.

From April on, the waves of racial violence seemed to be passing and local and international CSOs collaborated to find solutions for the migration crisis. Many activists were amazed by the intensity of racism and xenophobia that had been taking place. In May 2023, a prominent Black activist

lamented the racist violence and attitudes that had happened to sub-Saharan migrants:

> I've never seen such a wave of xenophobia. I have never seen this. That a shopkeeper wouldn't sell things to sub-Saharans. That he refuses a child a packet of crisps or candies, or a packet of biscuits. That he refuses to sell all that. We have never seen this! … Since I was born, since I knew and could understand something [about the world], this is the first time that I see so much hate and violence. It didn't exist before.
>
> (Interview, May 2023)

Upon the many tragedies, she expressed a precarious "silver lining" to what was then unfolding in Tunisia:

> We've seen the real face of the real Tunisia – from the top of the pyramid to the bottom … Now, no one Tunisian will be able to say anymore that "racism doesn't exist here"!

However, by mid-June, racial tensions re-emerged especially in the coastal city of Sfax. In February, Sfax had already witnessed some of the more notorious cases – often circulated as video clips online – whereby migrants were physically assaulted, including stabbing, and kicked out of their apartments. In June, the situation further deteriorated when residents, who were annoyed by the homeless migrants' presence on the streets, filmed the latter and urged the government to react. On 25 June, they organised an anti-migration protest and voiced opinions ranging between those who claim that they are not racist but want the government to find a solution, to those who were outright chanting "get out Mamadou" – as reference to a racial stereotype whereby the name denotes any Black person of African origin.

In what followed, the government began its crackdown on migrants of many African nationalities, resulting in a wave of arbitrary arrests based on racial profiling in different parts of the country. Thousands of migrants, including pregnant women and children, were transferred to the border regions facing Algeria and Libya and left without food, water, or shelter in the scorching desert. The situation led to several fatalities as they could not cross the borders nor return to Tunisia. Civil society activists denounced their mistreatment vocally on social media and global media platforms and tried to reach the borders to deliver aid but often in vain; only to be stopped by the authorities.

As the migrant crisis gained global media coverage, President Saied gave a public speech and the government accused the civil society actors, who tried to help stranded migrants, of spreading misinformation and tarnishing Tunisia's international reputation. Eventually, it gave Tunisian Red Crescent the responsibility for managing the crisis, discouraging other activist groups and CSOs from further action. Red Crescent transferred hundreds of

migrants from the desert to schools and dormitories in the Southern areas, while many others remained stuck in the border region. In the meantime, in July the government finalised a new partnership package with the European Union, including a sum of 100 million Euros to strengthen border control and facilitate the return of undocumented migrants intending to travel to Europe.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have explored several aspects of civic activism against anti-Black racism in Tunisia. Firstly, the racial social systems are based on the legacy of slavery and continue in many practices and attitudes today. The Tunisian revolution in 2010–2011 opened new opportunities for political dissent for Black Tunisians to denounce racism and racial discrimination in society; something that was virtually impossible during the previous Ben Ali authoritarian regime. In the early transitional period, activists could amplify and diversify their demands for racial equality, including legislative and constitutional reform, by campaigning, street protesting and social media activism. This emerging activism evolved as civil society formations, or as constellations of diverse actors, local and international, who managed to push the issues of racial discrimination and racism to the public debate, sometimes alone, sometimes together. In retrospect, Law 50 was only a minor success and brought few tangible changes to the everyday lives of Black Tunisians and sub-Saharan migrants; its symbolic importance is that the Tunisian state in principle acknowledges the existence of racial discrimination in the country.

By the early 2020s, civil society activists and organisations had parallel sources of hope and disillusionment. The COVID-19 pandemic and the political instabilities, including the freezing of parliamentary politics, brought further challenges to their work. The re-emerging authoritarianism, coupled with the socioeconomic crises, has implied that they should re-negotiate their roles and visibilities amid growing state pressure and public accusations. As noted above, the wave of racial and xenophobic violence in 2023 laid bare the racial social systems at play, making it impossible for anyone to maintain that "racism does not exist" in the country. At the same time, the dynamic civil society activism – that at times assume state's due responsibilities – has proven to persist from awareness rising and humanitarian efforts to large anti-racist marches. Even if racialisation and racism have been systemic, naturally not all Tunisians are racist and there are also friends, allies, and support networks who participate in the struggle for racial equality.

Finally, the emergent activism of Black Tunisians has involved sustained attempts to disrupt the "colour blind" arguments in Tunisian nationalism that ignore and perpetuate the racial inequalities under the normative surface of equal citizenship (Ltifi 2020). In a way, we could argue, the dominant notions of both Tunisianness and national unity – as historical constructions

of sameness and social belonging – have required the coexistence of populations racialised as Black as internal "others" (Bonilla-Silva 1997, 471). The activism against anti-Black racism, albeit sporadic and periodic, has involved repeated efforts to interrogate the implicit racial hierarchies and to reframe what "being a Tunisian" could mean. Their claim – and, in a sense, citizenship utopia – has been to diversify the scope and content of Tunisianness that seriously acknowledges the existence of racial inequalities and takes action to alleviate them.

Notes

1 The interviews were conducted by Onodera between March 2022 and May 2023 in Tunisia or online. This includes people who were or had been active members in associations that include (in alphabetical order), Association pour la promotion du Droit à la Différence (ADD), Aqalliyet, Baha'i community, Forum Tunisien des Droits Economiques et Sociales (FTDES), Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme (LTDH), Minority Rights Group International (MRG), Mnemty HEDUCAP, Voices of Black Tunisian Women, and two sub-Saharans' associations.
2 These include reports, for example, by Minority Rights Group, Observatoire pour la Défense du Droit à la Différence and Forum Tunisien des Droits Economiques et Sociales.
3 In this chapter, all personal names are anonymised unless otherwise agreed.
4 While official statistics do not exist, the activists and CSOs often maintain that 10–15% of Tunisians are Black (e.g. Mzioudet 2022, 67).
5 According to Larguèche (2003), North Africa has been inhabited by "Nigritic elements" since pre-historic times.
6 For the discussion on the extent to which the present forms of dependency can be considered as "modern slavery", see Dali (2005).
7 In this article, the notion of racialisation refers to social processes whereby "groups come to be understood as major biological entities and human lineages, formed due to reproductive isolation, in which membership is transmitted through biological descent" (Hochman 2019, 1246).
8 The notion of "sub-Saharan" is problematic for its homogenising effect. We use it here in accordance with its use by activists and migrants in Tunisia, as reference to mainly French-speaking countries in West and Central Africa.
9 Important precedents that are commemorated by activists, however, exist. The most renowned is the case of Slim Marzoug, a highly educated Black Tunisian, who was subjected to racial discrimination in public office in the 1960s. As a response, he tried to mobilise a Black Tunisians' opposition movement and, consequently, was put into a psychiatric hospital for 35 years until his death 2001 (Abdelhamid 2018, 2–3).
10 We refer to racial equality in this article, rather than racial equity, since by and large, the activists have demanded for recognition and full equality rather than acts of special affirmative action for the benefit of Black Tunisians (Mzioudet 2018, 5).
11 For a detailed account of the campaign, please see Mzioudet (2022).

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Part III

Re-imagining citizenships

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10 Governing through corruption

Young men, the state, and citizenship in interior Tunisia

Karim Zakhour

> This is not state corruption; this is a state of corruption.
>
> – Rami

> In Tunisia our happiness becomes our sadness, because we cannot live on what we love.
>
> – Amine

Introduction

The democratic transition in Tunisia that followed the fall of the Ben Ali regime in early 2011 opened up new and vibrant public spaces. This allowed for deep discussions and debates as well as revealed old and new sources of frustration. One of the main causes of anger and frustrations has been the perceived spread of corruption. Resentment over corruption in Tunisia is not new, it has been described as one of the main drivers behind the revolution (Zayani 2015, 85). Narratives on corruption come to have a different role during the transition; what was once suspected is now affirmed again and again. Stories of corruption, through the opening of public space, take on a stronger resonance and begin to inform the very understanding of state and citizenship. This chapter will explore narratives of corruption through the lens of young men in the margins. Specifically, it seeks to capture the way young men in Kasserine and Gafsa, in interior Tunisia, understand themselves as citizens through their understanding of the state and its corrupt practices. Gafsa is a town in the southwest of Tunisia, with a population of about 100,000. Kasserine, two hours northeast of Gafsa, is somewhat smaller with 75,000 inhabitants. Both places are considered historically marginalised regions of Tunisia, in contrast to the wealthier coastal regions. Both Kasserine and Gafsa saw early and large-scale protests during the revolution and have continued to be sites of demonstrations and resistance. The study makes

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use of an in-depth ethnographic approach and is based on 14 months of fieldwork in Kasserine and Gafsa between 2014 and 2019.

Citizenship and utopias

Citizenship is often understood as a legal relationship between individuals or groups and the state. Yet, the field of citizenship studies has gone beyond legalist understandings to include a much wider set of ideas, claims, and practices. Noted citizenship scholar Bryan Turner (1993, 2) writes that it is "important to emphasise the idea of *practices* in order to avoid a state and juridical definition of citizenship as merely a collection of rights and obligations" (italics in the original).

In this study, citizenship is understood as the way that expectations, disappointments, and desires are expressed by individuals or groups, whether explicitly political or not, to articulate their place in society vis-á-vis the state. As Mohamed Zayani (2015, 18–19) writes, "citizenship describes certain dispositions, practices, and activities through which individuals attempt to renegotiate – even if unwittingly at times – their relationship with the state". These are never completely captured, nor controlled, by the state but form part of the larger political imaginaries. Political imaginaries of citizens are articulated in a multitude of ways, often tied to diffuse expectations and desires. The assumption here is that, as political anthropologist Akhil Gupta (1995, 275) writes, "without understanding the emotional ties between citizens and the state, we cannot understand how people respond to state initiatives and actions". In focusing on desires, the chapter follows Lauren Berlant (2006, 24), who holds that, "when we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us". Desires articulate hopes and expectations that are directed towards "someone or something". In terms of citizenship, those expectations are primarily directed towards – and against – the state. Expectations on the state include many things; the provider of modernity; protection provided by the state from society itself; the bringer of everyday order.[1]

Symbols and stories

In the secret diplomatic dispatches of the American Ambassador to Tunisia made public by WikiLeaks in December of 2010, just before the revolution, one can read "corruption is the elephant in the room; it is the problem everyone knows about, but no one can publicly acknowledge". Since the democratic transition in 2011, corruption has instead become the problem everyone knows about, and talks about, in public. Another way to frame it is to say that before 2011, narratives of corruption were what James C. Scott (1990, 12) termed hidden transcripts: the "backstage discourse consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of power". Since the revolution they have

increasingly taken the shape of shared and public narratives. Corruption became a constant theme in conversations. News stories that highlight the corrupt practices of officials and politicians were widely shared in cafés and across social media. Such narratives of corruption represented a facet of the new open democratic spaces, yet they also became part of what signals the failure and frustration with the democratic transition.

In social science literature, corruption is generally understood as the abuse of public power and authority for personal gain (Johnston 1996). As such, it is associated with a host of social, political, and economic evils, and studies on corruption typically attempt to understand the causes behind corruption and ways to mitigate them. Those approaches, while vital, do not exhaust the importance of studying corruption as a phenomenon.

Corruption is in Tunisia, as in many parts of the world, part of the quotidian interactions between citizens and their state. It can be a way of getting things done quickly in what is often cumbersome, difficult, and byzantine state administration. It comes to personalise the "faceless" bureaucracy, embedding it in social relations even as it comes to obscure lines of responsibilities and undermines legal procedures.[2]

Corruption is also something else; the way it is discussed and understood forms part of larger political imaginaries around the state and its citizens. This chapter looks at narratives surrounding corruption, arguing that these narratives are forms of storytelling, and as stories they are retold again and again, circulating and come to take near-mythic forms (Gupta 2005).[3] As Michael Jackson (2002) explains, story-telling involves intersubjective processes that unite private and public meaning-making. They are forms of political imaginaries that signal expectations and shared understandings.

I argue that the ubiquity of references to corruption among Tunisians is a signal that the state has not lived up to the ethical standards and expectations of the population. As Gupta (2005, 7) writes, "any discussion of corruption necessarily assumes a standard of morally appropriate behaviour against which 'corrupt' actions are measured". Implicit in any narratives of corruption are notions of what the state ought to *be* and ought to *do*:

> The discourse of corruption is central to our understanding of the relationship between the state and social groups precisely because it plays this dual role of enabling people to construct the state symbolically and to define themselves as citizens. For it is through such representations, and through the public practices of various government agencies, that the state comes to be marked and delineated from other organisations and institutions in social life.
>
> (Gupta 1995, 389)

It is precisely this symbolic contract between the state and its citizens that this chapter will explore through discussions of corruption; how young men come to conceptualise the state through their narratives of corruption, and

consequently also their own citizenship. Corruption is a challenge that transcends generations, social groups, and places. Corruption, however, may be particularly pressing for the young in the margins. They lack the connections and resources required for navigating in a system where both are essential. It should not, perhaps, be surprising then that corruption was the most common reason given for the palpable disappointment over the transition process among the young men I spoke to. Often my very presence, even without mentioning my research or background, was enough to turn the conversation to topics of struggle, desperation, and disappointment often centred on the problem of corruption.

Two forms of patriarchal states

Below is a longer excerpt from a conversation I had in a café with two men in Gafsa in 2016. Radhouane, who was in his mid-twenties, was an unemployed engineer and lived at home. Mehdi was thirty and married with kids and worked in the military. Both were politically conscious and curious if not particularly active. Our conversation initially centred around everyday life in Gafsa, but the two quickly turned to discussing state corruption:

RADHOUANE: Our corrupt state is against the smart, hardworking, and creative. This is the case in North Africa in general but it's especially bad here in Tunisia. I will give you an example. After graduation I wanted to develop a new machine for more efficient refinement of phosphate, but those in charge were against it. They would lose money and support, even if it would be more efficient. I could do nothing. A lot of young men are like that. They have a lot of good ideas that they cannot realise. So, they drink.

MEHDI: Even to go to Hajj [pilgrimage to Mecca] you need to bribe officials.

RADHOUANE: A student wanted to do a PhD here in Tunisia, but they told him, "your topic is bad, uninteresting". He went to France to do it and got top marks there. And then they say we have no bright young people here.[4]

MEHDI: A cousin of mine works as a pilot in Tunisia Air. When flying to Paris there was a serious malfunction, yet he managed to land and save everyone's life. There were a lot of French people on that flight and in France he was treated like a hero. Here in Tunisia, he was suspended for 6 months. As if the malfunction was his fault. A few months back there was a man in Kasserine that was very smart and that built a rocket all by himself, and he was put in jail. If he did that in France, they would give him a medal and a job.

RADHOUANE: The new law that doesn't let people under 35 leave the country, it's made just to keep us here.

KARIM: But why? Isn't it to keep youth from going to Syria?

RADHOUANE: (laugh) There are a hundred ways to go to Syria, law or no law. It's just to keep us here, under their thumb. We used to live in a small cage. Now we live in a slightly larger one.

MEHDI: The youth are lost.

RADHOUANE: We feel, in these areas, that we are Algerians. Not Tunisians. In Algeria, the government helps youth start businesses, pays them a salary even if they don't have jobs. They have oil and industry. In Tunisia we have the police. We like Bouteflika, not Bourguiba.

Whether all the stories of Mehdi and Radhouane are accurate or not is less significant than the image of the state they convey and the symbolic understanding of state-citizen dynamic that they imply. From the conversation it is clear that corruption for the young men, while partly understood as involving bribery, is also more than misuse of public authority. Corruption is put in connection to the state's unwillingness or incapacity to help its citizens to realise their ambitions, particularly the young. The Tunisian state restricts the young, both in time and space. Not even Hajj, a religious duty, is exempt from this logic of penalising and profiteering and represents a state in which even the sacred has been turned into profit. They compare Tunisia to Algeria, the neighbouring country, and France. France as the former coloniser can be understood as a projection of promised modernity. Since the regime of Ben Ali invested heavily in portraying Tunisia as relatively *better* than its neighbours, by comparing it less favourably to Algeria, the young men are undermining such nation-state myths. Bourguiba, the "father of the Tunisian nation", who ruled post-independence Tunisia for over 30 years, and Bouteflika, the long ruling Algerian president, can both be understood to represent two kinds of father figures, two kinds of masculine, non-democratic states. Bouteflika, a "positive" one in which the father provides for his "sons"; Bourguiba, one in which only pure force remains. While both figures represent authoritarian forms of power, the Tunisian kind of paternalism is understood as unable to provide anything other than restrictions and to function only through force.

Mehdi and Radhouane saw themselves and youth more generally as full of initiative that was deactivated by the corruption of the state. The young are understood to be full of initiative but *are made passive by the state*, which was understood as a constraining force. France, in the young men's minds, rewarded heroism and initiative, while the Tunisian state punished it. Algeria provided material support for unemployed youth, while Tunisia criminalised the young. In other words, a state *should* help its citizens financially as well as provide opportunities for them to develop their ideas, dreams, and goals. Here their critique of the state simultaneously revealed a hope for the future: a utopian promise for tomorrow.

To stay or leave?

The conversation with Radhouane and Mehdi can be understood in terms of the corrupt practices of the state that undermine its own legitimacy; it "acts against itself". It appears that since the state has been portrayed as the sole representative of "the nation", disappointment of state practices may create wholesale rejection of not just the state but also the nation itself. Tied to this, disappointment in the nation becomes a further motivator for dreams of leaving.

Hamdi, a young man from Gafsa, expressed the connection between the corruption, political apathy, and the urge to leave clearly:

> Here there is at least 50% unemployment among the young. That's the biggest problem, that and corruption. Our only hope is to leave the country. There is no future here. Corruption is so rampant that you have to pay to get jobs. There are so few private companies and so few government jobs. No political parties focus on these issues. They just want to get power and they are just interested in personal benefits. I never got politically involved, they are all corrupt.

For Hamdi, the effects of corruption are immediate and personal. The common assertion that in many instances one has to *pay* in order to get a job means that for those like Hamdi, with limited means, escape is understood as the best option. The political leaders that focus on their own benefits rather than society as a whole are also part of these corrupt practices. These situations signal that things have, after all, not changed, and that formal politics is a dead end.

Such sentiments are not restricted to young men. Hanan, a young woman from Kasserine, says, "I think Tunisia is the worst country in the world, although I have never been anywhere else. You spend all your time studying for the *baccalaureate* and then university and you get nothing for your efforts. If you don't have connections and can't pay for a job, you have nothing". Hanan had to interrupt her studies at the age 15 and work, when her older brother died in a car accident. She wants to someday finish her *baccalaureate*, and study law. Above all, she dreams of moving to France or Canada. The complicated connection between expectations, state, and nationhood is brought out by Amine, a 32-year-old shop owner in Kasserine:

> In Tunisia our happiness becomes our sadness, because we cannot live on what we love. My friend Mohammed is a musician. He studied at the Musical Conservatory in Tunis, and wants to preserve Tunisian traditional music, but he can't live on it. For 50,000 rich people it's their country and they do what they want. Not the rest of us 12 million. We are nothing.

Tunisia is understood by many in the interior as a country for the rich, it provides neither symbolic meaning nor material support for the rest of the

population. In such instances, reimagining one's place through symbolically exiting the nation by claiming, "We are Algerians. Not Tunisians", or seeking to escape Tunisia, appear as reasonable strategies for the young. This is not to say that such exclamations and dissociative claims do not have elements of theatricality to them. For example, while performatively "rejecting Tunisia", Radhouane is at the same time an avid supporter of the national football team and will fanatically follow all of Tunisia's games. Radhouane's "rejecting Tunisian" signals a sense of exclusion, a failure of politics from above, and ultimately of citizenship and the democratisation process. At the same time, narratives of corruption also point towards other ways of doing and being a citizen.

Activating struggles

If, for some, disappointment and frustration over the corruption of state and the nation act as an impetus towards political acquiescence and a desire to leave, for others, they function as fuel for political action. As the case of Ali, the owner of the café *Andes* in Kasserine. He said:

> If eight out of ten people are corrupt in the state, it is a corrupt state, a failed state. Where is Tunisia, where is the country? This is not my country anymore. I am not Tunisian anymore. If government cars use smuggled petrol, what kind of state is it? They, the state, build statues of leaders but not roads. A few years ago, we had 100,000 refugees here crossing the border. The state did nothing, but we the people, the poor people of Kasserine helped.

For Ali, like for the others, the widespread corruption reached such magnitude that it undermined not simply the legitimacy of the state but the nation as a whole. Jingoistic attempts at nationalism by politicians by building statues of Bourguiba fell on deaf ears. By failing to live up to its moral obligation to its citizens, not just through profiteering but also through misguided policy and neglect, the state lost much of its moral authority. Yet for Ali this disappointment in both the state and the nation did not lead to political apathy or a wish to escape. While it led to a reorientation of identity, a rejection of the label Tunisian, it was above all a rejection of a failed "politics from above". Ali instead came to emphasise a "politics from below". He was actively involved in creating a new, vibrant, and politically charged youth culture in Kasserine. He and his wife created an alternative space, "one of positivity among all the negativity". He opened his café catering exclusively to active youth and was a great supporter of Moncif Marzouki, the human rights defender and political outsider that served as president of Tunisia during the transition, losing the election in 2014 to Beji Caid Essibsi.

Ali, at 35, had worked as a journalist, was married, and was generally better situated than many young and unemployed men to leverage his

frustration into political action. Yet he was far from alone in being spurred to activism by disappointment and anger. All the young men I talked to viewed corruption as a central sin of post-Ben Ali Tunisia, and yet many continued their struggles to improve the state of affairs. In other words, if narratives of corruption were part of the larger sense of disappointment in the revolution and the state of things more generally, disappointment was not always directly connected to political apathy.

A killer of dreams

If the young treated corruption as a defining problem, it was also the case that in places like Kasserine and Gafsa many young men made a living on this economy of corruption. This did not necessarily mean that they were not highly critical of these corrupt practices. Rami, from Gafsa, was a hard-working and ambitious young man, with an engineering degree from Sfax, who was involved in the smuggling business.[5] For many years he and his brother smuggled all kinds of goods from Algeria to Tunisia. For Rami, smuggling was normalised, he did not attempt to justify it and his "occupation" was no secret. He was also a member of a leftist party and he constantly talked about and shared news on social media related to corruption. He was always more than willing to share the latest stories:

> The police and the security services are all involved in the smuggling business. Everyone gets a cut. The security apparatus is part of the weapons smuggling. In Kairouan, last month, the biggest smuggler threw a wedding party, in which all the local notables, politicians, and bureaucrats attended. The other day, the media showed pictures of the police using cars for personal use, to carry sheep and food for Ramadan. An ambulance and its driver were missing from Gafsa Hospital for four days. When the driver came back and they asked where he was, he just answered, "I was in Algeria smuggling". He was not punished. This is a state of corruption, not state corruption (*dawlat al fasad, mish fasad al dawla*). I had dreams before, to start a company, to become something. Yet Tunisia is the killer of dreams.[6]

Whether or not this anger at corruption was a way to legitimise an illegal business is less important than the fact that such stories concerning corruption circulated widely. True or not, these stories reflected the fact that after years of democratic transition many still experienced the state as something essentially negative. When Rami talked about a corrupt state, rather than just corruption as isolated practices, he was articulating an image of a state that was corrupt through and through, that its very logic was one that is incapable of doing otherwise. Likewise, Sari, another young man that had worked as a smuggler between Kasserine and Algeria, said of young smugglers like himself:

> We live in the border not because we have no other choice, but because we want what the government doesn't want to give. We steal, but we do it because the state has made thieves of us all. If there was no corruption, we would be richer than Sweden. We are the other side of the state, outside it and yet part of it. They steal, we steal. But we are honest about our thievery, they are not.

The dual and mimetic connection between the smuggling that Sari and others like him do, and the actions of the state, were clear in his mind. The smugglers are "the other side of the state". Their illegal activities were both enabled by the failure of the state and were a continuation of its own corrupt logic. The state did not *want* to give them what they wanted, and at the same time the corruption made the state *unable* to. While normalised, smuggling was not experienced as something positive for those like Rami and Sari. As Rami put it, "we who smuggle do it to survive. Without it there would be nothing here. So much of the basic goods here are smuggled. But we all wanted to do something else. The state has corrupted us too". The state of corruption is corrosive not just in its inability to provide basic social goods, but also in the way that even its "victims" become implicated in its corruptive logic. While this form of *governing through corruption* is the basis for livelihoods such as Rami's, it is deeply alienating. Despite an experience of a state that is the "killer of dreams", Rami, like so many other youths in the interior, articulated a desire for *another* form of state, another form of governing; one where the state provides access to livelihoods commensurate with the qualifications and expectations of the young. Although basic, such dreams appear utopian in the face of the governing logic of corruption.

During the Ben Ali regime, smuggling was to some extent tolerated and even involved actors with ties to Ben Ali's close entourage. According to Ruth Hanau Santini (2018, 71), the Tunisian state "considered smuggling as a safety valve given the systematic politics of social and economic marginalisation". Following the revolution, the ability of the state to control these flows of border smuggling decreased. And yet, clearly the young men understood their activities as intimately tied to the state. They understood their smuggling as a reproduction of a state logic. There is no clear distinction between the informal and the formal dimensions of the state. The state of corruption is experienced as a mode of governing; the central logic of the state is corruption, a logic that is imposed on anything it touches. This process of *governing through corruption* is contagious, in the direction of its citizens as well as across whatever boundary may have existed between the state and the nation. For the young men in the margins, it is not just the state but Tunisia as a nation that is the killer of dreams.

While it is undoubtedly true that corruption and clientelism occur in the intersection between the quotidian and expectations of the state, it would be misleading to say that corruption is desired even if it is expected. On the one hand, the young have a clear understanding of how the Tunisian state

operates; it is clientelistic and rent-seeking, exploitative, and violent. On the other hand, the continual disappointment, frustration, and anger directed at the state hides a hope; that it should do and be something else. A state that neither foists corruption on its population nor forces them to reproduce its corrupt logic. A state that provides support, rewards initiatives and delivers jobs.

Brighter pasts

Many dimensions of the narratives of corruption reinforce *continuities* between the post- and pre-revolutionary Tunisian state and the sense that the revolution and democratisation processes changed little. Yet among the youth there was a widespread perception that things were less corrupt before the revolution. Discussions of corruption were also narratives of *ruptures*. Radhouane and Mehdi both expressed a common sentiment regarding the effects of the revolution:

RADHOUANE: Inflation has undermined everything. No one has enough and corruption has gone out of control.

MEHDI: During Ben Ali's time I made 315 dinar a month. That was enough. Before, you could buy food for a week for your whole family for ten dinars. Now that will get you nothing, and 1,000 dinars a month is not enough.

RADHOUANE: Before the revolution there were a few big families that stole but kept the money in Tunisia and it got circulated. Now people are afraid, and they keep their money in Switzerland.

MEHDI: During Ben Ali the big families controlled the top, but the bottom could work and live in peace without hassle or corruption. Before, the Trabelsi clan were corrupt, now we are all Trabelsis.[7]

The rising inflation and increase in corruption came up again and again in conversations with Tunisians of all ages. This was true even among many who were critical of the Ben Ali regime. Ines was a young radio journalist in Gafsa and a member of a leftist party. Ines's father was imprisoned during Ben Ali and she was dedicated to the democratic transition process. Yet even Ines acknowledged that things have not been unproblematic:

> Before, we had stability, it was easier for everyone on one level, and easier for businesses, because everyone knew what would happen. There was predictability. You got paid every month and you knew when and how much you would get. Now, no one knows anything. It's harder for small businesses, larger ones dominate them now. Before, the big corrupt families ate each other, now everyone is eating everyone. Before, the people managed to get by, but now …

Similarly, Fares, an actor from Kasserine, had become critical of the democratisation process, "It's gotten worse. Now it's all bribes and connections. You can't even take a *louage* without it. Soon you will have to bribe someone just to get bread."[8] Instead of the hoped-for freedom from corruption, there was a sense that corruption had now engulfed everything and everyone.

Blurred boundaries

Many close observers of Ben Ali's Tunisia have shown that a small group, particularly the Trabelsi family, controlled large and key parts of both the formal and informal economy and engaged in mafia-like extortion practices (Hibou 2011; Meddeb 2011). In fact, the anger at the Trabelsi clan was one of the driving forces behind the uprising in 2010. This anger can be understood in part as a reaction to the threatening informality of the state. Leila Ben Ali and her clan treated the Tunisian state as their personal estate. The family of the president undermined the very notion of rule of law and blurred the distinction between public and private. The implication of "we are all Trabelsis" is that all of society was now caught up in this undermining of the difference between formal and informal, between public and private. For those in the margins, they too have now become part of the larger Tunisian family: but it had become a highly dysfunctional one. An activist in Kasserine put it even more starkly, "we wanted equality, and we got it. Now everyone is corrupt."

Even before the revolution, Beatrice Hibou demonstrated how the breakdown of the line between public and private was part of the *modus operandi* of the Ben Ali regime. She (2006, 13) writes that "abritrariness and fluidity of distinctions – for example between legal and illegal, public and private – constitute a mode of governing in themselves". Corruption then functioned to blur the lines between state and society, between perpetrators and victims. If the revolution was in part driven by an attempt at removing this informalisation of the state, and reverse its governing through corruption, it is understood to have had exactly the *opposite* effects. In the minds of many it is no longer just the state, or segments of the ruling elite, that are corrupt, there has been a spillover; a spread of corruption, both vertically and horizontally. It is equalising in its alienation and competitive in its logic of "everyone is eating everyone".

This democratisation of corruption can be understood as a shift in the political imaginaries; from a heavily regulated market monopoly in which a small and corrupt group controlled the higher levers of the economy, to a "purer" market economy with all the competition and uncertainties that it entails. To some extent this can be read as an important conceptual shift; corruption, like the state itself, is no longer understood only as something *external* to society but very much part of it, even as it is seen as threatening. This governing through corruption has been democratised. The political and social have fused and while the state remains the major target of both anger

and desire, both hope and despair, its dangerous dynamics have also been turned downwards and inwards.

Unlike Hibou's (2011) description of Ben Ali's Tunisia, where the middle classes were complicit in the corruption but simultaneously shielded from it, corruption was no longer seen to function in a closed system, but one in which everyone was visibly complicit. It is not just that "now everyone is corrupt", but that the corruption can no longer be made invisible, and that the degree to which everyone participates in its perpetuation is made clear.

By all accounts, inflation rose drastically following the fall of Ben Ali, but did corruption increase or did it simply become more visible? It is hard, if not impossible, to disentangle the perception of increased corruption and instability from the long legacy of authoritarian rule but also from the perhaps unrealistic expectations of post-revolutionary democratic transition and a new context in which such problems were for the first time openly discussed.[9] The narratives that are emerging in post-revolutionary Tunisia can be understood as part of an emerging public discourse. This meant that corruption could now be reported more readily. However, narratives of broken-down boundaries and a state that consumes added to the sense of uncertainty of the democratic transition.

Active or passive

Narratives of corruption are forms of storytelling, about the state, about society, about oneself. Gupta argues that it is through narratives concerning corruption that "the state comes to be marked and delineated from other organisations and institutions in social life" (Gupta 1995, 389). By contrast, it appears that, in the context of a democratic transition, it is through these narratives that the vision of the state as delineated from society is broken down, and that this breakdown is understood as threatening. Many consider that democratisation has foisted the predatory practices of corruption on society itself, and everyone is now seen as an active participant in its dominating rationality. Neither society nor the nation are spared the disintegrating influence of corruption.

If narratives of corruption are understood to be tied to the state and its corrosive influence, they are also stories of the corruption of society and the complicity of everyone. Furthermore, if this widespread sense of disappointment, frustration, and anger with a state widely seen as corrupt is the general atmosphere, particularly among the young, it is connected both to political apathy and resistance. Turner distinguishes between active and passive citizenship, and argues that it is important to discuss "whether citizens are portrayed as merely a subordinated person or as an active political actor" (Turner 1990, 209). The understanding of what it means to be a citizen that is articulated by the young appears to be primarily in terms of receiving state support, stability, and security. A state that "gives to the people", not necessarily a state that *represents* the people. This can be understood as Turner's

passive citizenship, which dominates over active citizenship. Yet such distinctions are not always clear. The young express a desire for a state that would let the young realise their ambitions; this can thus be regarded as a call for a more active role for both the state and its citizens. Furthermore, corruption is itself discussed as an activating force, even if a negative one. It is also the case that the demand for social citizenship is itself often activating, in a more positive sense. If the sense of disappointment is particularly acute among the young in these regions, then so is defiance. The anger at the state of corruption comes again and again to activate the young. It is in the marginalised regions, and among marginal groups, that various forms of activism are most clearly seen. It is here that protests and demonstrations, particularly through social movements and informal politics, come to play themselves out. Much of their demands can be understood as arising from the desire for another kind of state: one devoid of corruption.

Conclusion

The chapter has sought to show that when the young talk of corruption in interior Tunisia, they understand it not just as isolated practices of individuals, local officials, or political parties that misuse public authority. Rather they see it as a reflection and evaluation of a larger logic, one that could be termed *governing through corruption*, where the internal logic of the state is one of dominance and failed patronage. This chapter has also shown that part of the experience of democratic transition is one of increased corruption. This is understood by the young to arise from the corrupting logic of the state and has been amplified by the transition processes. Many find that the revolution and democratisation have amplified their frustrations, partly perhaps through disappointment, partly through a sense that the corrupt logic of the state has now engulfed all.

If the state is often expressed in negative terms by the young men, it is also experienced as "a cluster of promises" (Berlant 2006). The constant narrative of corruption at once reinforces the importance and impotence of the state. The state remains the central entity onto which neglected groups pin their hopes, as well as the main source of their disappointment. This state is present and visible through the corrupt practices of its agents, but also absent in its unwillingness or inability to provide positive support. The image of the state that emerges is a dual one: corrupting and desired.

The chapter has also shown that much of the narratives on corruption that are described by the young men are in line with the literature on clientelistic and predatory state practices. While "clientelism and patronage are very much part of the political cultures in many parts of the world today" (Robins, Cornwall, and Von Lieres 2008, 1075), this chapter also argues that it is important to see that clientelism and patronage is not valued by the young in the margins. While there may be powerful incentives for continuing and even expanding clientelistic politics in the democratisation process of

Tunisia, the young also understand it as a major problem facing Tunisia. This, I argue, is important. While studies have long described the clientelist logic of the developing state, an ethnographically informed perspective shows that it is not enough to define the state as corrupt. Unlike the literature that attempts to "rehabilitate" clientelist practices from the "normative discourse on liberal democracy", the young men's narratives of corruption also point beyond a patrimonial state. The fact that they term much state and individual behaviour as corrupt, it is itself a condemnation and a rejection of that mode of governing. The young may be pessimistic about the ability of the state and society itself to change, but they take the "problem of corruption" seriously and articulate counter-visions. Their narratives, both explicit and implicit, reveal a wish for another kind of state and another kind of citizenship. In their discussions, there are expectations of a state in which formal rules are followed, by those in power and citizens alike, and where citizens, at the very minimum, have access to stable and "dignified" jobs. More than that, the young articulate an expectation that the state ought to provide positive support for its citizens, to reward initiative and hard work, instead of punishing it. They also articulate visions of social relations where people do not "eat each other", and are not implicated in the parasitic logic of corruption at the expense of one another.

Notes

1 Furthermore, citizenship in Tunisia, like in so many other countries, remains in many ways wedded to a gendered notion of citizenship premised on the promise of a certain "modernity", encompassing education and a stable, preferably state-employment, for men.

2 Tunisians make a distinction between petty bribes (*rashwa*), having access to connections (*khtaf*) and corruption (*fasad*). Corruption connotes a larger structural problem. See Annika Rabo (2005, 149) for a similar logic in Syria.

3 Gupta (2005, 6) writes "The experience of corruption on the part of all parties involved occurs in a field overdetermined by stories about such acts, stories whose reiterability enables the participants in that particular social drama to make sense of their actions".

4 I have heard this same story from several people who claim it was in the news around 2015. Such stories appear to circulate widely in both news media and among the general population.

5 He has smuggled mostly cigarettes and cosmetics. Never any drugs or arms, "that is controlled by the police and the big families", he says. As Santini (2018, 68) writes, "The backbone of informality is represented by the smuggling of tobacco, petrol, clothes, and electronics from either Libya or Algeria".

6 I had some difficulty in translating the expression *dawlat el fasad*. I settled on state of corruption after some consultations, including with Rami himself. When I asked him about the term at a later stage he said, "I don't remember what I meant exactly by that. The main thing is that it is not just individuals that are corrupt but the state itself. It corrupts everything it touches." This is what I refer to below as governing through corruption.

7 Leila Ben Ali, the wife of Ben Ali, was born Leila Trabelsi. She and her family were widely considered to be extremely corrupt.

8 *Louage* is a minibus used to travel between towns and cities.
9 I make no claims as to whether corruption has increased or not. It is, however, reasonable to assume that for people living in the margins, the precariousness of their position means that their claims should be taken seriously. When they say that they can no longer afford meat, that they have to bribe more, this cannot only be reduced to a nostalgia for the past.

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11 Imaginaries of social change in Algeria

Nonviolent acts of citizenship of the autonomous trade union activists

Karim Maïche

Introduction

Before the spread of COVID-19 in 2020, the world at large witnessed political uprisings from Chile to Hong Kong, from Lebanon to France and from Sudan to Iran. In Algeria, millions of demonstrators occupied the streets in multiple cities and villages around the country since February 2019 organising regular massive marches every Tuesday and Friday. Mass protests prevented the fifth mandate of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and finally forced the aging president to step down. While there is a growing amount of literature related to the 2019 Hirak uprisings, only few studies approach political acts, mobilisations, and social contestations of the social movements, especially the struggle of the autonomous trade unions before 2019. This chapter aims to contribute to this gap in the literature. Contrary to other countries in the region, the popular uprisings in the North Africa and Middle East – often termed as the "Arab Spring" – did not instigate a large popular protest wave in Algeria in 2011. Nevertheless, oppositional autonomous trade unions have a decades long tradition of protesting activities in Algeria, and they have been able to challenge the state authorities often more importantly than the oppositional political parties.

Their functioning dates back already to the 1970s but gained wider and more structured performances since the 1989 constitutional reform. In 1990, dozens of autonomous trade unions were established officially using practices of political activism generating from labour related grievances and forming a heterogeneous oppositional political body with other political parties and other civil society organisations. Since the early 1990s, the autonomous trade union movement has had different stages of intensity although, towards the end of the 2010s, the trend could be considered downward and increasingly marginal phenomena.

In general, the Algerian autonomous trade union movement consists of dozens of unions that function in different social frameworks such as public, political and to a lesser extent economic, and they operate through various professional sectors such as educational, health, and transportation, to mention only a few.[1] Within these unions, activists have aimed to challenge

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the state authorities and their political decision-making processes in order to politicise workers' rights. Through multiple acts what can be defined as "manifest political engagements" (Ekman and Amnå 2012), their aim has been legitimising their own functioning through delegitimising the state authorities and, especially, the governmental trade union The General Union of Algerian Workers (Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens, UGTA). They promoted acts that they claimed as independent or autonomous from the state and challenged UGTA for its congruent connection to state authorities, who consider the latter as the sole representative of the workers.

Due to asymmetric power relations regarding the state, autonomous trade unions have organised nonviolent civic acts such as demonstrations, sit-ins, petitions, and hunger strikes. These acts, or manifest political engagements, often take place in urban public spaces such as squares in Algiers (capital of Algeria), Oran, Sétif, Tizi-Ouzou, Mostaganem, Ouargla, Touggourt, and other cities around the country or in front of the various ministries and official compounds depending on the content and aim of the protest. Several thousand protests have been organised around the country per year. In addition, autonomous trade unions gained visibility in the well-known oppositional newspapers such as El Watan, Liberté, Le Soir, El Khabar, and Echorouk only few to mention. As for the activists, they were strongly present in Facebook and their motivation sprang from the surrounding social conditions and their growing political consciousness to acquire their equal citizenship rights, or the actualisation of their full citizenship as guaranteed in the 1989 constitution.

In this chapter, I explore the acts of citizenship (Isin and Nielsen 2008) in this context and inquire how the autonomous unions have aimed for social change through political imaginaries related to a more democratic Algeria where citizenship rights are more equally distributed. I will also discuss the ways in which the state authorities and other security services controlled the public protesting activities in order to prevent wide-scale social spillover of the protests, forcing activists to operate within hegemonic and asymmetric social conditions. According to the activists,[2] as we shall see, state authorities responded to their protests through restrictions, arrests, negotiations and cloning of the unions. These phenomena are approached through construction of antagonistic discourses that produce subjective understanding of the citizenship rights expressed by the activists themselves (Jorgensen and Phillips 2002; Laclau and Mouffe 2001).

In what follows, this chapter explores, firstly, how the citizenship rights demanded by autonomous union activists are expressed in connection to political imaginaries through nonviolent acts of citizenship in the constrained urban civil society spaces before the Hirak uprisings in 2019. Secondly, it reflects how the social conditions and spatial restrictions of state authorities are connected to these acts of citizenship in the context of contestation of different autonomous trade unions. Finally, this chapter approaches individual activists through the theoretical framework of acts of citizenship

enabling to understand citizenship as transformation through acts instead of perceiving citizenship as an institutional status.

Acts of citizenship of the autonomous trade unions

According to Marnia Lazreg, citizenship should be separated as *status* and as *practice*: "formal citizenship precludes the emergence of substantive citizenship, which includes the protection of civil and social rights" (Lazreg 2000, 60). She highlights that autonomy and agency play a central role within the realisation of substantive citizenship, meaning more institutional understanding of citizenship. I approach the manifest political engagements of the autonomous trade unions in the public space within the theory of "acts of citizenship" of Engin F. Isin and Greg M. Nielsen, who describe citizenship as a phenomenon, which is neither status nor practice. By this, they mean that citizenship is not a static status or state, but something that exists and is shaped through motion and experience. They shift the focus of citizenship from the institutional understandings toward individual agency, acts of citizenship, where "acts are not passively given, nor do they emerge from a natural order" (Isin and Nielsen 2008, 2).

For Isin, the term "theorising acts" means "an assemblage of acts, actions and actors in a historically and geographically concrete situation, creating a scene or state of affairs" (Isin 2008, 24). By theorising acts one must "focus the rupture that enables the actor (that the act creates) to remain at the scene rather than fleeing it". Isin also differentiates "activist citizens" and "active citizens". For him "activist citizens engage in writing scripts and creating the scene" while "active citizens follow scripts and participate in scenes that are already created" (Isin 2008, 24). To act is to engage in the creation of a scene through creation of oneself. The observation and exploring of citizenship should take place in acts, not practices or institutions. According to Isin (2008, 38) "acts cannot happen without motives, purposes, or reasons", and they cannot be reduced only to calculability, intentionality, or responsibility. In similar vein, Sidney G. Tarrow (2011, 28–29) argues that, for social movements, "people engage in contentious politics when patterns of political opportunities and constraints change, and then by strategically employing a repertoire of collective action, creating new opportunities, which are used by others in widening cycles of contention".

In order to explore the acts of citizenship by autonomous trade unions further, it is necessary to reflect their official emergence and development of democratic practices in Algeria in the late 1980s. Autonomous trade unions were officially created in the country one after another since the enactment of Freedom of association, collective bargaining and industrial laws 90-14 and 90-02 in 1990. At the background were the so-called October uprisings in 1988 that forced the authoritarian government of President Chadli Bendjedid for the liberalisation of the political rights, political pluralism, and constitutional change.[3] The National Autonomous Union of Public Administration

Staff (Syndicat National Autonome des Personelles de l'Administration Publique, SNAPAP) was officially the first autonomous trade union established in 1990. With its nation-wide network of multiple sub-sections, SNAPAP was the most active and visible actor in the public sector especially since the early 2000s. The figures that depict the amount of its membership are in many ways political and controversial, but SNAPAP claimed in the early 2010s to comprise 300,000–500,000 members, of which 40,000–50,000 were contributive members.[4]

Autonomous unions played a visible role demanding political reforms and opposing Islamists, who were gaining strength after winning local governmental elections due to the establishment of the multiparty system. Islamist political party Islamic Salvation Front (Front Islamique du Salut, FIS) had strong autonomous trade union Islamic Trade Union of Work (Syndicat Islamique du Travail, SIT), which gained a lot of popular support during 1990–1993, though it was never formally authorised. When the electoral process was halted, the armed Islamist groups started civil war against the state authorities (Lowi 2009, 126–128; Werenfels 2007, 48).

During the civil war (1992–2002), the political reforms were halted and the activities of the autonomous trade union movement diminished, although some major demonstrations and rallies, organised especially by the National Council for Higher Education Professors (Conseil National des Professeurs du Supérieur, CNES), took place in the education and healthcare sectors. After the war gradually came to an end in the beginning of the 2000s, fierce struggles took place between autonomous unions and state authorities. This phase can be considered the most ferocious period of contestation, because during 2011 the popular support of the unions started to gradually weaken.

The autonomous trade unions emerged in the first place due to various socio-economic challenges that workers faced in their daily lives. Their social imaginaries were in direct connection with democratic principles and citizenship rights, when they criticised state authorities for being corrupted actors of foreign capital owners who stole Algerian national wealth. Neoliberalist economic policies started to spread increasingly during the presidency of Bendjedid Chadli in the 1980s and were strengthened in the 1990s due to the economic structural adjustment program (SAP) orchestrated by International Monetary Fund (IMF) during the civil war (Liverani 2008, 24; Werenfels 2007, 49). Since the 1990s, autonomous trade union activists organised public demonstrations with the aim of communicating their political imaginaries into larger audiences through production of space.

According to Craig Browne and Paula Diehl, in order "to understand substantial changes in politics and society, a conceptualization of the political imaginary is necessary" (Browne and Diehl 2019, 394). They define political imaginary vaguely as "a collective structure that organises the imagination and the symbolism of the political, and therefore organises the instituting process of the political as well" (Browne and Diehl 2019, 394). While I conceive the "political" here as constantly transforming phenomena,

the collective and individual experiences that shape the activists' political imaginaries should be understood as a process. Union activists in Algeria aspired to instigate the interest of their fellow citizens to join for the common struggle for a better and more democratic Algeria. They often argued how their acts and action aimed at increasing their citizenship rights in connection to aforementioned political imaginaries. They constructed discourses that underlined their patriotism, considering themselves as the representatives of the authentic independence fighters who fought for Algerian independence against the French during 1954–1962. They demanded more equal distribution of the national wealth, possibilities for every citizen to construct satisfying living conditions and freedom to express their political and social aspirations. In order to achieve these goals, they claimed the need to strengthen democratic processes in Algeria.

Young Algerian autonomous union activists blamed the state authorities for their economic discomfort. They connected democratic principles to citizenship rights and accused the officials of not fulfilling their guaranteed constitutional rights. Their political acts as part of trade union activism aimed at transforming Algerian state into democratic society, as young SNAPAP activist Madjid Ferras explained when he recounted how and why he joined SNAPAP:

> The article 55 states that every Algerian citizen has a right to work and live in dignity. Therefore, I applied status of the probation [pre-employee]. I worked three years under a contract which revealed to be non-renewable. I struggle with the salary of 120 euros per month. I work as the permanent worker paid 300 euros per month, and I am after all graduated from the university, while others may be from other educational institutes. We may have diplomas, but we do not have a chance to work as permanent workers. Therefore, I entered the SNAPAP to ask for my rights; to have a job.

The probation contract policy was implemented in Algeria decades ago. The intention was to offer temporary jobs to graduates of universities, institutes, and public schools paid for by the state before they could achieve a permanent job. For the young SNAPAP activist, Ferras, and many others pre-employed contracts meant precarity and deficit in regards to their citizenship rights. They were not paid according to their educational status; in fact, it was less than the official minimum salary, and their working contracts were temporary. Similarly, another young activist of SNAPAP, Mustapha Larbi, explained his participation in SNAPAP as follows:

> I was on probation [*beneficiate de pré-emploie*] with a miserable salary. I could not find anybody who could help us to integrate into the workplace. In the end, we only found SNAPAP who took over the topic of probation [*pré-emploie*].

Later on, in July 2022, the decision of Algerian government to waive degrees in exchange for the guarantee of permanent jobs instigated mixed reactions among the youth: Why should young graduate workers give up their degrees, get rid of their achieved social status and accept jobs beneath their qualifications to acquire secured jobs? (Mazzouzi 2022). Apparently, the government tried to get rid of the pre-employed program, which was considered expensive and inefficient.

According to Charles Tilly (2002, 115), political actors typically give individualised accounts of their participation, though they could be seen to be bounded as collective actors through communities, classes, armed forces, firms, unions, interest groups, or social movements. Young SNAPAP activist Mustapha Larbi connected rights of decent employments to other citizenship rights related to political agency and democracy:

> Work is our right, but today we speak about other things such as dignity (*karama*). We are against the indignity (*hogra*) … There is no right to unionise or to participate on strike. You cannot even have the basic rights regarding the work. They say we are not contractual. What are we then? … It is a clear message that we are not considered as workers, but as modern slaves. That is why I chose SNAPAP, because it gave us possibilities and helped us to fight for a contract.

Larbi depicted his position with references to modern slavery. He had to accept working contracts, which are below his educational qualification, meanwhile he had no possibilities to organise resistance within traditional trade unionism. For this reason, he chose SNAPAP, which was for him the only trade union that offered context and platform for the young pre-employed workers to struggle. Similarly, another young SNAPAP activist Samir Baroud described the beginnings of his activism related to social grievances that he faced, but moved to instruction and the importance of collectivity:

> I finished my studies in 2010, so the first thing that I was interested in was the working place. I found myself in a situation where I had a contract for three years. I worked from 8.00h to 17.00h with the salary of 15,000 dinars [about 170 euros]. I tried to demand after the worker's rights such as an increase of the salary. I searched Facebook and I found one autonomous trade union, SNAPAP. I went there and we created a committee, which was affiliated with the union.

Many activists, especially the younger ones whom I interviewed, explained that they found the autonomous trade unions through internet. After joining the union, they explained how they were trained to understand their constitutional rights and to demand their citizenship rights through organising themselves. They learned how to mobilise and to organise sit-ins,

demonstrations, and to create union committees. As Tarrow (2011, 29) depicts within Social Movements Theory, the young activist generation learned the practices of the political activism from the older generation through instruction and obtained knowledge of particular routines of action. Unions organise training on trade union practices to increase awareness of workers' rights.

Activist citizens

Malika Rebai Maamri (2014) has stressed that Algeria is one of the few states in the Southern Mediterranean area that possesses the preconditions for a transition to democracy: economic and social background conditions; consensus to desire democracy; conflict and resolution mechanisms; and politicians that can be committed to democratic transformation. Mass demonstrations during 2019–2020 strengthened this argument. Mustapha Medjahdi (2012), who has studied the educational aspect of citizenship in the Algerian press, stressed that citizenship constitutes a two-pronged meaning in the country.[5] The pro-governmental newspapers stressed the responsibility aspect of the citizens towards the state, while the critical oppositional media highlighted the rights and responsibility of the state towards the citizens. It is obvious that the activists of these autonomous unions stressed the latter related to their argument about the performances of nonviolent acts of citizenship.

During the interviews, the role of the state policies and the action conducted by the state authorities was often raised. Middle-aged activist and responsible of the public communications of the pre-employed section of SNAPAP, Idriss Mekideche, explained how offering precarious work was a better choice for the authorities because if you are unemployed, you have more time to create problems:

> [T]he life of the workers in Algeria is catastrophic. For example, I am not permanent, I am contractual. There are violations against the law because precarious work is a very dangerous phenomenon, even more dangerous than unemployment. When you are unemployed, the state is afraid because you have time. You can create problems. But when you are a precarious worker and you work every day from 8.00 to 16.00 while your salary is derisory and miserable, you are always preoccupied with taking care of your basic needs.

This narrative insight is common among activists, when they explain how state authorities function and what are the premises for their decision-making processes. However, behind their vigour for activism often spring from concrete examples related to hardship of surrounding conditions and deficits to construct meaningful everyday life and future. As Malika Rebai Maamri (2014, 17) highlights, citizenship is not only a "legal status, but also

as a way of life". According to Mekideche, the working conditions did not allow young people to construct meaningful life which pushed him to join SNAPAP in the first place:

> You cannot get married, live, or rent an [apartment] so the majority of precarious workers gain 12,000 to 17,000 dinars and the rent is 20,000 dinars or more. With your monthly income you cannot even rent a home. How can someone live? So being aware of all these problems I did some research on the internet if there is something that takes care of these [issues] … There is only SNAPAP that looks after these unemployed, precarious workers, pre-employs, unemployed graduates, and so forth. It creates committees for these branches in the society … Within the SNAPAP, there are the committees of the women, the youth, the pre-employed, the unemployed graduates etc. It creates committees trying to integrate marginalised people. Therefore, I did the research on the internet and found that there is one committee of the pre-employed within SNAPAP and I found a telephone number. I called them and I joined them.

Young and middle-aged activists explained their experiences how they realised deficits of their surrounding conditions and how SNAPAP was the only organised actor that enabled them to protest these social deficits. SNAPAP offered the framework for establishing committees, such as The Committee for the Defense of the Rights of the Unemployed (Comité National pour la Défense des Droits des Chômeurs – CNDDC), which was created separately because SNAPAP did not have right to unionise in the field of unemployed according to the legislation. Similarly, these young activists also formed the important body, The National Workers' Committee on Pre-employment and Social Safety Net (Le comité national des travailleurs de pré-emploi et du filet social), within the larger structures of the union as distinct organ gathering mostly young people.

Restrictions in the public space

Obviously, the landscape of employment policies in Algeria is much wider than union activists argue. General employment policies organised by the state include various programs that aim to decrease poverty and precariousness of workers.[6] The policies consist of tripartite negotiations between UGTA, employers and the government. However, in order to protest these conditions, SNAPAP activists felt that autonomous trade unions were the only ones that offered opportunities to challenge the state practices. Therefore, autonomous trade unions wanted to challenge the position of the UGTA as the only accepted partner of the state in tripartite arrangements. They accused the state of marginalising the autonomous trade union movement. Likewise, they accused UGTA of representing more the state and its interests at the expense of workers' rights.

Acts of citizenship of the autonomous trade unions are connected to spatial dimension and therefore struggle for the public space. Unions used public space to spread their demands and increase future mobilisations. When they organise activities, such as demonstrations, sit-ins and strikes, they gather in visible public spaces. Demonstrations have been organised in front of official compounds in the capital Algiers to demand better working conditions, sustainable salaries, higher minimum wage or to condemn state corruption. In general, these demonstrations gather from 50–200 activists. They hope to communicate with other citizens, who are passive but who could be potentially interested in joining the future acts. However, the state of emergency, which was set due to the civil war in the 1990s, prohibited public gatherings and was extremely severely monitored in Algiers. Activists were rapidly arrested, and the demonstration dismantled when it was organised in the centre of the capital. There was more space to demonstrate in the peripheries, smaller towns, and villages. The state of emergency was dissolved in the capital of Algiers only after Hirak mass protests filled the streets in 2019. Until then, any possibilities to organise demonstrations were categorically blocked by the police and security forces. Regardless of the closure of the public space, autonomous trade unions continued actively filling the streets around the country, as young SNAPAP activist Baroud explained: "Because the media is closed, dialogue is closed, [and] there are only the streets left to invest so that people can hear our demands".

According to longstanding SNAPAP activist Salim Mecheri: "In Algeria, the public space is defined as the street (*la rue*). That is the public space." According to autonomous trade unions and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Euromed Rights, the state authorities restricted the functioning of the autonomous unions and committed human rights violations when preventing the demonstrations.[7] Especially since the beginning of 2000s, when the civil war started to calm down, state officials hardened their position on autonomous trade union movement. Unions, simultaneously, started to demand more determinedly civic liberties guaranteed in the constitutional reform before the war. Preventing demonstrations, arrests and denying authorisation of the new movements were efficient tools to weaken and disperse civil society organisations including the autonomous trade unions. Activists insisted that authorities have promoted internal struggles in order to create parallel unions, or "the clones", that use similar names than the original unions but work in cooperation with the authorities. However, it seems that all the discrepancies among the key figure activists were not the result of successful state interventions. In addition, with the power displays, the state authorities have conducted negotiations with the autonomous trade unions since the 1990s, although, according to the autonomous unions, results have been modest.

Idriss Mekideche, in charge of communications within the Pre-Employed section in SNAPAP, explained how the state authorities controlled the public

space and prevent any oppositional activities, unless the streets are occupied by small group of demonstrators:

> In Algeria, the Algerians need to reappropriate the public space. Because it is closed … We have conducted maybe 50 different actions or more, especially since 2011. We organised them in Algiers and elsewhere. Every time we were repressed and arrested. Maybe there were a few occasions in some places, where they left us untroubled for a while, when they saw that we were only 20 to 50 participants. In general, they stop us quickly and the, interrogate us. Even when they leave us untroubled, they make some arrests further away to prevent some demonstrators from participating. That is for sure. So regarding the public space, the Algerians are prevented from expressing themselves in the streets and in the public space.

Well-known activist within SNAPAP, Meriem Maârouf, was highly appreciated teacher and activist among other SNAPAP members due to her contribution related to the hunger strike and demonstration organised in the capital of Algiers in 2008. She stated how the state authorities pressured activists to halt protests:

> I started in 2008 by creating a teachers' contractual office, affiliated to SNAPAP that aims for permanent working contracts for teachers. First, we started in two *wilayas* [administrative division or governorate in Algeria], Algiers and Blida, and then it spread into 33 *wilayas*. The first act we did was the hunger strike for 40 days. After that, the Minister of Education started negotiations which, however, did not respond to demands and lead into a real solution. Unfortunately, after hunger strikes, many teachers had health problems. The Ministry of Education had not given any reply and those involved in the sit-ins organised opposite to the presidential palace, because it is near to the Ministry of Education where the sit-ins were conducted, were prevented from organising protests. However, protests were organised every week. After the protests, there was intimidation by the police. We did 18 PV [Process-verbal] … They took the protesters for the whole day and asked: "Why do you protest, you must stop, you must stay at home?" Therefore, there were finally so many problems that it was not possible to continue the protests and continue claiming the rights. However, even after these intimidations I was not afraid.

Asef Bayat (2013, 12) sees the street as a central space in urban settings for contestation and political struggle. He has coined the concept of "street politics" to analyse how urban public space is used as space to communicate the discontent and to mobilise citizens for political action. Therefore, as Don Mitchell (2003, 13) suggests, an uncontrolled public space can instigate fear

as well. Contested public space as a site of resistance for oppositional groups and movements generate fear or concern by those who are in power. Young SNAPAP activist Hamid Derradji also argued pessimistically:

> In reality, public space does not exist in Algeria. Everything is squatted by the power (*pouvoir*) … How many of our activists are in prison? How many of our workers have been fired? How many students have been excluded? Therefore, they have really invested on the ground so that they stay in power.

Various surveys (Moulai-Hadj 2011; Robbins 2014) indicate that political passivity, in the sense of manifest political engagement, was widespread before the 2019 uprisings especially among the youth, while politicisation of the youth can be considered more constitutive within environments of sports, including football stadiums, and various genres of music and arts. Therefore, participation within formal channels of politics, such as voting or taking part in party politics, may not illustrate the whole picture but indicate rather the process of politicisation itself. Asef Bayat (2013, 11) argued as follows in the context of the 2011 uprisings:

> [T]he discontent subaltern groups – the poor, the youths, women, and the politically marginalized – do not sit around passively obeying the dictates of their police states, nor did they tie their luck to the verdict of destiny. Rather, they were always engaged, albeit in mostly dispersed and disparate struggles in the immediate domains of their everyday life – in the neighbourhoods, places of work, street corners, courthouses, communities, and in the private realms of taste, personal freedom, and preserving dignity.

Similarly, Daho Djerbal, a well-known scholar and editor of critical Algerian academic journal Naqd (Criticism), described in an interview (Davis, 2012) how multiple non-formal political mobilisations take constantly place in public space in Algeria:

> One occupies the street, sets up barricades, stops traffic. Sometimes these contests point to a social struggle, but sometimes they are for more general demands – such as the demand for housing. The young generation who are coming of age want housing, employment, a legitimate future. Since the unions, political parties, and parliament no longer play their role, protests and riots have become the most common mode of negotiation between various groups and the state.

Finally, there are also those who deny the existence of public space in Algeria in the first place. Trade union and human rights activist Kaddour Chouicha, who is well-known especially for his activism within CNES during the 1990s,

considered the public space in Algeria rather as "governmental space", at least in its form of political space:

> Public space [in Algeria] is not a public space. It is governmental space in reality. Nothing is permitted in the public space if you do not have accordance from the authorities. We do not have a real notion of public space, because normally the society has the right to use this space. Of course, according to the conditions that are defined by the space itself. We have totalitarian space that does not leave us even a margin of it to exercise.

Essentially, it is important to stress here that political, organised manifest political engagement was in many ways marginal phenomena in Algeria before the 2019 *hirak* uprisings. Being an activist in Algeria, whether a female or male, young, or old, was simultaneously reserved for the marginalised, and SNAPAP and other autonomous trade unions, created institutions for them through unionism. Within the SNAPAP, it was possible to engage within the committees of the women, the youth, the pre-employed, the unemployed, the unemployed graduates, and so forth. The SNAPAP created these frameworks in order to integrate marginalised people. Experienced injustices and societal grievances, such as working hours, the lack of housing, unemployment, corruption, oppression, marginalisation, and lack of prospects pushed many young to engage and they found autonomous trade unions instead of political parties or different state-affiliated platforms.

In consequence, the concept of citizenship was largely perceived as a link between an individual and the state, as well as well as between the ideas of democracy and the rule of law. Citizenship was, therefore, understood as a complex web of rights and responsibilities that contingently as every state, and according to Isin (2008, 15), "exists in social, political or economic integration and is implicated in varying degrees of influence and autonomy".

Meanwhile, when I discussed with the members of the state-affiliated trade union UGTA in Oran, they were directly critical of SNAPAP and other autonomous unions and claimed themselves as the ones who protected workers and their citizenship rights. The following excerpts from these discussions are illuminating in this respect:

> How are autonomous trade unions able to defend Algerian workers while they are not even able to defend themselves?

> UGTA defends the state whoever is the president. This is what UGTA has done since the founder Aïssat Idir [Revolutionary figure and trade unionist during the independence war and before].

> Autonomous trade unions only speak in the cafés trying to turn people against the state. They lack plan and responsibility. Some of them are even manipulated by the foreigners. UGTA defends Algeria.

> UGTA has rules and responsibility. UGTA is revolutionary and the only credible trade union in Algeria. UGTA trains the workers for syndicalism. Autonomous trade unions are "parasite" unions. They do not represent neither Algeria, nor workers. They are marginal. They are politicised and do not defend Algerian workers. Malaoui [Rachid Malaoui is the president of SNAPAP] speaks in cafés and does not even live in Algeria.

These quotations are from my field notes because I was not allowed to record our discussions. It was explicitly clear how activists of autonomous unions and members of UGTA constructed antagonistic discourses regarding each other's activities. Both claimed to represent the authentic trade unionists in the country and were working for the national interest accusing the other being "manipulated" by external actors. Often unionists constructed opposite symbolism and discourses related to patriotism, independence, and stability. Both claimed to function in order to conserve the stability accusing the other for causing instability.

Similarly, aforementioned quotes show the asymmetric power relations between UGTA and the state on the one hand, and SNAPAP and autonomous trade unions, on the other: "How autonomous trade unions are able to defend Algerian workers while they are not even able to defend themselves". The state authorities had all the machinery of power behind from police to army and they had monopoly of coercion in case it was needed. This, of course, is one reason, why autonomous unions used tactics of nonviolence, as young SNAPAP activist Hamid Derradji explained:

> If you speak politics in the cafe, you are being arrested. In the bar, as well. Therefore, when you go out to the street with demands in the sign, you risk a lot. Unfortunately, they have managed to depoliticise our society. This means that to speak politics in Algeria has become a taboo or something very sensitive. The people do not get mixed up; they disengage from everything. People have lost their solidarity. People are afraid to engage into dynamics of demands and claims, because our power (*pouvoir*) is known. How many of our activists are in prison? How many of our workers have been fired? How many students have been excluded?

Through acts and actions conducted within visible urban public spaces activists aimed at communicating with the Algerian people hoping to sensitise them to realise deficits within the state apparatus. Their objective was to mobilise more participants in contestation to demand the actualisation of the citizenship rights guaranteed in the 1990 constitutional reform. Through acts of citizenship potential participants would transform into actors of change motivated through stated but undetermined political imaginaries. However, these conditions changed simultaneously the conditions for their acts in the

sense that the autonomous trade union transformed from protection of workers' rights more towards a political movement that concentrated more on general societal questions, such as democracy, human rights, and equal treatment, during demonstrations in public space.

According to Malika Rahal (2013), features of nonviolent resistance in Algeria can be traced to the popular resistance of the French colonial period (1830–1954). The nonviolent acts of autonomous trade unions in post-civil war Algeria also stemmed from the fatigue of violence experienced in the 1990s, which also characterised the Hirak movement in 2019. Autonomous unions used pragmatic, normative, expressive, and communicative techniques to gain attention in the oppositional media, social media, and streets. Organising strikes in the public sector enabled to open discussion channels to negotiate with authorities at the ministerial level, though, according to activists, negotiations never provided any concrete results. Rather, the state authorities were able to use the negotiations for their own benefit by putting pressure on, and trying to break the unity of, the different unions.

Finally, the autonomous trade union movement attempted to internationalise the conflict between the authorities contacting international bodies such as the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and other international human rights organisations. State authorities then accused them of working as "foreign agents" enabling the destabilisation of the country. It was then possible to accuse autonomous trade union activists as unpatriotic actors, who did not work for the benefit of the national state. In this context, it is also relevant to remind that, under asymmetric relations, nonviolence, and internationalisation of the conflict are often the only possibilities left in order to continue the struggle.

In 2023, the autonomous trade unions continue to challenge the current government led by President Abdelmadjid Tebboune. In January 2023, unions called International Labour Organization (ILO) to prevent state authorities to submit planned amendments to aforementioned Freedom of association, collective bargaining and industrial law 90-14. They claimed that autonomous unions were not consulted about the amendments while they have serious impacts on their rights to get organised with political parties, to register new unions, to invest for their real estates and to affiliate with international organisations (IndustriALL 2023).

Conclusion

Based on above, it is clear that autonomous trade union activists and state authorities have viewed the societal environment from dissenting perspectives, in some contexts even from the opposite discourses. Both blamed each other for social destabilisation, political manoeuvres, and unpatriotic actions. Meanwhile, they both represented themselves as the nationalist protector of Algerian independence and freedom of citizenship rights.

In the early 2020s, there were expectations that Algeria would be in the process of constructing the second republic. By this it was expected that the first republic, born after the 1962 independence, had reached its end by the 2019 uprisings and the so-called Hirak movement, which gathered hundreds of thousands of Algerians demanding profound socio-political change. Hirak movement stayed pacific until its gradual deterioration. However, its vast demonstrations around the country surprised academics, political activists, and Algerian citizens themselves. As if overnight, the whole nation transformed from active citizens into activist citizens.

It seems that COVID-19 and the escalating crackdown of civil society has led autonomous trade unions again alone to struggle for citizenship rights. In the Algerian autonomous trade union context, this can be interpreted in the way that union activists are not satisfied by settling only for state led political processes, including voting and participating in elections, paying taxes, and developing society as civilian family members. They want more liberties and their voice heard in political decision making. They want to organise themselves as responsible actors and act through their own individual premises in order to have an impact on the national conduct of policies. They are ready to act within the moments of uncertainty even though it can mean for them drifting into confrontation with the state authorities. This could mean being arrested, being fired from work, and losing achieved social status.

In the past, activists have used protests, non-cooperation, interventions, and civil disobedience as tools to pressure the government to reach their set demands without knowing the outcome. They were ready to change the conditions according to their political imaginaries, which comprise democratic development of the state, civic liberties, and autonomous activities. Citizenship rights could only be achieved by changing the structures and agency. Through these acts of citizenship, they fulfilled their experienced social responsibilities and by transformation into activist citizens. These acts had a meaning: to struggle for a better society for everyone.

Today many argue that the achievements related to the 2019 uprisings, the formation of the Hirak Movement and the expected transformation of the political conduct of the state affairs, are lost. Therefore, the autonomous trade union movement needs to adapt for the new situation and the changing international world political order, where argumentation on democratic benefits seems to get more intractable around the world. In the near future, autonomous unions need to invent new ways to continue their struggle in order to justify their existence.

Notes

1 In 2018, 66 trade unions existed officially in Algeria (Babouche 2018). However, it is challenging to state exact number of the trade unions and especially autonomous trade unions because many existing unions that are functioning are not officially recognised while some of those that exist officially may not function in practice.

2 I have created the pseudonyms for all the young activists interviewed in this chapter. However, those interviewees who had more than decade long experience and were well-known figures within the movement are expressing themselves with their own identities.
3 The October uprisings, also called the "October riots" or "bread riots", erupted 4–10 October 1988, showing the depth of the discontent among the youth. The army fired on the demonstrators leading to the deaths of hundreds and imposed the state of emergency for the first time since the end of Algerian War of Independence (Liverani 2008, 27, 71; Volpi 2003, 38–45). I prefer to define the incidents of 1988 with the term October uprisings, which is, I believe, a more neutral concept regarding for the events.
4 Data from www.maisondessyndicats-dz.com/historique.php (accessed 7 February 2012; website does not function anymore).
5 Medjahdi has studied the discussions related to the concept of citizenship in the newspaper *El Khabar* established in the wake of October uprisings in 1988 and governmental newspaper *El Moudjahid*, closely linked to the government.
6 The four main programs are: the National Unemployment Insurance Fund (CNAC), the Social Development Agency (ADS), National Youth Employment Support Agency (ANSEJ), and the National Agency for the Management of Microcredit (ANGEM).
7 Amnesty International (2018), Human Rights Watch (2013), and EuroMed Rights (2014) have regularly published several critical reports on trade union rights in Algeria since 2010s.

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12 “Carrot and stick”

Cooperative citizenship and the pedagogic state in Vietnam

Mirjam Le and Franziska Susana Nicolaisen

Introduction

When travelling Vietnamese streets, propaganda posters with a socialist aesthetic and slogans like “All for the sake of a rich people, strong country, a democratic, fair and civilised society” seem like a vestige from a time gone by. As Vietnam’s society becomes wealthier, its cities more modern, and its economy more capitalist, the use of these posters and slogans is a stark reminder that the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) still rules the country as a one party-state. And while the economy has been integrated into the global economy since the mid-1980s, the VCP’s authoritarian rule characterises its political institutions. Furthermore, Vietnam lacks an independent civil society as all social organisations are part of the Fatherland Front, an umbrella for mass movements tasked with mass participation and popular mobilisation, reducing the political space for social activism. Instead, repressive political practices by state authorities at every level are commonplace (Croissant 2016).

This government structure is embedded in a political narrative of socialism which combines the goal of common welfare with the need for a strong national identity and the expectation of morally right behaviour from citizens (Derks and Nguyen 2020). To this end, the Vietnamese party-state at every government level, from nation to city, aims to build a modern state and society by educating its citizens in the conduct of modern, civilised citizens. In return, it provides welfare and protection to its citizens. This chapter conceptualises this process through the term “pedagogic state”. From this perspective, the state conceives its people as initially lacking but capable of improvement to develop into fully functioning and contributing citizens. The idea of a “good citizen” is rooted in the ideal of cooperative citizenship in which the state and society improve the Vietnamese nation together (Le and Nicolaisen 2021). However, in the everyday life of the Vietnamese, the idealised form of citizenship often leads to disillusionment towards the grand political narrative, where citizens need to find personal responses to the everyday challenges they face instead of relying on state support. In practice, this disillusionment finds its expression in a combination of conflicted

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citizenship (Le and Nicolaisen 2021), disengagement from the state (Bayly 2020), and localised forms of social activism outside of state boundaries.

Consequently, while Vietnam is characterised by a lack of freedom of the press and other democratic institutions, informal political practices in Vietnam provide a so-called “meditation space” (Koh 2006) for its citizens to negotiate at the local level between local authorities and citizens to address this disillusionment. Consequently, state-society relations in Vietnam, while marked by underlying authoritarianism, are ambiguous and complex in practice. This ambiguity became a central characteristic of Vietnam’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic in 2020, the Vietnamese government, in particular the Ministry of Health, used its experience with previous severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) infections in the region and its knowledge on the inner workings of the Chinese government to implement a “zero-COVID” strategy through enforcing a nationwide lockdown and closing all borders. This strategy was extremely successful, with a low infection and death rate, until the arrival of the Delta variant in April 2021 (La et al. 2020; Le et al. 2021). Due to a lack of access to vaccines, Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), in particular, was wrecked by an outbreak of the new variant. Only as vaccination rates had increased substantially by the fall of 2021, the outbreak came under control.

Oscillating between transparent communication, cooperation, and repression, a deeper look at the policies used during the pandemic can help understand the working of modern socialist authoritarianism in practice and also points toward how citizens adapt and respond to these governance practices. In the following, this chapter will explore two main arguments. First, during the pandemic, Vietnamese government institutions combined nationalist and normative rhetoric with increasing social pressure, public surveillance, and strict control of public space to educate the public on public health policies. Thereby government institutions retooled existing and widespread governance methods to address, in particular, the urban population. Second, the urban population, already familiar with these governance practices, employed an array of individual and collective practices to address the increasing failure of the institutional approach toward the pandemic and reduce the increasing social and economic pressures on them.

From this, we reconstruct the practices of the “pedagogic state” employed by public authorities and the social responses which reframe state-society relations in Vietnam. Thereby, we aim to broaden the discussion of social activism in the context of authoritarian state practices. We employ an “everyday politics approach” and focus on local practices, like domestic chores, recreational, and social interactions, and political activities as means to reconstruct local realities (Kerkvliet 2009; Koh 2006). The chapter analyses state practices of control and everyday citizenship negotiations based on the observed, local everyday practices in Vietnam during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This chapter is based on empirical qualitative data collected during fieldwork conducted in Hanoi and areas of Central Vietnam between February

and August 2020, as well as policy documents, newspaper articles, and social media content. To start, the chapter introduces the concept of the pedagogic state. In the second part, we analyse the relation between the pedagogic state and citizenship empirically. We describe practices of the pedagogic state employed during the pandemic and discuss social activism that emerged from the disillusionment with the failed aspirations of the Vietnamese state. To conclude, we argue that new forms of everyday social activism provide spaces for citizenship to be negotiated in an authoritarian context.

Citizenship in an authoritarian context from state perspective: The concept of a pedagogic state

The Vietnamese context demonstrates that authoritarian regimes attempt to use citizenship discourse to mobilise their constituents for nation-building projects, and to reconstruct state-society relations (Le and Nicolaisen 2021; Nguyen 2020). In this chapter, we follow the conceptualisation of citizenship for the Southeast Asian landscape from a bottom-up, practice-oriented perspective outlined by Berenschot, Nordholt, and Bakker (2018): citizenship is understood as a continuous renegotiation of state-society relations, oscillating between rights and obligations. This perspective includes informal structures of state responsiveness, which help local citizens voice their grievances and force state actors to adjust policies (Koh 2006). In the same vein, in recent years, a larger body of academic literature on citizenship in Southeast Asia emerged. It builds on previous work on different dimensions of citizenship, including the role of social media by adding to the work on insurgent citizenship and cyber urban space (Lim 2019), the role of morality (Söderström 2013), and emerging moral citizenship (Bayly 2020), and the role of citizenship in the context of environmental movements and citizen science as environmental citizenship (Nguyen 2020).

We have contributed to this work by looking at Vietnamese protest practices and formulating the concept of "cooperative citizenship", which conceives state-society relations as a partnership and a shared responsibility to implement the common good (Le and Nicolaisen 2021). In Vietnam, the common good and thus cooperative citizenship are intrinsically embedded in narratives of civilisation, morality, and modernity (Söderström 2013). We define cooperative citizenship as an imagined partnership between state authorities at all government levels and Vietnamese citizens to build a "civilised society". Civilised society can be understood as a political goal based on social engineering (Thu 2021).

This cooperative citizenship has a dual function. First, it is rooted in the citizens' perceived duty to support the Vietnamese government in its aim to modernise the nation and thereby provide legitimacy for the party-state. Second, it works as a correcting mechanism which provides a means to demand accountability and regime responsiveness based on performative politics. Citizens use the mediation space, an informal arena at the local

government level, to voice grievances and negotiate solutions (Koh 2006). This double function of state affirmation and state accountability creates a dynamic relationship between citizen and state.

From a state perspective, cooperative citizenship provides the tools to legitimise large-scale social mobilisation. From society's perspective, it provides legitimation to address grievances, albeit mainly at the local level. In reality, however, the government combines capitalist practices with tools of governmentality in its attempts to transform its population into "civilised citizens" rooted in expectations of cooperation and compliance. The emerging urban middle class frequently adopts the state's aspiration for (urban) civilisation. The power to define and use the Vietnamese national identity provides further means in the quest for citizenship. The government's discursive framework enables practices of exclusion for those who fall outside these narratives and cannot or are unwilling to fulfil expectations from state and social actors. In Vietnam, authorities employ practices of exclusion against those opposing government policies or being perceived as troublemakers. These practices, that operate in a grey zone of social and moral approval outside the rule of law, often target ethnic minorities, rural–urban migrants, homeless people, prostitutes, drug addicts, and to some degree, members of LGBTQIA+ communities. This contradiction between idealised forms of cooperative citizenship and the everyday practices leads to disillusionment in parts of society, thereby opening space for small-scale resistance.

Practices of the pedagogic state during the pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Vietnamese government used educational strategies, which echo the practices of the pedagogic state, to mobilise citizens to adapt their behaviour to combat the spreading of the virus. These strategies included subtle measures, such as using war rhetoric to demand sacrifices and narratives of solidarity to induce compliance with the ideals of cooperative citizenship. Additionally, digital surveillance tools were used to collect data from citizens. Below, the main types of state practices are discussed.

Mobilising support through war rhetoric

During the first year of the pandemic, beginning in February 2020, the state relied mainly on public communication to educate and mobilise citizens. Community support was essential to implement basic health measures, like hand washing and social distancing. Communication was mainly informational, explaining rules and regulations and sharing the latest developments regarding infection numbers. The government was aware that it needed public trust to pursue its "zero-COVID" strategy and saw the pandemic as an opportunity to gain legitimacy (Le and Nicolaisen 2022).

To this end, the government relied heavily on nationalistic tropes. During a speech in February 2020, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc described the fight against COVID-19 as the "Spring General Offensive of 2020" (Murray and Pham 2020). Thereby, he compared the pandemic with the 1968 Tet offensive, a military campaign of coordinated attacks by North Vietnamese military and South Vietnamese socialist guerrilla forces during the Vietnam–US War on South Vietnam. The party-state locates the pandemic response in a long tradition of the "war against imperialism" extending beyond the Vietnam–US War (Hartley, Bales, and Bali 2021, 159; Truong 2020). The use of wartime-style rhetoric supports the mobilisation of all citizens as essential, active participants in the crisis management against COVID-19 (Truong 2020). In Vietnam, war is emotionally embedded in a historical narrative of suffering, sacrifice, community support, and, ultimately, victory. However, whereas war metaphors engage a large portion of the population, they politicise the pandemic and legitimise the top-down approach of the Vietnamese government.

Narratives of protection, care, and solidarity

Following the ideals of cooperative citizenship, framing communication in ideas of nationalism and morality reminds citizens of their obligation to support the state. In turn, the state promises to protect the nation from outside threats, such as virus infections and economic hardship. One example of this narrative of protection were repatriation flights framed as a campaign to save Vietnamese citizens from countries where the pandemic had escalated, including in Europe. The media published photos of Vietnamese boarding planes while donning protective gear, waving national flags, and carrying pictures of national hero and state founder Ho Chi Minh.

The government called for national solidarity (Ivic 2020). For example, an analysis showed that propaganda posters generally tried to depict the diversity of Vietnamese society, including a wide range of occupations and ethnicities. Public propaganda posters also promoted messages of gratitude and depicted the hardship and heroic efforts of frontline workers. These campaigns aimed to increase the motivation, unity, and solidarity in society by sharing the struggles and hard work of people directly involved in battling the pandemic (Le and Nicolaisen 2024; Roberts 2020).

Social pressure and threats of social exclusion

However, this narrative of solidarity also led to social pressure and threats of social exclusion. During the first year of the pandemic, information regarding individual cases was given in detail and included personal data, such as names, passport numbers, and home addresses. The government also released a mobile phone app whereby people could anonymously report fellow citizens not adhering to government regulations. Policing between neighbours,

online mobbing, and public shaming were on the rise (Linh 2020; Luong 2020). Because in public perception compliance with public health measures was linked to the rhetoric of morality, this reduced social cooperation and solidarity with those infected.

For instance, in March 2020, a social media influencer from a wealthy family in Hanoi returned from Europe and subsequently infected numerous people. The government shared her private information and invited the press to a live-stream meeting concerning the woman's health. After her identity became public, an online bullying campaign ensued on social media (Linh 2020). The government leveraged this case to emphasise a moral responsibility towards the community (La et al. 2020, 12–14).

One example of successful mobilisation through social pressure was the case of a British pilot working for Vietnam Airlines. At the time of his infection and hospitalisation in March 2020, there had not been any confirmed COVID-19 related deaths in Vietnam. The pilot's health deteriorated quickly, and authorities feared he would become the first person to die of the disease in Vietnam. Local authorities in HCMC started a nationwide campaign to look for lung donors to save his life. The Vietnamese public met this campaign with extensive support. His recovery was reported nationwide as a celebration of national resilience (Truong 2020).

Surveillance and control

The increasing usage of social media to communicate shows a shift in Vietnamese politics toward embracing digital technology. The Ministry of Health contacted citizens via mobile phones with informational text messages. The first message was sent out on 3 February 2020, less than two weeks after authorities detected the first COVID-19 infection in Vietnam. The message contained instructions on how to behave in case of contact with an infected person and asked people to refrain from travelling abroad, especially to China.

On 8 February 2020, the Ministry of Health launched the Vietnam Health website. On 14 February 2020, citizens were asked to download the new official app "Vietnam Health" (*Sức Khỏe Việt Nam*) to access information regarding the pandemic. Other apps were used to convey information to the public and gather information used for pandemic prevention, such as travel history and health status of individuals. The different apps culminated in the "Electronic Health Book" (*Sổ sức khỏe điện tử*) app. While many people willingly downloaded the app to register for vaccinations, the app transmits the personal medical data to the Ministry of Health (Khuong 2021).

Finally, the government used the loudspeaker system already in place in Vietnamese cities and villages since the Vietnam-US war to communicate with the public (Giang 2020). The multiplicity of communication channels demonstrates the wide reach and influence the Vietnamese government has on its citizens' lives.

Control of public space as pedagogic aspiration

City authorities aimed to curtail access to public space across the country. Municipal authorities erected barriers, used the police and military for surveillance, and ordered the closing of restaurants, shops, and public institutions. Newspapers printed pictures of deserted streets, as well as security forces guarding access points (VietnamPlus 2021).

The Vietnamese government made use of a large-scale social mobilisation, including Fatherland Front organisations, like the youth and women's organisations. Military and police were the main actors implementing the lockdown with increased public presence. Additionally, the state increased its persecution of activists (Linh and Hai 2022). With increasing case numbers, local administrations implemented stricter lockdowns in neighbourhoods and factories, forcing people to take shelter-in-place as authorities suspended travel. In some cases, such as Da Nang in 2020 and HCMC in 2021, whole cities were under lockdown restrictions. During lockdowns, the police and the military set up checkpoints along roads where people had to provide identification, a health declaration, and permission to travel, for example, to get to their workplace. Besides limiting access to certain areas for people without documents, such as informal migrant workers, these checkpoints negatively affected traffic (Minh 2021). Restrictions on movement extended to grocery shopping. During a two-week lockdown in July 2021, local authorities in Hanoi provided residents with grocery vouchers. However, these were only valid on certain days of the week to ensure social distancing (France24 2021a). Restrictions extended to public transport, including motorbike taxis, and, when public buses were running, urban residents refrained from using them out of fear of getting infected.

Disillusionment and everyday resistance

Vietnam's shift towards more repressive pandemic measures constitutes a move away from the utopian ideal of cooperative citizenship. The lockdowns, closed borders, and global economic developments increased socio-economic pressure on urban communities, particularly in HCMC, when cases surged in the summer of 2021. The situation was particularly difficult for low-income families, the informal sector, and migrant workers, as authorities banned them from using public spaces causing them to lose income. (Dang and Do 2022.)

The lockdown in HCMC in July 2021 came with a more disciplinarian communication style. By then, the national and local authorities had changed their communication strategy to a more authoritarian, top-down approach (SGGP 2021). Authorities in HCMC communicated new regulations in a haphazard manner, which led to an increase in rumours and speculation. There was no clear information on travel, work, and how to access food and other daily necessities (Thi 2021a). Residents and newspapers

distributed photos of traffic jams, panic buying, and long lines in front of supermarkets, which contributed to increasing public frustration (Mai et al. 2021).

As infection numbers increased in May 2021, the government launched a national donation campaign to procure vaccines internationally. People met the call for solidarity with reluctance. There was a loss of trust as people feared that the money donated would be used for other purposes (France24 2021b).

The willingness to be vaccinated, however, was high (Khuc et al. 2021) until news about fatal complications with the AstraZeneca vaccine unsettled the public. Furthermore, a share of the population expressed distrust toward the Chinese Sinopharm vaccine (Le 2021). Reports of people using their connections to circumvent formal registration and distribution channels led to public outrage on social media (RFA 2021).

The government addressed these concerns by setting up an online registration platform, implementing a vaccine passport, and formulating priority lists for vaccination. It declared that it would only use Sinopharm on Chinese nationals and those travelling to China (Le 2021). Simultaneously, the state increased pressure on the local level to ensure compliance. For example, local residents in Hoang Liet Ward, Hanoi, had to sign legal statements accepting responsibility for any future transmission if they refused to be vaccinated (Tuoi Tre News 2021a).

These measures did not prevent state officials and entrepreneurs from benefiting financially from the pandemic. In September 2021, police arrested a doctor and two officials in HCMC and Binh Duong province for taking bribes in exchange for vaccination shots (Quoc, Tuan, and Khanh 2021). The year 2022 saw two more high-profile corruption scandals. First, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were suspected and subsequently investigated of colluding with travel agencies to extort citizens trying to return to Vietnam via repatriation flights. Second, the Ministry of Health and other high-level ministries and institutions were publicly accused of price gouging COVID-19 test kits (Fischler 2022).

To summarise, the state emphasised its pedagogic aspirations by asserting itself in a more violent fashion. Citizens were left unsure what support systems were available, which regulations the police enforced, and where to gather information while simultaneously being expected to self-monitor their behaviour. The arbitrary environment increased anxiety and reduced trust in government institutions after the initial gains in public trust during the first year of the pandemic due to the transparent communication (Vu 2021). The breakdown of this transparency, combined with the harsh and chaotic response to the Delta outbreak, led to disillusionment with the state's capacity to deal with crises.

Social response and everyday resistance

In general, compliance with state regulations in Vietnam was high, with people agreeing to have their temperature checked at store entrances and not complaining publicly about government measures. However, accounts of rule-breaking can be found as early as spring 2020 including a disregard toward mask-wearing, as observed in public in Hanoi in early 2020, and a disengagement from public messaging on COVID-19 regulations (Roberts 2020). During fieldwork in 2020, public playgrounds were frequented even after authorities had implemented social distancing rules. Coffee shop owners continued to set up tables on the pavement even though they were only supposed to operate with a limited number of guests. Even though entertainment establishments, such as karaoke bars, were closed, media reports suggested a recurrent breaking of this rule (Tuoi Tre News 2021b).

There were instances of people breaking quarantine, which led to public outrage, particularly when it concerned Chinese workers, foreigners, and travellers (Buckley 2020). When authorities detected infections in factories, contingency plans aimed to isolate the whole workforce in place, using the factory as a quarantine facility with poor living conditions and no pay. These measures led to instances of workers trying to flee their workplaces. For instance, in 2021, authorities caught seven fishermen in Loc Ha District fleeing their locked-down commune by boat and fined them around 1,500 USD (Tuoi Tre News 2021c). When the city of Da Nang was under lockdown in July 2020, Vietnamese tourists, travellers, and local residents tried to flee the province by private cars.

During the lockdown in HCMC in July 2021, citizens employed creative attempts to circumvent the stay-at-home order. For example, people used jackets with official logos of taxi companies or concealed non-essential products to avoid police scrutiny. Hundreds of migrant workers tried to leave the city after the lockdown went into effect (Reuters 2021). As the lockdown ended in September 2021 and the borders were opened, some of these workers were reluctant to return, creating a lack of cheap labour in the industrial centres in Southern Vietnam (Onishi 2022).

Tensions between local authorities and residents stayed high after the lockdown ended. In the four days after the loosening of COVID-19 restrictions in HCMC on 1 October 2021, authorities in HCMC reported 588 violations, which led to fines of around 52,000 USD in total (Tuoi Tre News 2021d). These violations included disregard of social distancing, mask-wearing, vaccination, and quarantine obligation.

As local authorities closed off public space, residents used cyberspace to express concerns, produce art, trade goods, offer help, share opinions, and, in some cases, fake news. Rumours concerned the military's involvement in enforcing lockdown measures, food scarcity, and problems with vaccines. Furthermore, social media platforms were an important means to offset economic challenges. Social media provided informal and low-cost trading

spaces, which was important for households and small businesses facing reduced income. At least in 2020, illegal home visits, to provide services, such as hair cutting and nail polishing, offered alternative income. For street food vendors, informal delivery services became more important to maintain business activities, where frequent buyers could order via phone. Others use their mobility, on foot or with bicycles, to dodge authorities to trade in local neighbourhoods. This strategy required knowledge about frequent raids, time, and location (Thai, Dinh, and Nguyen 2021).

Already in 2020, localised forms of resistance emerged. Labour activism was particularly prevalent in addressing grievances in factories. While the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL) supported the government in finding solutions to improve the situation of workers, at the local level, workers' actions addressed perceived government failures more directly (Buckley 2020).[1] Strikes at the Praegear Vietnam factory and Pinetree garment factory in February and March 2020, respectively, enforced better implementation of COVID-19 prevention measures, like the provision of free masks, temperature checks, and disinfectants by the companies.

Strikes also aimed to prevent companies from passing the economic costs of COVID-19 unmitigated onto their workers. As the downturn of the economy due to lockdowns negatively affected companies, they often used this as a pretence to reduce wages and bonuses, not pay their workers or furlough them. Workers responded with self-organised strike actions. For example, in May 2020, almost a thousand workers at the Seething shoe factory refused working because the company refused to pay overtime and social insurance fees (Buckley 2020). In January 2022, at least 14,000 workers at a factory owned by Pou Chen went on strike, blocking local traffic, after the company announced that it would cut New Year bonuses (Hioe 2022). For January and February 2022, the media reported 28 labour strikes (Hong 2022).

Citizens' initiatives, like Rice ATMs,[2] a 24/7 automatic rice dispenser machine, and online fund-raising campaigns, were established in Vietnamese cities by grassroots networks to address the socio-economic difficulties. The same businessman who installed Rice ATMs in 2020 in HCMC started the "Oxy-ATM initiative", where COVID-19 patients treated at home could call a hotline and have oxygen tanks delivered to them for free (Thi 2021b). Other initiatives, like the project "zero dong apartment" (Lenh 2021), provided free housing for disadvantaged people in Hanoi during the lockdown in August 2021.

Beyond community initiatives, various informal social activities tried to alleviate the challenges posed by lockdowns, using regulative loopholes. Some people would use permitted travel to disguise forbidden activities, for example, hiding non-essential goods among daily necessities. In other instances, residents posed as Grab Drivers, a Southeast Asian ride-hailing service, wearing borrowed Grab jackets, to circumvent lockdown restrictions.

In addition, private citizens and non-profit organisations shared calls for donations on social media to support poor communities, families, and

workers. These organisations included Blue Dragon, a Hanoi-based non-profit that rescues Vietnamese women and children from slavery and human trafficking, and Catalyst Foundation, which works with ethnic minorities (Pham, Doan, and Sidel 2022). The NGO Saigon Children in HCMC, that normally provides vocational education to disadvantaged children, collected money to finance "COVID backpacks" with everyday content for low-income families.[3] Financial support also came from the large diaspora community. For example, two New York-based Vietnamese started Đùm Bọc, a charity raising funds to benefit non-profits in Vietnam (Tatarski 2021).

Pedagogic state, fragmented society, and the localisation of social activism

The concept of the "pedagogic state" offers a governance method to the Vietnamese party-state to pursue two aims: to modernise Vietnamese society, and to maintain power. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the state had to carefully manoeuvre between practices of social mobilisation (communication, social pressure, framing) and practices of control (surveillance, punishment, restriction) for the common good and public health. This development follows a worldwide phenomenon of governments taking advantage of the pandemic to increase authoritarian tendencies (Modebadze 2022).

Vietnam's pandemic response had two distinct phases. In its first phase, from early 2020 until spring 2021, the government successfully combined transparent communication, calls for public cooperation, with closed borders and lockdowns to limit infections. The perceived performance of the government increased public trust, compliance, and legitimacy. In the second phase following the Delta outbreak in the spring of 2021, the government response became more repressive. Government institutions slowly backslid to a more aggressive, heavy-handed approach to enforce the rule of the party-state. In this phase, cases of corruption, including high-level government actors, became public knowledge. Consequently, public disillusionment increased as trust in government institutions plummeted. This breakdown of government communication combined with calls for cooperation points toward an increased level of institutional and financial stress which existing government capacity could no longer address. Under duress, the government falls back on tried and proven measures to maintain stability.

The Vietnamese state initially avoided confrontational measures, opting for soft pressure to implement behavioural change. This approach nevertheless constituted a form of violence because it limited mobility and access for certain societal groups, in particular migrant workers, to public spaces. People were pushed back into the private sphere, which increased social inequalities and limited citizenship rights. Lockdowns limited access to green space, education, and the labour market. The pandemic, therefore, increased the relevance of an online public space. Pandemic realities forced Vietnamese citizens to circumvent official policies to gain access to health infrastructure,

goods, information, and income. The need for circumvention exacerbates social fragmentation and the localisation of grievances. We argue that the Vietnamese state is aware of these processes and promotes this fragmentation of society by pedagogic means to maintain control.

At the societal level, this leads to localised, everyday forms of resistance (Kerkvliet 2009), that redefine the concept of "social activism" in Vietnam which is state-sanctioned, localised, or informal (Le and Nicolaisen 2021). During the pandemic, urban residents used public space, including virtual space, for three purposes: to exchange information, to voice dissent, and finally, to express solidarity. The emerging networks and practices produced mobilisation structures outside of the state-sanctioned mass organisations. Forms of everyday resistance in the framework of pandemic policies in Vietnam include the refusal to cooperate with state efforts (disengagement), the subversion of state domination (opposition), and the formation of informal support and information networks (cooperation). All three dimensions are partially linked and can be in effect simultaneously.

All three dimensions include activities to address individual or collective grievances and reduce the pressure from pandemic restrictions. However as most of these activities were isolated, localised, and used by individuals, there was little collective mobilisation. The only two exceptions are labour activism, which organised larger groups of workers at single factories for localised goals, and the cases of fundraising, which mobilised a global community. However, in both cases, the scope was small and rooted in personal networks. Consequently, the pandemic showed the relevance of these personal networks as means to voice grievances, demand accountability and as a security tactic where the state fails, as seen in the case of the migrant workers moving back to their families in the periphery where better support was available.

Many initiatives faced government scrutiny, a lack of professionalism, and bureaucratic challenges. The party-state followed an ambiguous approach where it encouraged these initiatives while simultaneously maintaining its restrictive policies. The regulative control forced registered non-profit organisations to cooperate with mass organisations and restricted the work of voluntary, independent, and small initiatives (Pham, Doan, and Sidel 2022). In the wake of the 13th National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in January 2021, the Vietnamese government implemented a more repressive policy. Consequently, in the shadow of the pandemic, they arrested and convicted numerous social activists (Linh and Hai 2022).

While the perceived failure of the cooperative citizenship approach and the lack of state capacity to address the pandemic in the second half of 2021 led to more small-scale resistance, the overarching pedagogic state approach still maintained the government's hold on power. Consequently, existing social activism in Vietnam primarily addresses the everyday grievances of citizens instead of aiming for long-term solutions; a similar pattern exists in China (see also, Teets 2014 on consultative authoritarianism). Finding direct and

immediate solutions to alleviate the perceived failure of the authorities has precedent over questions of reform. Consequently, localisation, and fragmentation are the biggest obstacles in allowing for broader forms of social activism. In the context of Vietnam, we have to understand social activism as a means of everyday resistance aimed toward improving individual living conditions. These activities look for loopholes to facilitate everyday life and foster community inside the constraints of the existing regulations.

Utopian aspirations of cooperative citizenship

Low state capacity to solve large-scale problems like the Delta outbreak in 2021 and a lack of responsiveness to local needs leads to the emergence of new and the expansion of existing forms of social engagement outside of the state framework. Residents of disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods look for resources outside of state institutions. This practice brings forth forms of resource-sharing and community networks that became increasingly important during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the emerging practices of social activism show, the socialist party-state no longer serves as the only focal point of citizenship negotiations. Instead, alternative frameworks, actors, and narratives can emerge. These emerging forms of social activism are, firstly, rooted in the locality, the neighbourhood, and the community. They use social responsibility as an incentive to engage with one another. Secondly, this activism addresses perceived government failure to provide necessary infrastructure and resources. It constitutes foremost a coping mechanism, which contains potential for further cooperation and engagement. Thirdly, new forms of social activism are not necessarily a direct critique of the political status quo. They at times do not even engage the state. Rather, they focus on mundane everyday challenges. Finally, social media allows these small-scale forms of activism to be promoted and shared on an ever-larger scale, carrying a potential for more prominent forms of protest and reform.

In the framework of citizenship negotiations in Vietnam, as citizens start to establish informal social networks and support structures, the government is losing control of the moral narrative of solidarity and care. Whereas the moral narrative, embedded in "cooperative citizenship" policies, was previously used by the government to invoke public support, questions of morality are now addressed in local communities. Thereby, citizenship discussions are reframed by recentring the community.

This reframing enables small-scale emancipation for citizens which breeds everyday resistance against an overbearing state and keeps the utopian aspirations of cooperative citizenship in a post-pandemic Vietnam alive. This utopia understands the existing ideal of "cooperative citizenship" not as an empty phrase used to sugarcoat repressive governance practices but a genuine cooperation between members of local communities and local state actors to improve the urban everyday life of people in Vietnam.

Notes

1 As Buckley (2020) demonstrates, localised forms of labour activism have been integrated into the policy process in Vietnam since the 1990s. Besides the VGCL, Vietnam's workers' union, which lobbies to improve working conditions at the government level, self-organised labour fights, like wildcat strikes, deal with local issues of wages and working conditions. Local authorities often support the resolution of these local labour conflicts.

2 Rice ATMs were first installed by a local entrepreneur in HCMC in 2020 and later in Da Nang and Hanoi. The 24/7 automatic dispensing machine allowed people out of work due to the nationwide lockdown to collect 1.5 kg bags of free rice.

3 For more information on the NGO Saigon Children, see www.saigonchildren.com/news/1117-backpacks-delivered-to-families-in-ho-chi-minh-city-in-july.

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13 Hindu nationalism or collaborative social justice?

The role of queer communities in furthering democracy in India

Banhishikha Ghosh

Introduction

Since the early 2000s, there has been a gradual but steady rise in the engagement, visibility, and activism of queer communities in India. Subsequently, after a host of judicial and legislative developments, queer communities were formally recognised but, despite such recognition, realising citizenship rights has seemed a long drawn out process for them (Ghosh 2022a).

Historically, queer communities of South Asia have used a diverse set of repertoires to legitimise themselves and their identities socially (using local folk tales, as well as mythological and literary narratives). Since the summer of 2014, when the present National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government was formed, certain sections of queer communities have steadily embraced the ideology of the ruling political parties to gain acceptance as citizen-subjects.[1] But post-promulgation of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, in India, one can witness the rise of other novel forms of repertoires: during COVID-19, many provided voluntary service and aid to the homeless, migrants, and others in need (Ghosh 2021); they came out in support of persecuted religious minorities by protesting the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the introduction of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) in 2020; they have passed a charter of demands for a political participatory advocacy plan for LBGTQIA+; and a significant proportion of the gender non-conforming communities (hereafter GNCs) came out in support of, and rallied for, the ongoing farmers' movement in India, demanding the removal of three contested farm laws being pushed forward by the current Indian government.

The rise in multiple social movements and protests across the country for the rights of queer, Dalit, tribal, and religious minorities, farmers, and other groups demonstrates that public welfare policies that guarantee access to safe and secure livelihoods, education, food, and health care are deficient (Keane 2021). Consequently, for many marginalised groups, participating in and being part of majoritarian Hindu nationalism became a feasible modality of claiming citizenship and getting access to resources, thereby demonstrating

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the ambivalences and contradictions in the promotion and enactment of LGBTQIA+ rights and belonging in increasingly authoritarian contexts, an issue which will be dealt with in detail in this chapter. In this complex political situation, certain sections of the queer community conformed to the narrative of nationalism (Bhattacharya 2019), leading to the emergence of "homohindunationalism" (Upadhyay 2018).

Mobilisation of community voices

When the 17th Rainbow Pride Walk in the city of Kolkata was held on 18 December 2022, after a gap of two years of pandemic break, thousands of GNC members showed their support by participating in it. India's oldest Pride walk, and one of the oldest in Asia, it started in 1998, and this year attracted participants not only from different states in India, but also from neighbouring South Asian countries like Bangladesh (Economic Times 2022). Excited about participating in the parade after a gap of three years, I came across innumerable people, many with inspiring journeys in their own right, who had painstakingly participated in activism in person, in the form of protests, rallies, strikes, and marches, as well as through social media. Previously, during the Pride March at Delhi University on 1 June 2022, activists put out a call stressing that queer rights are human rights. What is interesting, in this context, is that the march organised by the Students Federation of India (SFI) asked all marginalised communities, and not just those that are gender non-conforming, to join hands to fight for their rights. The Pride Parades, both in Kolkata and Delhi, saw the participation of not just GNC members and activists, but other individuals marginalised along the lines of religion, caste, ethnicity, and the like.

Abhishek,[2] a cis-gendered student at Ambedkar University from one of the tribal communities in India,[3] who took part in the parade in Delhi, stated on 8 January 2023:

> Pride Marches signify defiance and disobedience. In the process of raising voices for disenfranchised groups, we realise how such lines of oppression are interconnected. This realisation has led us to stress the need for moving beyond identity-based politics. … [and] led us to connect multiple issues. When we identify only as Dalits, Muslims, tribal, or queers, we often tend to forget how normative structures impinge on marginalised communities in seemingly different ways, creating a façade and making us believe that each of these communities has different and divergent issues. The power instead is in the joint struggle.

This narrative highlights a significant trend in the nature of social movements in contemporary India: a strong shift towards collaborative social justice (Ghosh 2020). This can be seen not only within the queer movement, but is also visible in other kinds of movements which have taken place in India for

which GNC members have shown their utmost support. These include farmers' movements and anti-CAA and NRC protests, with the two latter both operating during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is significant to note that the thrust for collaborative social justice comes at a point in time when India has earned its reputation as the world's largest failing democracy (Keane 2021); indeed, in some recent reports, India is ranked poorly for its failure to protect the democratic setup,[4] reports which also refer to a new growth trend in authoritarianism and nationalism at a global scale.

While the queer movement in India has been in an ongoing process of struggle for rights and recognition, the country has also witnessed several other social movements. In 2019–2020, protests were held against the Citizen Amendment Bill after the Citizenship Amendment Act was passed in India in December 2019. The protesting activists argued that the Act would render stateless many Muslim religious minorities, who had sought shelter in India as refugees from various parts of South Asia. In 2020–2021, large sectors of farm unions and leaders throughout the country protested against the farm laws which they found to be "anti-farmers". In 2020, tribal communities in Chhattisgarh protested against the privatisation of an iron and steel plant (Sharma and Borguhain 2020). The protests took place because the government had no prior consent from the tribal community before launching the privatisation move, despite knowing that it would have massive bearings on the livelihoods of the community.

Saffronisation of queer politics

Several scholars and queer activists have noted that certain sections of GNCs in the last decade have been swaying towards conforming to ideas of Hindu majoritarianism (Goel 2020; Tellis 2017a; Upadhyay 2018). This trend can be elucidated by demonstrating that many GNC individuals join the Kinnar Akhara (*akharas* are known as places of Hindu practice) to reaffirm a Hindu queer identity. The advent of Kinnar Akhara, which claims to offer inclusive faith-based religious convents for GNC individuals (e.g., *kinnars, hijras*) practising Hinduism, was a major development which affected the course of the queer movement in India.[5]

Coming out in support of a Hindu queer identity is problematic, because, as Goel (2020) states, it reinforces and privileges majoritarian ideals. The GNCs have inhabited a strongly marginalised liminal space when it comes to religious and ritual practices (Ghosh 2020; Goel 2020), and many of the *hijra* and *kinnar* community, therefore, have gone to the extent of employing religious myths to validate their liminal presence and existence in South Asian societies (Loh 2014). However, members of the Kinnar Akhara try to redefine their existence and carve out a legitimate space for themselves within mainstream Hindu society.

Salian (2019) and Bevilacqua (2022) argue that the establishment of Kinnar Akhara marks the entry of queer figures into spaces traditionally

thought to be reserved for male Hindu priests; hence, it was interpreted by many as a symbol of inclusion within the Hindu social order (Borkataky-Varma 2021; Das 2019; Srivastava 2019). To a certain extent, this argument is valid. As Borkataky-Varma (2021) states, until the advent of Kinnar Akhara, religious orders, or *akharas*, were completely dominated by men. In 2019, the step of recognising Kinnar Akhara by the religious leaders of Kumbh Mela, a major Hindu pilgrimage and festival held on the banks of the River Ganges, was significant, as never before in the history of the Hindu religion have non-male members been assigned this kind of status. Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a well-known Indian transgender rights activist who founded Kinnar Akhara, believes that the recognition of Kinnar Akhara has increased their social acceptance. As Tripathi says:

> Since the spiritual texts mention us, it gave us strength to make a place in the spiritual world. You may not speak about us but we are there in the spiritual texts. The idea is to reclaim the position of the community in the Vedic Sanatana Dharma.
>
> (Quoted in Haridas 2022)[6]

Hence, according to Tripathi, Kinnar Akhara helps to foster not only religious recognition for GNCs but, at the same time, brings the issues of queer individuals into the public realm, thereby aiding in the process of advocating and fostering their rights. Religious recognition, accordingly, will lead to positive developments in the form of political, social, bureaucratic, and legal recognition. Given that GNCs suffer from a severe lack of resources and have barely any access to inclusive ritual spaces, one can understand why Tripathi, who was born into a priestly, upper-caste Brahmin family and is one of the most respected and recognised faces of transgender activism in the country, would employ repertoires such as admission to religious sects to gain societal acceptance. However, the employment of such a ritualised repertoire to gain visibility and recognition is not just extremely problematic but can also cause colossal damage to the spirit of the queer movement in India. In the following, let me analyse some reasons for this.

Obliterating pre-existing queer syncretic traditions

It has been widely documented that by drawing from different South Asian religions, queer communities have produced and reproduced syncretic religious practices in the long term (Nanda 1990; Reddy 2005). Reddy defined the *hijra* community in India as one that retains a sense of solidarity with Islam despite being located in a nation with a Hindu-dominated population in the numerical sense. Referring to the *hijras* of Bangladesh, Hossain (2012, 449) has demonstrated how "categorical oppositions of Hindu versus Muslim are creatively collapsed in the enactment of *hijra* religiosity in terms of both faith and praxis". The nature of religious syncretism displayed by

GNCs in India forbids them to create borders between members of the community based on religious affiliation. Adopting a common and often mixed religious practice (Bittu 2020), they came up with chosen names and opted for a plethora of ritual and religious traditions.

Previously in my research with a *hijra* community, I have elucidated how they act as protectors of a religious Sufi shrine (a tomb built at the grave of a religious figure in Sufism) (Ghosh 2021). Syncretism among them is not a recent phenomenon. During colonial rule, when British government officials decided to list the cultural practices of the *hijras* in order to penalise them under the Criminal Tribes Act 1871 (Ghosh 2022b), they found that they were engaged in an eclectic mix of Hindu and Muslim religious practices.

Given their history of syncretic religious practices, most persons with GNC identities believe that there is no inconsistency in articulating and coalescing worship of the deities, rituals, customs, and ways of life of different religious traditions. Neha, a self-identifying *hijra* individual, who participated in the Delhi Pride March 2022, stated:

> The *hijra* community has always strived to uphold a syncretic tradition, and ascribing a Hindu identity would not only be wrong but also factually incorrect. In the courts of Mughal emperors, more than any Hindu kings, we received the utmost respect and power.[7] However, we were not made a part of the staunch Hindu traditional order. Seeking recourse to limited and sporadic Hindu scriptural acceptance, therefore, would not lead to our socio-cultural and economic development. Rather, it would divide us, our voices, along very unproductive lines, weakening the mission to empower gender non-conforming individuals and secure their rights.

The role played by GNC individuals in challenging communalist religious exclusivism has also been elaborated in fictional novels (Carbajal 2022). Hence, Neha and several of her *hijra* friends were of the opinion that assigning a Hindu identity to "nationalise religion" would harm the queer movement in the country.

Liminal status of GNCs within the Hindu social order

It is to be noted that while Kinnar Akhara aims to be a part of the traditional Hindu social order, extensive research and documentation reveal that it is not given recognition within the traditional orthodox Hindu hierarchy. Kunihiro (2022) mentions that even in temples of Gujarat where Bahuchara Mata, the goddess of *hijras* and *kinnars* is worshipped, the latter cannot function as priests and participate in the process of worship of their own goddess. While local people respect them, priests of the temple do not recognise their ritual powers. Hence, it is indeed true that *kinnar* and *hijra* communities have legitimised their social positions by referencing Sanskrit

epics from ancient India like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, as well as through local myths connected to various Hindu deities. Yet the lines between religious recognition and obliviousness are liminal and always shifting. Very recently, Tripathi and other leaders of Kinnar Akhara came up with the proposal to perform Hindu rituals for both known and unknown departed souls from their community. This process of offering rituals, including Pind Daan (conducted after the cremation of an individual) and Arpan Tarpan (offering sacrifice), is not being held in any spot meant for conducting such rituals; rather, they are being performed only in two particular places. As Tripathi mentions (Times of India 2022), "Pishach Mochan Kund and Badri Kund are the only two places in Sanatan Dharma where bodies of unknown souls can be cremated. In eunuch society,[8] Sanatani eunuchs are only burnt, they are not cremated. Kinnar Akhara has decided that every two years, mass Pind Daan will be done for the eunuch souls."

This ritual, therefore, will not be performed across any space based on the choice of the Kinnar Akhara; rather, it will be performed in a space meant for unknown souls. It is also intriguing to recount the process whereby the Kinnar Akhara received recognition from the Juna Akhara, the most significant of the male-led Akhara monasteries, in 2020, during the Kumbh Mela pilgrimage and festival. After following all the religious rites on entering the complex of Kumbh Mela on horses and chariots, the *kinnars* were cheered by huge masses of people. Subsequently, hundreds of people visited their camp to seek them out and receive their blessing (Schroder 2019). It is only on seeing this enormous support that Juna Akhara provided them with formal recognition and included them in their list of legitimate orders. The other religious organisations also started to regard the Kinnar Akhara and its leaders with respect after these pivotal occurrences, which altered their mindsets.

Scholars like Bevilacqua (2022) contend that Kinnar Akhara culture aims to empower and enhance the representation and voices of GNCs using a form of selective Sanskritisation.[9] In this process of emulation, *kinnars* are granted access to religious spaces which they could never access before, as well as several social and economic advantages to which they had prior limited access. While Bevilacqua (2022) argues that the initiation of the culture of Kinnar Akhara challenges and destabilises the Hindu patriarchal world of *akharas* and takes forward the mission of gender equality, this repertoire of seeking empowerment and social justice needs to be critically problematised.

In 2018, when Tripathi actively came out in support of the right-wing nationalist ideology advanced by the NDA government, several GNCs condemned her stand in a statement which reads as follows:

> Laxmi Narayan Tripathi, a dominant-caste Brahmin trans woman, has been appealing to *hindutva* [Hindu-ness] ideology and justifying the existence of the caste system in India … [Her] position idealises a mythical past of the Sanatan Dharam [Hinduism] and supports the

> right-wing politics of communal hatred in the guise of 'we were always accepted". Such a stance is likely to deepen existing hierarchies of transpersons in dangerous ways, especially alienating minority-religious and atheist gender expressions and identities.
>
> (News Minute 2018)

In 2019, queer student activists of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) queer collective issued a similar statement arguing that Tripathi and the Akhara ideology made them feel unsafe and threatened (Deeksha 2019). Citing her thinly veiled upper-caste ideology, as well as her uncritical adoption of the scriptures of Hinduism, which she argues to be progressive and inclusive, Tripathi takes an ultra-conservative and exclusionary vision, the queer students noted.

I contend that Kinnar Akhara forwards a skewed vision of social justice and gender equality. This vision is not inclusive, as documentary and textual evidence suggests that GNCs are not wholeheartedly made a part of either Hindu society or the Hindu social order. Bevilacqua (2022) states that in Manusmriti, a prominent Hindu religious text, *kinnar*s (literally "what man") are not considered humans but, rather, are presented as wild animals. Very recently, priests in a temple of Kerala denied an individual identifying as transgender the right to marry their partner within the temple premises (Hindustan Times 2022). Previously, four GNC persons approached the Kerala High Court after they were denied entry to a very prominent temple in South India. One of them, Ananya, described their experience:

> First, they said we will not be allowed to visit the temple in the lady's dress, and they asked us to change to a man's attire. Initially, we refused and after some time, we decided we will change, but the police changed their minds and asked us to return.
>
> (Outlook India 2018)

Collaborative social action by GNCs

In the discourse of citizenship, many GNC individuals conform with right-wing ideology to fit the image of a good transgender citizen. The meaning of a "good citizen" is often framed by state actors (Pykett, Saward, and Schaefer 2010) to manage a population (Bhandar 2010), invoking Foucault's (1991) notion of governmentality. Such discourses very often frame particular subjects as deficient, as undesirables who must change their norms, values, and behaviour in order to meet the criteria of good citizenship (de Koning, Jaffe, and Koster 2015). By emphasising the distinctions between good and bad citizens, "differentiated" (Holston 2008) or "variegated" citizenship (Inda 2005) is produced. Such constructions reflect inequality and offer little scope for agency or claim-making by people around the world. Hansen (2015), therefore, argues that citizenship agendas are not only forms

of control, they also provide GNC people with important horizons of aspiration and a range of actions to deal with exclusion and inequality. To push the concept of citizenship beyond its institutional-legal framework (Gordon and Stack 2007), this last section demonstrates how collaborative social justice is furthered by many non-state GNC actors. The role of queer collectives in speaking up for other marginalised communities is a very recent phenomenon which I have discussed in a previous paper (Ghosh 2021).

In recent Pride Parades between 2022 and 2023, many GNC activists called for a collaborative and interwoven struggle for justice for queer people, Dalit, and Adivasi people.[10] I interacted with several GNC individuals in the Pride Parades of Kolkata (2022) and Delhi (2023). For most of them, the ongoing saffronisation of the queer movement is a major concern which had prompted them to sound the clarion call for collaborative social justice in order to put an end to an exclusive and elite queer perspective on Hindu nationalism. First, this initiative directly correlates with those developments which make it imperative to generate a collective and shared responsibility and address the multiple and intersecting lines of violence and oppression which plague disenfranchised groups today. This could be seen in Aseem's narrative, which strongly urged me to rethink how the larger social and political milieu influences the nature of social movements, and the repertoires that social activists employ within these movements. As Aseem, a participant in the Pride March in Kolkata 2022, stated:

> A queer movement in the contemporary world can only be successful if queer individuals themselves encourage inclusive social justice, aimed at marginalised communities based on diverse lines. It is important for activists to realise that speaking about *hijras* and *kotis* [11] but omitting the issues of so-called lower caste and tribal communities will not lead to any real progress. Many within the community are from lower caste and Adivasi backgrounds. Furthering a queer voice without realising the intersectional lines of marginalisation will only divide queer activist voices and weaken our goal to critically reflect on queer subject positions and the precarity of marginalised queer individuals.

Second, collaborative social justice strengthens the queer movement. Shalu, a participant in the Delhi Pride March in 2023, argued that despite the seeming progressiveness which one may witness today in the form of queer assertions, activism, and judicial, legislative, and media support, queer persons are still at a very nascent and budding stage of queer empowerment. Hence, it is important to mould the queer movement in an inclusive and non-elitist spirit. As Shalu stated:

> Today we still are at a very nascent stage of the queer movement. And while it seems like we have overcome a lot of challenges [to move] from being invisible to being communities who are assertive and speak up for

> themselves, yet this is just the beginning, and the kind of movement we fashion today will determine if queer communit[ies] from numerous social backgrounds will have opportunities to self-articulate themselves in the future; or will the liberation come at the cost of compromising with elitist and conservative visions of liberation? Hence, while there are some legal developments like the Transgender Act by the state, a lot of our perceived progressiveness is performative. While laws protecting queer communit[ies] are present today, and discussions on social media might indicate a shift in our mindset, most gender non-conforming people, particularly in the rural countryside, have to grapple with the complex realities of combatting multiple kinds of violence on their own. Gender non-conforming communities face state-sponsored violence; in certain cases, they face violence for being Dalit, Adivasi, or Muslim or for not conforming to perceived notions of a "good transgender person". So, collaborative social justice is a prerequisite of a successful queer movement today.

Hence, while the Transgender Act has been passed, and Section 377 has been repealed, it is still a far cry from any change in the state and public perception of GNC individuals.[12] Shalu's narrative resonates with writer and queer activist Revathi's statement explicating how repealing Section 377 benefits elite queer sections of society more than other non-elite sections. She stated: "Murders, rapes, thefts, false charges, shootouts and lots of other problems will not allow us to celebrate the [Section] 377 [strike down] tomorrow" (Bhatt 2022, n.p.).

Hence, collaborative social action is a prerequisite for any queer struggle which is to be undertaken in contemporary times or in the future, according to many young queer activists with whom I interacted. Instances of collaborative action are not just reflected in the spirit but in the recent activities of many queer organisations as well. For instance, when the protest against Section 377 gripped the country in cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Bangalore, several queer persons attending these protest marches also raised slogans like *halla bol* (raise your voice) and *azadi* (freedom) for all marginalised people. Incidentally, these slogans are also commonly used in the rallies organised by left-wing organisations.

While it is true that several queer and trans individuals were also denied citizenship through the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019, queer and trans communities and organisations voiced their support not only for queer individuals but also for religious minorities who were affected in large numbers across the country. The Act discriminated between people based on religious and national identity, providing asylum only to people from certain religious and national backgrounds while denying others the same rights. It has been contended that the act is transphobic, homophobic, Islamophobic, casteist, and sexist (Narsee 2020), a process that deprives common people and asylum seekers who cannot present valid and classified documents of their

citizenship rights. Queer groups questioned the selective highlighting of social and political issues in the queer community, particularly by elite upper-caste and upper-class GNC individuals, and released the strong statement: "What is Pride if not political?" (Desai 2020, n.p.). Many protesters in Mumbai's Pride Parade raised demands to the state to release Sharjeel Imam, an activist who was detained for speaking up for the rights of religious minorities (OpIndia 2020). Pride, in this sense, becomes "an expression, a voice, a celebration, and a platform to ask for equal rights of these individuals" (Desai 2020, n.p.). Desai (2020, n.p.) quoted a student activist and a participant in the Pride Parade in Mumbai, who said, "There has been very limited representation of the issues that affect trans people or religious minorities within Pride. We have to understand that Pride cannot look at simply LGBTQIA+… issues alone; we have to look at how those issues intersect with trans rights, or the rights of other minorities."

Another participant stated, "I can't understand how anybody can claim to keep politics away from Pride; we are still not equal here, so it has to be political" (Desai 2020, n.p.). This demonstrates that unlike the viewpoints of many queer theorists (Tellis 2012, 2017a, 2017b; Kumar 2022) who feared that the queer movement would lose its radical potential, many sections of the GNC are making the queer issue political. In various protests across the country, queer people have protested in solidarity with and alongside landless labourers and housewives against the divisive agenda of the government (Press Trust of India 2020). This sense of radical collaborative social justice is reiterated again and again by queer people in different social movements that may not seem directly related to queer politics. In an open letter on being queer and the nature of queer dissent, Kaushiki Ishwar (2022, n.p.) stated:

> Queer movements are about more than just educating and reaching out to possible allies – they're also about standing up to those who are clear foes … radicalism is the only way queer movements have ever advanced …
>
> Rather than attempting to assimilate and de-radicalise [the queer movement], we must embrace it. Queerness has always been anti-fascist, anti-capitalist and associated with the larger struggle against repressive institutions.

Carrying on a similar line of radical collaborative actions, GNCs actively stood for, and rallied in, farmers' movement of India in 2021. In June 2020, the government of India promulgated three pieces of legislation which enhanced the commercialisation of agriculture (Jodhka 2021), re-orienting the entire framework of farming cultures in India. Farmers across the country protested and demanded the removal of these laws, and queer organisations came out in support of the farmer's cause during the protests. The GNC in Karnataka cooked food for farmers who came from across the state to rally in Bangalore. As Veena, a self-identified transgender activist, stated in a

newspaper article (Gauri Lankesh News 2020, n.p.), "This government is trying to stamp down the farmers – those who work hard to provide us food. We, the gender, sexual and sexuality minority communities are here to tell the government to stop such attacks on its own people."

Previously, in 2017 in Maharashtra, GNC individuals had also written letters to the government and protested to voice the challenges of the farmers (Indian Express 2017). When they received no reply to the letters, they assembled in front of the Council Hall in the city of Pune, with black and white banners. Pannu, one of the self-identified transgender protesters, described the event: "The transgender community gathered outside the Council Hall in Pune on Tuesday to join the protest for farm loan waiver… Do we not need farmers to grow our food? When the farmers are going through one of the worst crises of the present time, it is our duty to stand beside them." In Mumbai, the Kinnar Maa Trust came out in support of farmers and led demonstrations against the government (Mumbai Times 2021), while in Karnataka and Maharashtra GNC also came out in support of the farmers of Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh (R. K. News 2021).

Critically reflecting on the emergence of such multiple repertoires of collaborative social action one may contend that many GNCs have become committed to the idea of "alternative citizenship practices" (Koch 2018), based on the notion of care towards one another. Opposing the state, GNC individuals as members of a marginalised community collaborate with other marginalised groups in order to enact resistance. This chapter highlights the value of seeking collaborative social justice in contemporary times to resist the waning of democracy in India. Following Banerjea, Boyce, and Dasgupta (2022), I argue that contemporary queer activism counters the notion of queer as "dispossessed". Queer collaborations with other dispossessed groups like Dalits, farmers, and Adivasis not only enhance social dialogue but also lead to better efficacy and affordance of advocacy, collaboration, and interactivity. By showing their solidarity with other causes, recent queer assertions demonstrate GNCs' capacity to harness collective strengths in order to show stronger resilience towards the exclusionary politics of the state.

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates how disenchantment with democracy, especially among queer communities and other marginalised communities, has led to the spontaneous and urgent demand for collaboration with different social movements which has been occurring in India. While it is true that the identity-based differences on certain issues continue to exist and act as a deterrent to the call for unification against social injustices, through their mobilisation disenfranchised communities contest divisive populist politics. Simultaneously, the adoption of Hindu nationalistic ideals by certain sections of the GNCs has brought forth multifaceted ambivalences and contradictions for contemporary queer activism in India, producing a distinctive

dialectic that has both nationalist and elitist segments and social justice segments. These have different strategies and repertoires and in an increasingly authoritarian context, with the former adapting to the situation to gain recognition and resources, and the latter fighting against it, demanding democracy and social justice.

Thus, GNCs in India have been fostering diverse kinds of desired citizen-state relations or citizenship utopias. They employ multiple repertoires to envision such utopias as they attempt to raise their diverse and divergent voices in the process of consistently negotiating with the state and its vision of providing them with representation and resources. In many ways, the GNCs promote and further a new form of activism in India, and they have expanded the scope of their struggle to collaborative social justice. Despite the pluralistic directions in which contemporary queer activism is currently progressing, I have argued that Pride Parades demonstrate a new phase of activism in India, which is reconfiguring the ways in which different activist communities as interest groups relate to the Indian State, political representation, and to their understanding of democracy. The recurrence of collaborative themes of social justice time and again within Pride marches confirms that queer communities can demonstrate their agency. This agency is instrumental not just in securing their rights, but also in furthering a vision of rights and collaborative representation which they validate, as opposed to those endorsed by the current Indian state.

This chapter contributes to critical literature on how diverse queer communities are becoming part of a wider solidarity platform today to struggle against structural violence, discrimination, and exclusion. Such instances of queer collaborative social justice demonstrate how countries like India can cease to disintegrate into phantom democracies.

Notes

1 According to several scholars (Jaffrelot 2009; Ogden 2012; Vanaik 2002), the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has threatened the principles of secularism and inclusivity.
2 All the names and personal details have been anonymised.
3 The word "tribal" which remained within both official and academic debates in India as a colonial legacy, has been continually used to describe Indigenous communities in the subcontinent. The term was eventually adopted by the Indigenous communities in India themselves to refer to their marginalised and deprived status (Xaxa 1999, 18).
4 The Democracy Report 2020 and the Global State of Democracy Report 2021 have stated that the efficacy of the world's largest democracy has become compromised.
5 The advent of the NDA government also saw the intensification of communal conflicts in India.
6 Sanatan Dharma in Hinduism refers to rituals, virtues, and practices that all Hindus are required to follow, regardless of caste, class, background, or sect (Britannica 2009).

7 The Mughal Empire, comprising India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, commenced in the fifteenth century, a period during which many GNCs held positions of power (Arondekar 2009).
8 The term eunuchs came to be used in official documents to refer to GNCs like the *hijras* in India during British colonial rule (Britannica 2023).
9 Sanskritisation (Srinivas 1956) describes a process of social and cultural change and upward mobility for castes who are situated lower in the hierarchy.
10 Adivasi refers to original inhabitants and particularly tribal people.
11 *Kotis*, or *Kothis*, are members of GNCs in India. They are male-bodied individuals who identify and express themselves as feminine.
12 Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code was a colonial law that criminalised sexual activities "against the order of nature". In 2018, the Supreme Court of India struck it down, decriminalising consensual gender non-conforming activities.

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14 Afterword

Citizenship utopias in an age of polycrises?

Henri Onodera, Martta Kaskinen and Eija Ranta

This edited volume has presented a dozen of empirical chapters that bear witness to the complex dynamics between activism, citizenship, and utopia today. As a collective attempt, it has investigated the emergent form of activism and dissent, and the conditions in which they have emerged and evolved in various parts of the Global South. As we have seen, states may tolerate or even support certain civic associations, while being increasingly hostile towards civic actions that envision transformative alternatives to the *status quo*. This manifests the global tendency of autocratisation, where state authorities are increasingly defensive of their discursive monopoly over defining the parameters of desirable society, good life as well as "good citizen" (see also Lewis 2013). While the specific civil society associations may be accepted even in the most repressive conditions (Young 2002), the construction of societal spheres where prevailing political discourses are debated and ultimately challenged has become ever more challenging. This volume has explored diverse tactical agencies to which people resort and the ways in which they convene into collectives, groups, associations, and movements in conditions that increasingly obstruct their possibilities to participate in public life. We have approached these processes through the notion of citizenship utopias as enacted social imaginaries that articulate the ideals of democratic polity – based on equality, dignity, and justice – with ideal forms of experiencing citizenship. Citizenship utopias, as noted in the Introduction, are prone to generate transformative alternatives that disrupt the reproduction of hegemonic power relations, hierarchies, and inequalities. The chapters focused on empirical contexts ranging from India to Chile, and from Algeria to South Africa, and demonstrated that people are highly resourceful in resisting top-down dictates of "good" citizenship and in expanding the realms of perceived possibilities. These are testimonies of the multiple ways in which emergent activisms can establish and cultivate motivation and hope for public mobilisation.

Thus, importantly, this volume has also addressed the question of how people's possibilities to influence state-society relations could be re-imagined in conditions of shared disillusionment. Several chapters shed light on everyday political struggles in precarious settings that have been shaped by,

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for example, the pandemic restrictions, narrowing civic spaces, post-revolutionary disappointment, or shared disenfranchisement at the face of neoliberal and socialist projects of state building. As we have seen, citizens and activists have demanded social inclusion, basic services, legal reforms, or, in short, recognition, entitlements, and better accountability from state authorities. While these demands are seemingly conventional, their import is growingly radical since the prospect of citizens' equal access to justice and welfare is rapidly withering away. As already noted, citizenship utopias are utopian insofar as the existing social, political, and economic conditions have pushed their ideals of equality, dignity and justice further away from the realm of perceived possibilities. Thus, citizenship utopias do not necessarily question the ontology of the nation state but, rather, they question its legitimacy and seek to expand the scope and content of citizenship, or what being and acting as a citizen could mean. In several chapters, diversity, racial justice, and decolonisation are seen as essential in correcting contemporary and historical injustices. In some contexts, public authorities – at state, regional, and municipal levels – have embraced these plural visions and, particularly at the local level, the boundaries between activism and political decision-making appear to have become more and more porous. This is evident, for example, in the case of Ecuador, where the goals of plurinationalism and Buen Vivir imply new – and hopefully improved – state-society relations, as Sarah A. Radcliffe's Chapter 6 shows.

In this light, we have also examined what kinds of locally grounded conceptualisations and understanding of citizenship can potentially emerge, and the plurinational politics in Ecuador serves as a good example. Moreover, many chapters illustrate the creativity of young people to imagine more equal and just prospects for citizens and state-society relations. While the "youth bulge" has often been framed through risks and dangers – including unemployment, radicalisation, and political uprisings – Karim Zakhour's Chapter 10 on young people's narratives of corruption in interior Tunisia, for instance, provides a testimony of their everyday inclination to articulate different kinds of social and political visions through criticism of the present conditions. Banhishikha Ghosh's Chapter 13 on gender non-conforming communities in India, for its part, also indicates that the lures of authoritarian power are hard to resist even among the most marginalised. Yet, the dynamics of emerging activisms are diverse and the scope and content of citizenship are constantly negotiated between those who find comfort in aligning with the powerful and those who seek supportive networks and continue building horizontal solidarities and alliances.

In retrospect, this edited volume took shape in a period of rapidly exacerbating global inequalities, emerging authoritarian populism, and shrinking civic spaces, which has rendered the social imaginaries of a democratic polity increasingly challenging or – as we argue – utopian. Some of the major events and processes of the early 2020s include the COVID-19 pandemic, climate emergency, wars in Ukraine and Gaza, coup d'etats in Africa and

elsewhere, and global militarisation. The changing geopolitics has accelerated the transition towards a more conflictual and multipolar world that has been in the making since, at the least, the 2008 financial crisis (Ranta, Ylönen, and Urvas 2023). Russia's war and attack on Ukraine in 2022 changed the political atmosphere globally. In the Global North, and European Union and United States in particular, it coincided with the rise of exclusive nationalism and right-wing populism, and the priority of supporting Ukraine implied rapid withdrawal from their earlier commitments, also in financial terms, to North-South collaborations. In addition, demands made by activists and the global students' movement – the largest in decades – to seize material and political support for Israel's war and genocidal acts on Gaza were widely dismissed, if not crushed, by the same governments. These escalated global tensions have underlined global inequalities and the precariousness of the institutional structures, including the UN-based multilateral institutions that have claimed to compensate for those inequalities. With Donald Trump's presidency in 2017–2021, the last fragments of the United States as a global advocate of democracy seem to have withered away, although the United States' democracy promotion have for long evolved in parallel with aggressive trade policies, military actions, and ideological support for authoritarian regimes in the Global South.

Against these changes in global politics, combined with the conservative (and anti-gender) rhetoric that views "Western" values as a sign of either moral corruption or double standards, many countries in the Global South have sought distance from the former colonial relations, including the EU, and embrace illiberal and authoritarian states, such as Russia or China, as the more compelling partners and funders for their societal projects. Many countries featuring in this volume are either founding members or, at the time of writing, aspiring or potential members (e.g. Algeria, Tunisia, and Vietnam) in the BRICS, established by Brazil, Russia, India, and China in 2009, and joined by South Africa in 2010. As an intergovernmental organisation, it has since expanded and claimed to provide a meaningful venue also for South-South collaborations, and trade relations especially, as a counterweight for the Northern dominance in global economy. China's model, in which rapid economic growth and social modernisation proceed within the framework of a one-party system, may appear attractive from the perspective of many leaders of the Global South. From the perspective of many Asian leaders, decision-making in Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic appeared disorganised and ineffective; while in Africa, the EU's actions concerning vaccinations were seen as selfish and racist; in a global sense, anti-democratic (Sariola 2021; Sumba 2021).

In addition, and for some time now, scholars have alarmed that the world is experiencing various entangled crises that imply largescale systemic transformations in the not-so-distant future. In 2020, for instance, Gills (2020, 577) viewed the COVID-19 pandemic as part and parcel of a "triple conjuncture" of global crises, relating it to the accelerated climate change and

ecological breakdown, and the "systemic crisis of global capitalism and neoliberal economic globalization". In global policy circles, the talk on mutually reinforcing crises intensified after World Economic Forum published its *Global Risks Report 2023* (World Economic Forum 2023). It discusses the notion of polycrisis, whereby "disparate crises interact such that the overall impact far exceeds the sum of each part" (World Economic Forum 2023, 9) and report alarms of simultaneous realisation of social risks whereby different crises are interconnected and feed one another and, as such, they require complex, yet concerted solutions at the global level. According to the report, the most acute crisis at the time concerned the cost of living, which had been raised by, for example, the disruptions in production chains due to the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war on Ukraine. The fastest growing crisis for the next decade was predicted to be the biodiversity, loss of species, and the collapse of ecosystems. This is related to the climate emergency, which had been the prevailing condition for activism in the Global South for a long time. Also, the escalation of geopolitical tensions and social confrontation, cybercrime, and involuntary migration were also seen to cause significant risks globally in the near future, further complicated by the global rush for natural resources (World Economic Forum 2023, 57–68).

In a sense, it would be welcomed that the multiple crises or polycrises are addressed at the centres of political and economic power. However, as Allouche et al. (2023) observe, a lot of trust and agency is being bestowed upon national governments and private corporations so as to tackle the polycrises, and they rightfully question: Can we expect the same institutions to solve the multiple, entangled, and mutually reinforcing crises that they have helped to create and uphold? The actual power of these institutions notwithstanding, the emerging activisms, social movements, and civil societies can yield alternative visions and potential solutions for these crises. In this volume, we have seen the quick, resourceful, and persistent ways in which people device and adjust their ways of doing and being to challenging environments. They should play a role in, and be an integral part of, the global solutions, whatever they may be.

There is an increasing academic need to understand what happens in rapidly changing global society. With this volume, we hope to have argued in this context that it is important to focus on Global South and to examine the different kinds of agencies and resistance that are manifested in times where democratic practices and imagination have been on the decline. Naturally, the insights compiled in this volume are all but exhaustive. Although it has not explicitly discussed other important issues such as resource extractivism, climate activism, or migration, each chapter has shed light for studying citizenship utopias in the making. We hope that the chapters also provide inspiration for current and future research on human and more-than-human relations in activism, non-human ontologies, as well as discussions on the scope and content of global citizenship – however unimaginable as it may seem in this age. In any case, we hope the insights in this volume provide

important reminders of a world in flux and, for researchers and activists, of the constant need to keep heels with civil society dynamics in an increasingly challenging global situation. Finally, the future research on citizenship utopias should not contend with the observation that there is hope or optimism among citizens even in post-emancipatory contexts. The pertinent question is how this hope, even in fragile and battered forms, can translate into agency and perseverance to reimagine and expand the realms of what is possible today, and what shall be thus tomorrow.

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